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External and internal pressures on radical social movements: tracing the (de)mobilization of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers

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DePaul University

**External and Internal Pressures on Radical Social Movements: Tracing the
(De)Mobilization of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers**

A Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis considers the rise and fall of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, a radical social movement located at the praxical intersection of Black Nationalism and Marxism. It traces the activities of this movement chronologically and identifies the external and internal factors that led to its demobilization. By consulting primary and archival sources, I identify two external factors of demobilization, resource deprivation and repression, and one internal factor of demobilization, factionalization. It is concluded that as repression and resource deprivation by the auto companies, the UAW, and local police forces succeeded in diminishing plant-level organization and activity, the League succumbed to increasing tactical and ideological factionalization. This allows me to infer that external factors were the primary and internal factors the secondary causes of the League's demobilization. Whereas unions are typically seen as agents of worker mobilization, I show that the UAW instead colluded with the companies to demobilize the League.

Contents

TABLES	iv
ABBREVIATIONS	v
ABBREVIATIONS OF NON-ARCHIVAL MICROFILM	vi
ABBREVIATIONS OF ARCHIVES	vi
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Condition of Black Automobile Workers 1919-1969	14
Introduction	14
Historical Relationship of Black Workers to the UAW and the Auto-Industry	15
Black Labor in the Auto Industry in the 50s and 60s	21
Chapter Two: Revolutionary Union Movements and Radical Newspapers	34
Introduction	34
Before the RUMs	34
Revolutionary Newspapers	37
Early Revolutionary Union Movement Activities	39
Chapter Three: Chronology of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers	52
Introduction	52
The League of Revolutionary Black Workers Mobilized	52
Chapter Four: Analysis of External Demobilization Factors	72
Introduction	72
Repression and Resource Deprivation	76
Chapter Five: League Ideology and Factionalization	93
Introduction	93
League Ideology	93
League Split	100
Factionalization	105
Conclusions	112
BIBLIOGRAPHY	121
Primary Sources	121
Secondary Sources	124

Tables

Table 1.1 Black Workers as a Percentage of Total Workers by Company	25
Table 4.1 Repression and Resource Deprivation	96

Abbreviations

AFL	American Federation of Labor
BEDC	Black Economic Development Conference
BWC	Black Workers Congress
CADRUM	Cadillac Fleetwood Revolutionary Union Movement
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CRU	Committee for a Real Union
DPD	Detroit Police Department
DRUM	Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement
DRUMII	Dodge Truck Revolutionary Union Movement
ELRUM	Eldon Avenue Revolutionary Union Movement
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FORUM	Forge Revolutionary Union Movement
FRUM	Ford Revolutionary Union Movement
GM	General Motors
HARUM	Health Workers Revolutionary Union Movement
ICV	Inner City Voice
IFCO	Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization
IMA	Interdenominational Ministers Alliance
JARUM	Jefferson Assembly Revolutionary Union Movement
MARUM	Mack Avenue Plant Revolutionary Union Movement
MERUM	Mound Road Engine Revolutionary Union Movement

NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NEWRUM	Detroit News Revolutionary Union Movement
NIRA	National Industrial Recovery Act
NLRB	National Labor Relations Board
RNA	Republic of New Africa
RUM	Revolutionary Union Movement
SMO	Social Movement Organization
TULC	Trade Union Leadership Council
UAW	United Auto Workers
UPRUM	United Parcel Service Revolutionary Union Movement
WSU	Wayne State University

Abbreviations of Non-Archival Microfilm

BPM4	Black Power Movement 4
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Abbreviations of Archives

ALEC	American Left Ephemera Collection
DGC	Dan Georgakas Collection
DRMR	Detroit Revolutionary Movement Records

Introduction

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers struggled against racism, exploitation, and imperialism at the peak of the Black Power Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They emerged from the establishment in Detroit of Revolutionary Union Movements seeking unions that engage in militant class struggle, particularly by and for Black workers, and Marxist-Leninist newspapers. While the League extended beyond the auto industry, to postal workers, health workers, and public transit workers, among others, and to other geographical areas, including Chicago, and New Jersey, the majority of its base remained Black automobile workers in the city of Detroit. The League and its constituents faced many external enemies including the “big three” auto companies, Ford, Chrysler, and GM, the UAW, and the state including the Detroit Police Department and the FBI. Strategically, they believed that since the UAW had continually let down workers generally and Black workers specifically there needed to be a union movement external to the UAW bureaucracy to represent the interests and needs of Black workers. Tactically, the Revolutionary Union Movements targeted the point of production through wildcat strikes, and the union through protests and running radical candidates in predominantly Black locals. Furthermore, radical newspaper editors and students produced newspapers, newsletters and other propaganda in order to inform Black workers and their communities of injustices from the intersection of national oppression and capitalist exploitation. The League believed in change through praxis rather than ideology.

Only three major scholarly works discuss the League in detail: James A. Geschwender’s *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers* (1977), Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin’s *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study in*

Urban Revolution (1975), and Ernie Allen's "Dying From the Inside: The Decline of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers" (1979). Each of these works emphasizes some internal mechanism as the primary factor in the demobilization of the League.¹

Sociologist James A. Geschwender traced an intricate history of the Detroit Black workers' movement before, during and after the existence of the League. In his analysis Geschwender contributes the demobilization of the League primarily to what he refers to as "*ideological strain*" between Black Nationalists who emphasized Black cultural, economic, and political equality, while holding variable ideological positions on capitalism,² and Marxist-Leninists concerned with combating the surplus exploitation of Black workers. As an example he points to Black Nationalist rejection of white lawyers brought in to defend Black workers who were fired in the wake of a wildcat strike. Geschwender also considers the contribution of *tactical schisms* stemming around the question of plant organizing or community organizing to demobilization. Despite this, he spends a significant portion of the book discussing repression of the League, and while he certainly does not discount its importance, he concludes that "[t]he League might have been able to survive its external enemies if it had been internally sound. It is doubtful if it could have survived its internal contradictions even in the absence of external enemies".³

¹ James A. Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers* (London, Cambridge University Press, 1977). Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I do Mind Dying, A Study in Urban Revolution*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012). And, Ernie Allen, "Dying From the Inside: The Decline of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, in *They Should Have Served that Cup of Coffee: Seven Radical Remember the '60s* edited by Dick Cluster, 71-109, (Boston: South End Press, 1979).

² While it seems clear that none of the League leadership tacitly accepted capitalism the rank-and-file seems to hold variable positions ranging from "socialist" to "indifferent" to the class question. I doubt if any League or RUM members were adamantly pro-capitalism.

³ Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 174-182.

Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin produce a narrative of the Black liberation movement in Detroit during the late 1960s and early 1970s focused on the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) and the League. They use primary accounts to show how Black workers' movements struggle against the established power structures of the state, massive corporations, and indoctrinated unions. Although their narrative is similar to Geschwender's, Georgakas and Surkin attribute the fall of the League to a lack of organization and a collapse in personal loyalties, or *personality factionalism*. They state, "one of the ever-present dilemmas during the first year of League operations was whether to answer a new inquiry or to devote extra time to an existing RUM (Revolutionary Union Movement). The League leadership's time and energy were spread thin and the organization's structure was as fragile as a pyramid of playing cards".⁴ Furthermore, while Georgakas and Surkin may have agreed with Geschwender that political disagreements weakened the League, they were not detrimental until they led to antagonistic rivalries between League leaders. The seven-man League Executive Committee split into three factional groups that participated in a brief but destructive polemic. The group made up of Matt Watson, Ken Cockrel, and Mike Hamlin was labeled bourgeois because of their emphasis on political education and projects outside of the plant. Another group made up of General Baker and Chuck Wooten was labeled "paternalistic to workers," while the third faction made up of ex-Detroit Black Panther Party leaders, John Williams and Luke Tripp was said to lack "imagination".⁵

A third explanation of the League's demobilization written by former League Central Staff member Ernie Allen emphasizes the League's structural and organizational weakness.

⁴ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I do Mind Dying*, 71.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 133-34.

Despite its profession of democratic centralism, the League lacked “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”.⁶ He blamed “an extremely lax organizational structure” lacking capacity “whereby leadership could communicate its concrete political experiences to the rank-and-file” or a “formal mechanism developed in order that the organization might collectively and systematically analyze itself”.⁷ He ultimately concluded that the League was caught in the structural contradiction of simultaneously attempting to build a vanguard party and a mass organization.⁸

The League situates itself at the praxical intersection of Black Nationalism and Marxism-Leninism. While these ideologies may harbor contradictions in their articulations of race and class intersectionality the League sought to resolve them on the terrain of struggle, rather than the terrain of scholarly reflection. Still, it will be of use to us to briefly explore three articulations of Black Nationalist and Marxist theories of race. For this task I have identified three foundational works to examine: Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* which set the stage for academic debate over Black Nationalism, Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States* which claims that race must be treated as a category independent of class, nation, or ethnicity, and Theodore W. Allen’s *The Invention of the White Race*, which proposes a Marxist/class oriented understanding of race.⁹

⁶ Allen, “Dying From the Inside”, 80.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 87-90.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁹ Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership*, 1967 repr. (New York: New York Review Books, 2005). Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 1994). Theodore W. Allen, *Racial Oppression and Social Control*, Vol. 1 of *The Invention of the White Race*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2012). And,

In *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* Harold Cruse insists that the Black Nationalist movement, led by Black intellectuals, must disassociate itself completely from the white left. Therein lies the “crisis of the Negro intellectual”, for as long as the leaders of the Black movement lean on the contributions of white intellectuals, whether radical or liberal, they can never create “new conceptions of reality,” adding, “it was historically unfortunate that the American Negro created no social theorists to back up his long line of activist leaders... Instead the American Negro has unwittingly, been forced to share in many of the corrupted values of the society.”¹⁰

Cruse places Harlem at the center of Black hopes for autonomy. He states, “Harlem is the Black world’s key community for historical, political, economic, cultural and/or ethnic reasons ... the way Harlem goes (or does not go) so goes all black America”. White radicals and liberals alike (supported by many Black intellectuals from the Harlem Renaissance through the 60s) strove to integrate Harlem under the mantra “break up the Harlem ghetto.”¹¹ Yet the integration of Harlem would certainly envelop and overwhelm Black cultural identity with a white cultural identity backed by economic and political power.

Cruse provides us with stinging criticism of a white radical left that was almost invariably pro-integrationist, aspiring to “class solidarity”. Yet the white left was/is completely blind to the cultural desires of the Black community as well as the dual nature of its oppression. Furthermore, the white left (no matter how radical) adheres to white bourgeois cultural standards even while contesting capitalist economic and political

Theodore W. Allen, *The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America*, Vol 2 of *The Invention of the White Race*, (London: Verso, 1997).

¹⁰ Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, 564-65.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12

hegemony. In addition, Cruse points out the importance of mass media in subsuming the Black intelligentsia under white cultural dominance.¹²

While Omi and Winant do not directly lay claim to either a nationalist or Marxist racial paradigm they certainly draw from each in the process of developing a theory of “racial formation”. They claim, however, that “most racial theory fails to capture the centrality of race in American politics and American life,” and that “most theories are marked by a tendency to *reduce* race to a mere manifestation of other supposedly more fundamental social and political relationships such as ethnicity or class”.¹³ Their central goal is therefore to draw from three existing paradigms of race - ethnicity, class, and nation - to create a new paradigm that centers on race as a critical determinant of political reality in the United States.¹⁴ For Omi and Winant race is constantly changing and evolving due to political struggle such as the civil rights movement, the Black power movement or the white backlash against “preferential” hiring which resulted in the movement toward a “color-blind” society. Three concepts are critical to understanding racial formation. First, they define race as any “concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies”.¹⁵ Second, they define racial formation “as the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed”.¹⁶ Finally, they define a racial project as “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Their emphasis. Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 2.

¹⁴ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 2-13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

resources along particular racial lines”.¹⁷ The racial project exists as the motor for transforming racial formation via competing projects such as a liberal project, conservative project, or radical projects on the right and left. As these projects compete in the ideological, social, and political battlefields new projects are created and old projects are pushed to the fringes. If a racial project becomes prevalent enough it is likely to get institutionalized and standardized and become a part of our everyday discourse, or what they refer to following Antonio Gramsci “common sense”.¹⁸

Theodore Allen’s work seeks to uncover the origin and continued significance of racial oppression in the United States. Allen first compares phenotypically-based racial oppression in the Anglo-American slave colonies (later states) to English non-phenotypical racial oppression of the Irish beginning in the 14th century. Allen does this to show how racialized feelings between a subject group and an oppressed group can lead the former to protect its “interest” in maintaining its superior position to the latter, whether the basis for this superior position is real or perceived. Despite their racialized oppression by the English, when Irish Catholics migrated to the United States in the 19th century they were assimilated into the “white race” and became defenders of Black enslavement in the United States.¹⁹

Plantation labor in the Anglo-American colonies (Allen concentrates on Virginia) was based on a range of unfree labor regimes. Landholders first attempted to enlist the American indigenous population as bond laborers but the latter, more familiar with the land and thus more easily able to escape, were unwilling to assume an inferior position in an unfamiliar

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁹ Allen, *Racial Oppression and Social Control*, Vol. 1 of *The Invention of the White Race*, 2nd ed.. And, Allen, *The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America*, Vol 2 of *The Invention of the White Race*.

hierarchical societal structure. Labor power instead came from limited-term bond laborers from Europe (primarily England) and Africa. During the 17th century, Allen claims, the legal status of African and European bond laborers was not sharply distinguishable. He therefore suggests that there was no universal concept of the “white race” at this time. For instance, in 1666 in Northampton County, Virginia “10.9 percent of the African-Americans and 17.6 percent of European-Americans were landholders”.²⁰ Nearly two centuries later in 1860, in the state of Virginia, the population of European-Americans owning land “was 46 percent less” while the population of African-Americans owning land had decreased by 95 percent, proportionately.²¹ Allen claims that the disproportional decrease in African-American land ownership “was the result not of normal capitalist economic development but of racial oppression”.²² Allen points to two main factors that led to this growing disparity. First, after the completion of the bond contract, European-Americans had more access to the capital required to purchase land via familial and personal ties. Second, landholders tended to extend bond terms (usually for attempting to escape or otherwise misbehaving), longer for African-Americans than European-Americans²³.

Allen then emphasizes the critical role of Bacon’s Rebellion of 1676 in impelling the landholding elite to develop an effective strategy for social control of bonded laborers. Allen does not focus on the “great men” interpretation of the rebellion that analyzes the importance

²⁰ Allen, *The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America*, Vol. 2, 184.

²¹ Allen lists in Table 10.1 on page 185 of the same text that European-American landholders totaled 17.55% in 1666 (Northampton County) and 9.53% in 1860 (Virginia), while African-American landholders totaled 10.93% in 1666 (Northampton County) and 0.54% in 1860 (Virginia).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ This is consistent with Allen’s claim that the relative social status of African-American laborers and European-American laborers was being “fought-out” over these years but by no means had come to a decisive conclusion. *Ibid.*, 186.

of Nathaniel Bacon, an out-of-favor counselor, and Sir William Berkeley, the Governor of Virginia, or their rival opinions on the importance of driving west the indigenous peoples. Rather, he emphasizes the mass participation and demands of non-landowners, both European-American and African-American, who joined in the rebellion to fight for their own interests. For Allen, the eagerness of bond-laborers to join a rebellion against the gentry signals a weakness in social control of the masses, while the willingness of European-Americans and African-Americans to ally with one another for the same cause demonstrates the incompleteness if not non-existence of a prevalent racial bias toward African-Americans at the time. The rebellion spurred an interest in developing an effective intermediate buffer social control stratum to prevent mass uprisings. Beginning in 1691 laws were put into place that solidified the African-Americans' place as hereditary chattel life-time bond laborers while European-American limited-term bond laborers were given the semblance of rights constituting a position in society superior to African bonded laborers. This would lead to a growing white consciousness and the development of "white supremacy" as white non-land owners would come to act as slave patrols and thus an intermediate buffer social control stratum that subordinated class-consciousness to race-consciousness. Allen identifies this moment as the origin of deep racial division among surplus-producing workers in the United States.²⁴

Much of the discussion about demobilization of the League has emphasized internal conflict: ideological strain at the intersection of Black Nationalism and Marxism (Geschwender), personality factionalism (Georgakas and Surkin) and lack of organizational

²⁴ Allen, *The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America*.

structure (Allen). However, the framework presented by Christian Davenport makes it possible to analyze the interplay of internal and external demobilizing factors.²⁵

Davenport identifies five internal challenges that movements might face: burnout, factionalization, lost commitment, membership loss, and rigidity. Burnout refers to dissidents becoming tired of the stresses of being involved in a movement causing disengagement. Factionalization occurs when differences in opinion arise either ideologically or tactically causing a schism in the group. If suffering from lost commitment a social movement organization (SMO) participant loses their emotional attachment to the movement in question. Membership loss refers to the mechanical functioning of an SMO and the amount of people it will take to accomplish the goals of the organization. Finally, if a movement places too much power into the hands of only a few inflexible leaders the organization may not be able to react to change. This is referred to as rigidity.²⁶

Davenport also identifies three ways that SMOs are challenged from the outside: resource deprivation, problem depletion, and state repression. SMOs need resources to thrive (or survive), but these resources often come from external sources. If these sources are cut off or become suddenly unsympathetic to the cause, resource deprivation is likely to occur. Problem depletion occurs when constituents perceive an improvement in the situation that the SMO is challenging. In this situation a government (or other institution) may make reforms (whether real or perceived) that are perceived to be a positive change. Finally, state

²⁵ Christian Davenport, *How Social Movements Die: Repression and Demobilization of the Republic of New Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 32-37.

repression occurs when a government undertakes coercive action in order to harm the SMO and limit its effectiveness.²⁷

A social movement will have a greater chance of success (and survival) if it properly judges the potential issues, and adjusts as their realities change. Efforts to predict and counter repressive acts are referred to as reappraisal, the continuous evaluation of the movement's strengths and vulnerabilities. An SMO may also attempt to build trust, comfort, and dedication among its members. On the other hand, governments will often try to remain one step ahead of an organization. Governments accomplish this by either overwhelming the SMO with superior resources or outwitting the SMO by acting in unexpected ways.²⁸

I have identified three sources of demobilization from Davenport's model (one internal and two external) to examine more deeply with reference to the League: factionalization, resource deprivation, and repression. Like Davenport, I am primarily concerned with the intersection of internal and external sources of demobilization.²⁹ While the current research is in no way as comprehensive as Davenport's case study on the Republic of New Africa, similar temporal, geographical, and ideological locations allow me to isolate certain important aspects of Davenport's theoretical framework to a new but comparable SMO and extend repression beyond the state to private entities including unions and companies.³⁰ To this end I would like to present a few questions that drove my research: How and why did the League mobilize? What caused it subsequently to demobilize? Can we

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 23-32.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ He has numbered each intersection in a simple 3x5 matrix numbered 1-15, but just two intersections concern us in the case of the League. The intersection of factionalization and resource deprivation is identified as intersection 1. The intersection of repression and factionalization is identified as intersection 11. Furthermore, Davenport's matrix is a heuristic rather than a hypothetico-deductive tool.

³⁰ The RNA and the League, as you will see in Chapter 3, actually had close ties.

trace the chronological intersections of internal and external demobilizing factors? Is it possible to judge the relative causal importance of internal and external demobilizing factors?

Over the course of this research my views on the most important causes of the League's demobilization changed more than once. However, close historical tracing of the League allows me to argue that external factors (repression and resource deprivation) played the primary role in the demobilization of the League while internal factors would play a secondary, albeit important role. Since the three most detailed secondary sources on the League all emphasize internal causes of demobilization to the neglect of external causes, I needed to base this study on primary sources. These sources make it possible to trace the narrative of the League chronologically in order evaluate at which points the League made major shifts in strategy and ideology and as a result of what external and internal forces. Many of these archives were located in the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University in Detroit. There I consulted the *Detroit Revolutionary Movement Records*, submitted by General Baker of the League, and the *Dan Georgakas Collection*, submitted by Georgakas. I also consulted a collection of primary sources on microfilm called *Black Power Movement Part 4* held by Northwestern University but accessible via Inter-Library Loan. Other archives exist that I would have liked to consult, but time and resource limitations did not permit. "Mainstream" newspapers such as *The Detroit News* and *The Detroit Free Press* are consulted where ever possible to avoid relying exclusively on the League's self-representation. Lack of access prevented me from consulting a few pertinent articles in the *Michigan Chronicle*.

The following chapters begin with narrative and then move to analysis. The first chapter discusses the UAW's rise in Detroit, culminating in a crucial battle at Ford's River

Rouge Plant in 1941, resulted in the unionization of the auto industry's last major holdout against unionization. In order to gain the support of Ford's substantial Black workforce, the UAW promised to fight for racial equality. A second part of this chapter shows that despite the promises of the UAW, conditions for Black workers in the auto industry remained poor relative to their white counterparts through the period of the League's founding. The second chapter explores the activities of the Revolutionary Union Movements and radical newspapers that jointly founded the League. The third chapter traces the activities of the League once it was fully formed, showing its gradual movement away from plant activity. The fourth chapter analyzes how two external demobilization factors, repression and resource deprivation, affected the League. I claim that these were the primary causes of League demobilization. The fifth and final chapter concludes that the League's ideological mixture of Black Nationalism and Marxism influenced the tactical and ideological factionalization, that constituted a secondary cause of League demobilization. I'll finally rap up with some concluding remarks.

Chapter One

Condition of Black Automobile Workers 1919-1968

1. INTRODUCTION

The U.S. automobile industry, particularly in Detroit, grew rapidly in size and importance during the early and middle portions of the twentieth century. Contemporaneously, Blacks migrated in large numbers to escape oppressive conditions of the south in search of (better) paid work in the industrialized north in what has come to be known as the Great Migration. Henry Ford was one of the first industrialists to harness this new influx of labor and garnered a reputation as a friend to the Black worker. Yet, conditions for Black workers at Ford remained poor even relative to horrid conditions experienced by white workers. As the UAW struggled to unionize the auto industry, it had to address the disparity between Ford's reputation as a leading employer of Black labor and the persistent disadvantage faced by Black workers at Ford and elsewhere in the auto industry. This chapter is split into two main sections. The first describes the burgeoning relationship between Black workers and the UAW, particularly with reference to the unionization of Ford in the early 1940s. Black workers, politicians, and community leaders had to choose whether to continue to trust Ford or to switch their allegiance to a predominantly white union. When Ford was unionized in 1941, UAW pledged to uphold a policy of racial egalitarianism, ushering in a two-and-a-half decade alliance between Black workers and the UAW. The second section of this chapter will examine whether this alliance resulted in real material gains for Black workers and, if so, to what degree? Whatever their absolute gains, did Black workers gain relative to white workers?

2. HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP OF BLACK WORKERS TO THE UAW AND THE AUTO INDUSTRY

In order to better understand how the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was founded, we must first briefly examine the complex relationship that Black workers had to the UAW and the auto industry throughout the early and mid-twentieth century. Much of this relationship concerns workers at Ford Motor Company, the first auto company to hire Black workers in large numbers. I will first look at the traits that made Ford distinct from other auto companies during the time period. Then I will briefly compare Black workers employment at Ford with other auto companies. Third, I will examine the complexities behind UAW's progressive reputation on the question of race. Finally, and most importantly, I will trace the difficult and contradictory process of unionizing Ford, the last of the major auto companies to unionize.

Black workers first migrated to Detroit in significant numbers during a labor shortage caused by World War I. Many manufacturers welcomed the influx, but by 1919, as a result of unique hiring practices, Ford was poised to become Detroit's leading employer of Black labor.¹ Henry Ford, along with his top executive Charles Sorensen, met with Rev. Robert L. Bradby, the pastor of Second Baptist Church, Detroit's largest Black religious institution, and got him to agree to recommend "very high type fellows" as well as promote the work standards desired by Ford. During the course of the 1920s, Ford would create similar relationships with other Black religious leaders in Detroit.² By working with local Black religious leaders and providing the best job opportunities available to Blacks in Detroit, Ford

¹ August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 6.

² *Ibid.*, 9-11.

was able to gain the support of the local NAACP and Urban League (this would prove to be a major barrier to unionization at Ford).³ Ford was not particularly progressive in his views on race, but rather was practicing a brand of paternalistic philanthropy epitomized by statements such as “dominance is an obligation. The whole solution of the race question as of every other lies in the stronger serving the weaker, the abler serving the less developed”.⁴ That is, he believed in the so-called “white man’s burden”. Despite Ford’s active interest in preventing unionization, Herbert R. Northrup claims that “there is no evidence that Henry Ford Originally decided to employ large numbers of Negroes at River Rouge for other than altruistic reasons”.⁵ But, Ford was able to take advantage of his support from the Black community to forestall unionization longer than any of his competitors.⁶

During the late 1930s almost half of the Black auto-workers in Detroit worked for Ford. Throughout the industry, Black workers were concentrated in just one or two production locations and placed into the most physically demanding and dangerous jobs, particularly in foundry operations.⁷ According to Lloyd H. Bailer the 1930 U.S. census reveals that three-fourths of the Black automobile workers compared to one-fourth of white automobile workers held unskilled positions, while only one-eighth of Black automobile workers compared to half of white automobile workers held skilled or white-collar positions.

Bailer insists that even these numbers are misleading as:

semiskilled and skilled Negro workers were found in such departments, where they were confined to the most hazardous or otherwise undesirable occupations... Likewise, Negro unskilled workers filled the more undesirable

³ *Ibid.*, 16-22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵ Herbert R. Northrup, “Automobiles and Aircraft,” in *Organized Labor and the Negro*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1944), 190.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Geschwender, *Class Race & Worker Insurgency*, 20.

jobs in that broad occupational category. In brief, Negroes were not only concentrated in occupations requiring less skill but were also attached to the worst jobs within each occupational classification⁸

Soon after the 1933 passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), which guaranteed the right to collective bargaining, the leaders of the Urban League and the NAACP began reconsidering their position on organized labor.⁹ After NIRA was deemed unconstitutional in 1935 congress passed the Wagner Act that not only guaranteed the right to collective bargaining and adopted several other provisions supporting workers rights to unionize.¹⁰ As auto-industry unionization began to pick up steam Black workers remained largely skeptical of unions as only opportunistically supporting them when necessary to win strikes.

That being said, the UAW does have a reputation of being a particularly racially progressive union during that time period. During the 1930s and 1940s, CIO industrial unions (the UAW included) espoused egalitarian racial policies. In 1940 the UAW appointed seven salaried Black recruiters to aid in the drive to unionize Ford.¹¹ The UAW also came to the defense of the Black community after the Detroit race “riots” of 1943 that stemmed from the Black community’s demand for more housing, standing with the NAACP and the Urban League in support of the right for Blacks to live in the Sojourner Truth Housing Project located between a white working class neighborhood and a well-to-do Black neighborhood. When Blacks’ rights to live in the housing project were rescinded, the UAW-CIO encouraged trade unionists to take up picket lines at Detroit City Hall. Both Black and white trade

⁸ Lloyd H. Bailer, “The Negro Automobile Worker,” *Journal of Political Economy* 51, no. 5 (October 1943): 417.

⁹ Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, 20, 29-31;

¹⁰ John Barnard, *American Vanguard: The United Auto Workers During the Reuther Years, 1935-1970*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 56-57.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

unionists attended the protest, and what is more, the majority of Catholic workers (historically a racist stronghold) believed that the housing project should be open to Black workers. The president of the UAW stated that he was “more convinced than ever that justice requires that the project be occupied by Negro workers who are in need of public housing”.¹² *Yet, at times, these egalitarian policies proved opportunistic and the racism of the largely white rank-and-file intransigent.* As an example, when Chrysler sought to break a 1939 strike by encouraging Black workers to return to the factories (as an effort to incite racial violence) many Black leaders, including members of the NAACP and prominent ministers, took the side of the union, leading to the success of the strike. As Meier and Rudwick inform us:

In the year following the Chrysler strike, despite all the apprehension that the black strikebreakers had generated at Dodge Main, and despite the help rendered on that occasion by black civic leaders, the UAW had done little about the grievances of the black workers. Discrimination on the job remained essentially unchanged; much was left undone on the touchy issue of black participation in union social functions; and only slight improvement was registered in the number of black holding elective and staff positions in the UAW”.¹³

Despite these troubles an alliance between Black workers and leadership was on the way to being forged and would be solidified by one impending battle; the unionization of Ford.

In September of 1940 the UAW once again began to organize Ford despite previous difficulty. With a strike impending, both the UAW and Ford recognized that Black workers were likely to sway the results of the strike. In face of this tactical situation, the UAW hired seven salaried Black organizers as a part of an operation to organize Black workers.

Originally, the committee was headed by a white man with a strong record, as president of

¹² *Ibid.*, 175-183

¹³ *Ibid.*, 67-72

his local, for racial equality. However, the Black organizers were upset and requested that a Black man be put in charge of the operation. Thus, Walter Hardin was brought in to be director of all “Negro organizational activities at Ford”. Hardin subsequently hired two Black secretaries. With this the UAW-CIO¹⁴ formed its very first mostly Black team, used as an organizational tactic in order to garner support from Black workers. On the other side of the dispute Ford hired a significant number of Black workers to tilt the tide in their favor. Meier and Rudwick go as far as to claim that Ford intentionally brought in trained fighters such as boxers and street-fighters. By the end of March Ford had between 14,000 and 17,000 Black employees,¹⁵ “the largest black workforce in its history”.¹⁶ Major Black organizations were split, with the Urban League leaning toward Ford and the NAACP leaning toward the UAW. Another major organization, the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance, openly endorsed Ford. Most Black workers took no strong position, going home during the strike rather than remaining in the plant as strikebreakers or walking the picket lines. The strike officially began on April 1, 1941, and the River Rouge plant, the plant with the largest proportion of Black workers, became the main point of contention. Three hundred white workers and between 1,500 and 2,500 Black workers chose to remain in the plant on the first

¹⁴ The early years of auto-worker organization were contested by many independent worker’s organizations touting their own ideologies and tactics. From the passage of NIRA the AFL took the leading role in shaping the auto-workers unions. However, disagreement over organizational structure, craft (horizontal) or industrial (vertical) unionization led to a factional split within the organization in 1935 becoming the CIO. Meanwhile, in 1936 a new body, the UAW, was formed and affiliated with the CIO leading to the CIO’s expulsion from the AFL. The UAW-CIO positioned itself to the left of the AFL (referred to in some books as the UAW-AFL) and as the industrial union. During the Ford strike of 1941 the UAW-AFL eventually aligned itself with Ford supporting a “back to work” campaign that eventually failed.; For more information see Barnard, *American Vanguard*, 36-72.

¹⁵ Depending on the source you consult Meier and Rudwick (84) claim 14,000, while Geschwender (30) claims 17,000.

¹⁶ Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, 84.

day of the strike; many of them the newer workers hired intentionally as strikebreakers. A couple of the strike-breakers telephoned Horace White, a progressive Detroit pasture and leader in the Black community, to express that they knew White was mad at them, but they were being promised higher wages and that they would be taken care of “union or no union”.¹⁷ On April 2, the second day of the strike, workers in the plant were sent to attack the picketers (additionally attempting to incite racial violence). Subsequently, the UAW-CIO appealed to leaders in the Black community and received support from the NAACP Detroit Youth Council headed by Horace Sheffield. Sheffield acquired a UAW-CIO sound car and began appealing to Black strikebreakers on April 3. Sheffield is attributed with defusing racial violence as well as shifting the adult branch of the NAACP to a pro-union stance. By the end of the strike’s third day, over a hundred Black leaders, including representatives from the Detroit NAACP, political leaders, the AKA sorority, and the Detroit Urban League were prepared to both endorse the UAW-CIO and condemn Ford’s use of strikebreakers. They claimed in an official statement that “the Negro worker in the Ford plant would lose no privileges because of union membership and ‘stands to gain additional privileges in the way of better jobs through the union’s promotion policy based on seniority, regardless of race’”.¹⁸ Tensions still remained high and violence continued at the margins, but the UAW-CIO was gaining momentum as more and more Black leaders became convinced that the way forward for Black workers was within the union. According to Meier and Rudwick, by Monday April 7 UAW leaders had “assured the NAACP Secretary that they now planned to work aggressively for the promotion of Blacks to all job categories

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 87-88.

¹⁸ Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, 93. And Ford Organizing Committee press release, 8:54 P.M., April 3, 1941, NAACP Ford Strike File; *Ford Facts*, April 5, 1941.

and that they asked only for the opportunity to show that the union would do more for Blacks than Ford".¹⁹ The UAW-CIO would go on to win the strike and thus a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB)-supervised unionization vote between the Ford-backed UAW-AFL and the more radical UAW-CIO. The UAW-CIO went on to win the vote and thus full unionization of Ford.²⁰

With this labor victory (and the promises made to Black workers and their communities in order to make it happen), an alliance was forged between labor organizations and the Black communities of Detroit. This led to, as discussed earlier, the UAW's support during the race "riots" of 1943 and the housing controversies of the same time period. The alliance lasted well into the 1950s and early 1960s. Yet, by the late 1960s, lack of progress in the position of Black workers relative to white workers brought scrutiny from more radical Black workers who remained disproportionately in the most dangerous and menial positions. They insisted that despite its egalitarian rhetoric the UAW (in collusion with the companies) at worst promoted and at best remained neutral to racist hiring and promotion practices.

3. BLACK LABOR IN THE AUTO INDUSTRY IN THE 50s AND 60s

There is no doubt that Black workers, at the beginning of the 1950s, sat in quantifiably inferior position to their white counterparts. Three primary questions are to be posed in this section. Did the material condition of Black autoworkers improve, that is in terms of both skilled jobs and safety conditions, relative to white workers? Did Black workers continue to cycle in and out of employment quicker and more often than white workers (thus maintaining Black workers as members of a racialized industrial reserve

¹⁹ Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, 99

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 82-107

army)? Finally, did Black workers make gains at the level of UAW elected union officials at the local and national level?

In 1970, Herbert R. Northrup analyzed the post-war experience of Black workers at each of the big three auto producers.²¹ He separates his data into two eras, a “post-war reconversion” era highlighted by modest industry gains followed by national economic recession from 1958 to 1961, and an era highlighted by “industrial expansion and civil rights” ending in 1968. Sporadic sample sizes and regional inconsistency in Northrup’s data make it difficult to interpret. This is likely due to limited research on racial makeup of industrial workforces during this time period. However, data becomes more readily available throughout the 60s as research becomes more thorough. While the data may not be representative, I believe that enough is available to be indicative of overall racial trends in the auto industry.

The geographic disbursement and size was different for each company having different effects on Black workers. In 1940, prior to U.S. direct involvement in World War II and full unionization, Chrysler had an estimated 50,000 hourly employees.²² Its employment peaked in 1955 with 176,356 employees before decreasing significantly due to financial troubles.²³ Chrysler began to increase employment again in 1961 and reached 153,973 by 1968.²⁴ While comparative numbers are not provided it is clear that both Ford and General Motors were significantly larger as early as 1940. In 1968 GM had a total workforce of

²¹ Herbert R. Northrup, “The Negro in the Automobile Industry,” in *Negro Employment in Basic Industry: A Study of Racial Policies in Six Industries*, edited by Herbert R. Northrup, 44-112, (Philadelphia: Wharton School of Finance and Commerce, University of Pennsylvania, 1970).

²² *Ibid.*, 55.

²³ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

621,991 and Ford had a total workforce of 244,819.²⁵ Furthermore, Chrysler was the most concentrated company in and around the city of Detroit, while GM was the most dispersed, nationally and internationally.²⁶ This suggests that Chrysler's Black employment should reflect changes in the Black population of Detroit more closely than its counterparts, while GM may deviate further from it.²⁷

As seen in Table 1.1 prior to unionization Ford hired significantly more Black employees than did its competitors making up 11.1 percent of its Michigan workforce, compared to 4.0 of Chrysler's total workforce and 2.5 percent of GM's workforce in Michigan and Indiana.²⁸ By 1957, prior to the economic recession, Chrysler had significantly increased its Black employment. For instance, across four Detroit plants surveyed the percentage of Black workers to total workers was 20.3 percent,²⁹ greater than the Black population of Detroit, which stood at 16.8 percent in 1960 but was likely slightly less three years prior in 1957.³⁰ In the same year, Ford appears to have made less progress in the hiring of Black workers stagnating at around 11.6 percent over a sample size of ten plants across the country,³¹ while GM sees an increase to 14.3 percent over a sample size of seven plants

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 65, 70.

²⁷ While I do my best to concentrate the data in and around Detroit it is important to note that the UAW represented autoworkers industry wide regardless of region. For instance racial employment progress took hold much slower in the southern states despite the presence of a union.

²⁸ Northrup, "The Negro in the Automobile Industry", 55.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁰ Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, United States Census Bureau, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For Large Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States*, Population Division Working Paper No. 76, (Washington, D.C., 2005).

³¹ Northrup, "The Negro in the Automobile Industry", 67.

across the country.³² This seems consistent for Ford, because although Ford added Black employment to its other plants it significantly cut the production size of its River Rouge plant, Ford's primary employer of Black workers. However, Northrup suggests that in actuality "General Motors' domestic labor force of about 450,000 in the mid-1950's, was approximately 8 or 9 percent negro".³³ The year after the recession hit the percentage of Black employees at Chrysler decreased significantly to 14.7 percent over the same four Detroit plants,³⁴ while GM took a less significant hit falling to 11.2 percent over the same seven plant cross country sample size,³⁵ and Ford increased slightly to 12.4 percent over the same ten plant cross country sample size.³⁶ GM's less drastic decrease in Black employment during this time period compared to Chrysler can be attributed to its more geographically diverse locations, and being less affected by the economic downturn generally. Contrarily, Northrup addresses the difference between Ford and Chrysler by simply stating that at Ford workers had more seniority than their Chrysler counterparts. But there is another issue at stake here regarding the UAW's promise during the 1941 strike to promote the interests of Black workers by giving them access to better, more stable jobs.

³² *Ibid.*, 69.

³³ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

Table 1.1 Black Workers as a Percentage of Total Workers by Company³⁷

Year	Chrysler – number of Black workers	Chrysler – Black workers as percentage of total workers	Ford – number of Black workers	Ford – Black workers as percentage of total workers	GM – number of Black workers	GM – Black workers as percentage of total workers
1940	2,000 ^a	4.0 ^a	9,882 ^b	11.1 ^b	100,000 ^c	2.5 ^c
1957	9,242 ^d	20.3 ^d	3,234 ^e	11.6 ^e	1,563 ^f	14.3 ^f
1958	3,345 ^d	14.7 ^d	2,582 ^e	12.4 ^e	1,923 ^f	11.2 ^f
1968	N/A	25 ^a	N/A	25>x>12.7 ^a	N/A	12.7 ^a

Table 1.1 Black Workers as a Percentage of Total Workers by Company

a: Entire workforce

b: All Michigan plants

c: All Michigan and Indiana automobile and auto plants

d: Four plants in Detroit

e: Ten plants across the country

f: Seven plants across the country

Black workers did make some headway in terms of employment in the auto industry. Whereas in 1940 nonwhites made up only 3.7 percent of the auto workforce, in 1950 that number had risen to 7.8 percent, and by 1960 it reached 9.1 percent.³⁸ By 1968, the year that DRUM and ELRUM (two of the most active members of the League) were founded, that number, among the big three auto companies, had reached 14.5 percent. That same year the company most closely related to Detroit and most inclined to hire Black workers relative to total employment employed, Chrysler, had a Black workforce making up 25 percent of the total workforce. This statistic is, however, misleading in three different ways. Firstly, while some of these jobs are outside of Detroit the majority of them remained in Detroit, a city with a rapidly growing Black population (due to the latter half of the Great Migration). Second, there is no corresponding increase of Black workers in white-collar work or highly skilled

³⁷ Statistics drawn from best available information.

³⁸ Northrup, *The Negro in the Automobile Industry*, 74.

blue collar jobs. Third, safety conditions were more neglected at the factories where Black workers constituted the majority.

While the overall share of nonwhite (primarily Black) workers may have risen by 10.8 percentage points over the span of 28 years, the Black population of Detroit was growing at a much higher rate. During the Great Migration (1915-1960), approximately five million southern Blacks migrated north to industrial cities.³⁹ One of the main destinations for this migration was Detroit, in early years largely because of Ford's announcement of a five-dollar workday and his propensity to hire Black workers. This trend continued into the forties, fifties, and sixties as Chrysler became another company known for hiring Black workers (eventually GM would follow suit, but would continue to lag behind its two main competitors). Due to this factor and white flight out into the suburbs, Detroit's Black population grew from 9.2 percent in 1940 to 43.7 percent in 1970.⁴⁰ However, according to Northrup's study over six industries (automobile, aerospace, steel, rubber tires, petroleum, and chemical) the automobile industry was a more likely destination for Black workers.⁴¹ While this suggests that the UAW was making progress in terms of absolute employment growth it does not necessarily imply equality.

A second issue that still existed within the plants was a lack of upward mobility for Black workers. However, it still bears consideration. In 1968, out of a total of 813,729 white

³⁹ Alferdteen Harrison, preface to *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South*, Alferdteen Harrison ed., (Jackson MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), vii).

⁴⁰ Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, United States Census Bureau, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, For Large Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States*, Population Division Working Paper No. 76, (Washington, D.C., 2005).

⁴¹ Herbert R. Northrup, "Concluding Analysis," in *Negro Employment in Basic Industry: A Study of Racial Policies in Six Industries*, edited by Herbert R. Northrup, 715-43, (Philadelphia: Wharton School of Finance and Commerce, University of Pennsylvania, 1970), 721.

workers employed by GM, Ford, or Chrysler, 235,533 (28.94%) were “white collar. Contrastingly, out of 137,829 Black workers employed by GM, Ford, or Chrysler only 5,757 (4.18%) were “white collar”.⁴² It is plain to see that Black workers were underrepresented as white-collar workers in the auto industry, important to note the UAW’s limited influence on hiring to white collar, non-union positions.

Where the UAW had more influence, in hiring to highly skilled union craft jobs, however, workers were, if anything, even more underrepresented. Data accumulated with the help of the UAW by the United States Civil Rights Commission in 1960 paints a bleak picture of the progress made in UAW-represented factories. The UAW reported statistics on each of the “big three” auto companies on their facilities located in Detroit. At Chrysler, for instance, where 26.7 percent of all employees were Black, only 24 out of 7,425 Black workers held skilled positions (less than 0.01%). Similarly, General Motors reported that of 11,125 skilled employees in the Detroit area 67 were Black. Even Ford, with its history of hiring Blacks (implying seniority), reported that only 2 percent of skilled workers were Black, compared to 38 percent of the overall workforce.⁴³ Although the situation had improved by 1968, the numbers still told a grim story of a union failing to make good on its commitment to racial equality. In that year only 3.3 percent of the Blacks employed by the big three automobile producers were craftsmen, the second largest sector of employment in the automobile industry (behind operatives), and also the best paying of all blue-collar

⁴² Calculated out of Northrup, *The Negro in the Automobile Industry*, Table 11 Big Three Automobile Companies Employment by Race, Sex, and Occupational Group, 1968, 80; The table neglects to include a separate amount of workers of Asian, Arab, or Hispanic descent but as these numbers would be nominal the general point that Black workers are under represented in white collar work goes unaffected.

⁴³ United States Civil Rights Commission, *Hearings Before the United States Commission on Civil Rights, Detroit, Michigan*, December 14-15, 1960 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1961), 62-65.

positions. Craftsmen were mainly hired via union apprenticeship programs, yet Northrup informs us that “historically, most Negroes have come to regard all apprenticeship programs as closed to them. ... There is little reason to believe that this feeling has been substantially overcome in the automobile industry.”⁴⁴ Even within the craft trades, Black workers were mostly relegated to the lower-paying less-skilled professions. Northrup explains that since craftsmen are selected using scores from aptitude tests and Black workers generally score on the “low side...[t]hey find opening[s] in apprentice classes for millwrights, pipe fitters, and welders. The tool and die and electrical trades take those with the highest scores, and few Negroes now make up these groups or qualify for them.”⁴⁵ The lack of progress made in the skilled trades under the watch of the UAW constitutes a damning critique of UAW racial policies when contrasted to the egalitarian claims of the international leadership.

The UAW under Walter Reuther had become engaged in a cooperative (rather than combative) negotiating process with the companies. Between the years 1948 and 1950 Reuther and the UAW engaged in a series of negotiations that secured certain concessions such as cost of living pay adjustments, pensions, and medical benefits in exchange for longer contracts with a no-strike clause. *Fortune Magazine* touted this contract as “the treaty of Detroit” but the UAW gave up significant control of the shop floor.⁴⁶ Ernie Allen suggests that this focus on pay increases rather than safety negatively affected conditions in plants, particularly hurting Black workers.⁴⁷ Automation, new machinery brought into the plant to increase productivity, did not replace human labor, but often forced workers to labor harder

⁴⁴ Northrup, “The Negro in the Automobile Industry”, 81.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁶ Barnard, *American Vanguard*, 270-81.

⁴⁷ Ernie Allen, “Dying From the Inside: The Decline of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, in *They Should Have Served that Cup of Coffee: Seven Radical Remember the '60s*, 71-109 edited by Dick Cluster, (Boston: South End Press 1979), 72.

and faster under increasingly unsafe conditions. Black workers who bore the brunt of this abuse came to call the process “niggermation”.

Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin describe this process at the Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle plant where Black workers made up 70 percent of a work force of over 4,000 and “considered this key plant the most niggermated factory in Detroit”.⁴⁸ I would like to examine four telling events at this plant. The first is of a janitor named Rose Logan. In mid-1969 Rose was struck by an “improperly loaded jitney whose driver’s vision was blocked”. Her doctor advised her to stay off her feet, but Chrysler’s doctor declared that she was ready to return to work. In fear for her job, Rose returned to the shop floor where she developed thrombophlebitis (an inflamed wall of a vein), leading ultimately to her death.⁴⁹

Just a year later, three events occurred within close succession at this plant. First, another Black female employee’s life was claimed due overwork and unsafe. On May 13, 1970 Mamie Williams, an employee with 26 years of experience, passed out while working on the line and died shortly there after at her home. The risks of working were not unknown to either Chrysler or Mamie Williams because a week earlier Williams had been ordered by her doctors to remain home and avoid strenuous labor due to a dangerous blood-pressure condition. However, Chrysler, by threatening her accumulated benefits as well as her job, had been able to coerce Williams back to work under unsafe conditions.⁵⁰

Not even two weeks after Mamie Williams’ death, 22-year-old Gary Thompson was killed when his jitney malfunctioned and turned over, burying him under five tons of steel. An investigation of the equipment and of safety practices done by the UAW subsequent to

⁴⁸ Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying, A Study in Urban Revolution*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), 86.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 87.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

the “accident” sheds light on management’s lack of concern for the safety of Eldon Avenue workers. UAW Safety Director Lloyd Utter found that not only was the specific piece of equipment faulty - missing its emergency brake and having a poor transmission, along with further damage - many others were in similar or worse condition. He found maintenance procedures to be systematically negligent:

there is supposed to be a regularly scheduled maintenance procedure for this equipment in this plant. I was also informed that operators are instructed to take trucks to the garage and tag them when they are in need of repairs. However, it seems to be the practice of foremen, when equipment is needed, *to pull the tags off the equipment in the repair area that badly need corrective maintenance and put them back into service on the floor.*⁵¹

Such negligence shows a lack of value for life, in this case Black life.

However, the case that received most attention was that of James Johnson, a young, autoworker who walked into the Eldon Avenue plant on July 15, 1970 with an M-1 carbine hidden in his work clothes. Earlier that day he had been disciplined and suspended for refusing to participate in a work speed-up. Johnson had also been subject to unfair loss of pay and vacation time in the recent past. After spotting a foreman who had been involved in his suspension he began firing, killing one Black foreman, one white foreman, and a white job setter. After he was taken into custody, Ken Cockrel (a member of the LRBW executive committee) took on his case exclaiming, “We’ll have to put Chrysler on trial for damages to this man caused by his working conditions”.⁵² The judge and jury were taken to the Eldon Avenue plant to witness the working conditions that could drive a person to such an act. The jury felt that Johnson was not at fault as the conditions were “abominable” and acquitted Johnson, although eventually he would be subjected to indefinite hospitalization on the

⁵¹ Emphasis added by author; *Ibid.*, 86-87

⁵² *Ibid.*, 86.

grounds of mental disability. Furthermore, Johnson would win a worker's compensation suit against Chrysler for damages suffered during his time at the Eldon Avenue plant.⁵³

The awful conditions at the Eldon Avenue plant, one of the few predominantly Black auto plants in the country, persisting well into the 1970s, are a testament to the life-threatening conditions Black workers faced, going beyond class exploitation into the realm of racially specific oppression. This, of course, is not to claim that white workers labored in plants devoid of safety concerns, but to show that where Black workers were concentrated, both the UAW and the company neglected safety to a greater degree. The instances discussed, while anecdotal, indicate that the lives and safety of Black workers were more systematically undervalued than those of white workers.

Into the 1960s, the UAW Executive Board remained all white. During the course of the forties and fifties it was suggested many times that an executive position be created for the purpose of electing a Black committee member. However, Walter Reuther insisted that this course of action would discriminate on the basis of "reverse Jim Crow" stating more starkly that, "there will come a time when a Negro will be qualified... and at such a time a Negro will be placed on the board".⁵⁴ This seems to suggest that Reuther did not believe that there was a single Black union member qualified to represent the interest of Black workers and workers as a whole at the highest level, but it is equally likely Reuther had an interest in placating a still largely racist white rank-and-file. Only the intervention of a progressive Black caucus called the Trade Union Leadership Council (TULC) led to placement of a Black worker on the executive board. The TULC came onto the scene in 1957, led primarily

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 9-11, 86; Chapter three will discuss the Johnson case in more detail.

⁵⁴ Cornelius C. Thomas, "The Trade Union Leadership Council: Black Workers Respond to the United Automobile Workers, 1957-1967", *New Politics* 10, no. 2 (Winter 2005), 127.

by Horace Sheffield and Robert “Buddy” Battle III, both experienced unionists who came of age during the Ford River Rouge strike of 1941. They knew about the promises made to Black workers for their support and were determined to see them realized. The UAW, on the other hand, did not welcome internal challengers, especially those determined to tarnish its reputation for racial egalitarianism. In 1959 TULC went head to head with the union by sponsoring its own Black candidate at Local 600, the local associated with the Ford River Rouge plant, but lost. Later that year in October Sheffield threatened to lobby against the paying of dues by Black UAW members unless the union placed Willoughby Abner of Chicago or another Black union member on the International Executive Board. Abner, as anticipated, declined the nomination. After a bitter struggle which included an attempt to fire Sheffield, the UAW created three at-large executive positions in 1962, one intended for a Black unionist. TULC nominated Horace Sheffield as their candidate, but the Reuther camp maneuvered successfully to elect their candidate, the more moderate Nelson Jack Edwards.⁵⁵

This seems to be representative of the UAW’s strategy: avoid incorporating Black leadership as long as possible and, when one’s hand is forced, make certain that a palatable Black moderate can be found to fill the void. Certainly by the late 1960s some progress had been made in terms of overall numbers of Black leaders within the international but at the local level primarily white-majority locals rarely elected Black candidates to office. On the other hand, in Black-majority Local 3 and Local 961 white unionists still held majority power. As we will see, when the League threatened to develop militant Black leadership, the union (both local and international) intervened forcefully to curtail the challenge.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 124-137.

This chapter shows how the UAW's broken promises and the persisting material disadvantages faced by Black autoworkers set the stage Black worker militancy in the late 1960s, highlighted by revolutionary union movements that coalesced into the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Ample evidence suggests that Black workers remained faithful to the union cause for a period of over twenty years, even as the Black worker-UAW alliance brought them only minimal gains. By the end of the 1960s Black workers still had less job security, their employment gains did not keep pace with Black population growth in Detroit, they were still largely shut out of skilled blue-collar and white collar jobs, faced worse safety conditions, and had minimal Black union representation. In came a group of uncompromising, young Black radicals determined to push for real material change.

Chapter Two

Revolutionary Union Movements and Radical Newspapers

1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I hope to trace how various threads of Detroit's radical Black political movement came together in the late 1960s to form the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Two major components of the eventual League are discussed in this chapter: the Revolutionary Union Movements - first DRUM then ELRUM followed by an array of others – and various revolutionary newspapers, espousing a unique ideology that which they referred to as “Black Marxism-Leninism”. The RUMs were militant Black worker organizations that functioned outside of the confines of UAW bureaucracy in order to combat racism and labor exploitation within both the UAW and the companies. They asserted that not only had the UAW failed to live up to its racially egalitarian promises of the 1940s, but had sold out all workers by closely allying itself with the auto corporations it was supposed to be fighting against. Another group of young Black radicals produced, and distributed revolutionary newspapers in working-class Black neighborhoods. I discuss events chronologically in order to show the simultaneous development of the various components and strategies.

2. BEFORE THE RUMs

The founders of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers worked for years prior to its founding in a compact Black radical Detroit milieu. Five leading members (four of whom would go on to be on the Executive Committee) - Luke Tripp, John Williams, John Watson, General Baker, and Gwendolyn Kemp – met as early as a 1963 NAACP-sponsored

protest against Detroit's bid to host the 1968 Olympic games.¹ They were all arrested and accused of disorderly conduct for allegedly jeering during the national anthem. Two-and-a-half years later they were acquitted on the grounds that there was doubt that "the five accused were among the actual troublemakers".² The League's leaders and members did not arise spontaneously from the shopfloor, but rather from Detroit's lively Black radical political environment.

Another important event that preceded and affected the trajectory of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was the Great Rebellion of July 1967. This, the largest rebellion anywhere in the United States in over two decades, caused a spurt in radical Black politics as well as a conservative white backlash. On July 23, 1967 Detroit police officers raided a bar primarily patronized by Black Detroiters. Police frequently raided "blind pigs", bars which lacked proper licensing and served during illegal hours, but usual practice was to arrest only the owners of the bar while documenting and releasing patrons. However, during this raid the police arrested all 82 people in the bar. In the next few hours a growing crowd gathered around the bar as nearby residents were uneasy about the police presence in their neighborhood on a Sunday morning. As the crowd grew, so did the police's use of force. From this point, violence escalated quickly on both sides. The governor of Michigan, George Romney, and the mayor of Detroit, Jerome Cavanagh ordered 9,200 National Guardsmen and 800 State Police officers to block off a one mile radius around the center of the rebellion and quell the mobilization. Politicized members of the Black community drove

¹ James A. Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 87. This protest which arose out of the Detroit government prioritizing frivolous sporting events over the needs of the impoverished is similar to the protests in Brazil leading up to the 2014 World Cup.

² "Olympics Protesters Acquitted", *Detroit News*, February 24, 1966.

around repeating over a sound system, “This is Black power. Fight for your rights!” Early in the morning of the 24th Romney and Cavanaugh agreed to bring in federal help, and President Johnson sent in 4,700 paratroopers. Striking levels of police brutality were reported during the rebellion as thirty-three Black and ten white Detroiters lost their lives.³ Furthermore, 7,231 men and women were arrested while extensive damage was done to buildings and other property.⁴

The 1967 Detroit rebellion is conventionally termed a riot, implicitly denying it any political importance, while term rebellion calls attention to the uprising’s political implications. Certainly the call for Black power and rights during the rebellion was a political act, but given the political environment of 1967 (Malcolm X’s assassination was just two years before and MLK’s assassination was yet to occur), it would not be implausible to suggest that most of the rebellion participants were consciously participating in an attack on an oppressive and exploitative system. Many Blacks, at the time and later, including the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, referred to these events as a rebellion. This level of political consciousness was demonstrated best when, at Cavanaugh and Romney’s request, a Black Congressman, Charles Diggs, showed up on the scene hoping to calm the situation. “He was told, ‘Go home Diggs.... [W]e want Stokely Charmichael.’”⁵

³ Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern City*, (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2001), 46-47.

⁴ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2005), 259.

⁵ Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 72.

3. REVOLUTIONARY NEWSPAPERS

Over the course of its existence the League of Revolutionary Black Workers employed multiple forms of autonomous media to disseminate its message, including a local newspaper, a university paper, and many smaller plant specific newsletters. John Watson of the League's executive committee spearheaded and edited three League publications. The first and most ambitious of these publications was called the *Inner City Voice*, a locally distributed (in Detroit) monthly paper targeted at Black working class communities. The first issue was released in October of 1967, just three months after the Great Rebellion. The paper was revolutionary in tone and featured provocative articles with titles such as "Michigan Slavery", "Detroit's Concentration Camps Waiting for Blacks", and "Black Workers Uprising".⁶ Two other (future) members of the League's executive committee played a significant role in the paper's production. The first is General Baker, a radicalized autoworker from Chrysler's Dodge Main plant. Baker was often the League's most consistent advocate of engaging in Black struggle as working class struggle. Mike Hamlin, the third important member of the *Inner City Voice* editorial team, remarked in his memoir, "It was General who would become our link to inside organizing in the plant." Hamlin also commented on his own role as a mediator stating that he "held it all together with all the personalities and egos".⁷ The newspaper found a fairly strong readership, printing 10,000

⁶ Newspaper Article, *Inner City Voice*, Vol, 1, No. 6, March, 1968, BPM4 Reel 3/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library and Newspaper Article, *Inner City Voice*, Vol, 1, No. 8, June 1968, BPM4 Reel 3/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

⁷ Michael Hamlin and Michelle Gibbs, *A Black Revolutionary's Life in Labor: Black Workers Power in Detroit*, (Detroit: Against the Tide Books, 2012), 17-19.

copies of each issue and selling nearly all of them, but it struggled financially and within a year (and prior to the official founding of the League) it collapsed.⁸

Two other publications succeeded the *Inner City Voice*. During periods of scant funding, particularly at the founding of the League in March 1969, a much shorter newsletter called *Spear* served as its main propaganda organ. Although more a newsletter than a newspaper, *Spear* offered poignant critiques of the racist capitalist system in the United States in an accessible format. It could also easily and inconspicuously be distributed at auto plants.

Perhaps the most interesting publication, from a political perspective, was *The South End*, the university newspaper at Wayne State University. John Watson, a part-time student at Wayne State, gained editorship of the paper (and thus full access to the paper's funding) for the 1968-69 school year. He used this newfound authority to turn the school paper from what was previously a counter-cultural outlet to a full-on revolutionary channel. In his first issue as editor, Watson outlined the paper's goals:

The South End returns to Wayne State with the intention of promoting the interests of the impoverished, oppressed, exploited, and powerless victims of white, racist monopoly capitalism and imperialism. We will present that portion of the news which rarely received coverage in the major daily newspapers, or for that matter in the average university newspaper... **In other words, we will take the hard line**⁹... [O]ur only enemies will be those who would further impoverish the poor, oppress the oppressed, exploit the exploited and take advantage of the powerless. We are sure there are no more than a handful of these rascals on campus.¹⁰

⁸ However, a second volume of the *Inner City Voice* appeared in 1970. Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 13-22.

⁹ Emphasis in original text. Editorial, "As We Define Our Goal", *The South End*, September 26, 1968. Harry Salsinger, "Student Mother of 3 Seeks WSU South End Post", *The Detroit News*, March 16, 1969.

¹⁰ Editorial, "As We Define Our Goal", *The South End*, September 26, 1968, Walter P. Reuther Archives, Wayne State University.

Watson would turn out to be overly optimistic, as he would face opposition from students, faculty, and even the university president. The *Detroit News* even ran an article not-so-implicitly supporting Jean Campau, an opposition candidate for student editor, toward the end of the 1968-69 school year.¹¹

In addition to League-wide information organs, many of the associated RUMs had their own newsletters. Some of these include the DRUM newsletter, the ELRUM newsletter, a FRUM (Ford Revolutionary Union Movement) newsletter, a JARUM (Jefferson Assembly Revolutionary Union Movement) newsletter, a FORUM (Forge Revolutionary Union Movement) newsletter, and a newsletter representing the Blue Cross/Blue Shield RUM called “The Blues”. Many of these newspapers or newsletters serve as essential primary sources for my analysis.

4. EARLY REVOLUTIONARY UNION MOVEMENT ACTIVITIES

The event that really kicked off in-plant organizing and the establishment of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement was an interracial wildcat strike that began on May 2, 1968. This would be the last of a string of five wildcat strikes to occur in under a year at Chrysler’s Dodge Main plant dating back to July 1967, caused by a speedup of the Dart and Valiant production lines from 49 to 56 units an hour within a week. Roughly equal numbers of Black and white workers walked the picket lines, yet after the three-day strike punishment was disproportionately meted out to Black workers. The *Inner City Voice* reported in June that “three of the five workers discharged were Black, nine of the ten given 30 days

¹¹ Harry Salsinger, “Student Mother of 3 Seeks WSU South End Post”, *The Detroit News*, March 16, 1969.

(suspension) were Black and so forth”.¹² A more recent essay by James Geschwender and Judson Jeffries reports (based on reporting in the *Michigan Chronicle*) that “[s]even persons (five Blacks and two whites) were fired, and all but two, General G. Baker Jr. and Bennie Tate-both Black- were eventually rehired.”¹³

This wildcat ultimately led to the establishment of DRUM when nine production workers from Dodge Main, including Chuck Wooten and General Baker, met with the editors of *Inner City Voice* at a bar near the plant. They decided that something had to be done to curtail the blatant racism found in the factories. General Baker produced an open letter to Chrysler that was published in the *Voice*'s June issue. In addition to rejecting the “banner” of leadership bestowed upon him by the firing, he politicized the issue by declaring, “In discharging me you have attempted to belittle the racial overtones in the affair which will prove an impossible task on your behalf. Any confrontation between Black and white men in this racist decadent society is a racial and therefore political question”. He essentially declared war on Chrysler, continuing, “You have made the decision to do battle with the entire Black community in this city, this state, this country and in this world of which I am part”.¹⁴ After the establishment of DRUM, the first task was to get out the word to Black workers around the plant. For this, the DRUM newsletter was established and in the first issue of the first volume they explained why it was necessary:

[T]he overall administration of punishment was overwhelmingly applied to the Black workers who were held responsible for the walk-out which was

¹² “Black Workers Uprising”, *Inner City Voice*, June 1968, BPM4 Reel 3/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

¹³ James A. Geschwender and Judson L. Jeffries, “The League of Revolutionary Black Workers”, in *Black Power: In the Belly of the Beast*, ed. Judson L. Jeffries (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 139.

¹⁴ General Baker, “Open Letter to Chrysler”, *Inner City Voice*, June 1968, BPM4 Reel 3/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

directly caused by company indifference towards working conditions... We feel the actions taken against these workers were unjust and should not be tolerated. We need your unflinching support. Concern yourselves with the plight of the Black struggle. You have but one life, live it with dignity.¹⁵

Gradually, DRUM began to gain recognition in the plant, and in June of 1968 they decided to test their influence (in preparation for bigger plans ahead). Two bars near the plant, Bucciero's and Mickey's, were regularly patronized by Black workers, yet both institutions refused to hire Blacks with the excuse that "no black people will work for [their] wages," ignoring the fact that both bars paid union rates. DRUM went on to claim that Blacks were not permitted to sit in the booths and were often treated with disrespect. To resolve this, the eighth issue of DRUM's newsletter called for a "FOUR DAY BOYCOTT of these bars until these acts of discrimination are ended".¹⁶ In the next issue, DRUM reported that there was 90 percent participation and victory was claimed. Furthermore, "a committee of Black workers is now negotiating with these bars" in order to stop the racism. The practical success of these negotiations is unclear¹⁷, but DRUM felt that the high level of participation was an indication that they had enough support among Black workers in the plant to move forward with their program.¹⁸

In preparation for this program DRUM used the ninth issue of its newsletter to list 14 demands, the means it intends to use to get them, and a date (July 19, 1968) by which the tactics were to be implemented. These demands were:

¹⁵ Newsletter, DRUM Vol. 1 No. 1, *Wildcat Strike*, BPM4 Reel 1/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

¹⁶ Newsletter, DRUM Vol. 1 No. 8, *Double Standards*, BPM4 Reel 1/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

¹⁷ Georgakas and Surkin (*Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 38) assert that the boycott "brought the desired concessions", but leave no indication of how to trace the validity of this claim.

¹⁸ Newsletter, DRUM, Vol. 1, No. 9, *Boycott*, BPM4 Reel 1/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

1. D.R.U.M. demands 50 black foremen
2. D.R.U.M. demands 10 black general foremen immediately
3. D.R.U.M. demands 3 black superintendents
4. D.R.U.M. demands a black plant manager
5. D.R.U.M. demands that the majority of the employment office be black
6. D.R.U.M. demands all black doctors and 50% black nurses in the medical centers at this plant
7. D.R.U.M. demands that the medical policy at this plant be changed entirely
8. D.R.U.M. demands that 50% of all plant protection guards be black and that every time a black worker is removed from the plant premises that he be lead by a black brother.
9. D.R.U.M. demands that all black workers immediately stop paying union dues.
10. D.R.U.M. demands that the two hours pay that goes into union dues be levied to the black community to aid in self determination for black people.
11. D.R.U.M. demands that the double standard be eliminated and that a committee of the black rank and file be set up to investigate all grievances against the corp., to find out what type of discipline is to be taken against corporation, and also to find out what type of discipline is to be taken against Chrysler Corp. employees.
12. D.R.U.M. demands that all black workers who have been fired on trumped up racist charges be brought back with all lost pay.
13. D.R.U.M. demands that our fellow black brothers in South Africa working for Chrysler Corp. and its subsidiaries be payed at an equal scale as white racist co-workers.
14. D.R.U.M. also demands that a black brother be appointed as head of the board of directors Chrysler Corp.

The power base for these demands will be as follows:

1. Legal demonstration at Local 3 and Solidarity house.
2. Legal demonstration at Highland Park (Chrysler Corp. headquarters).
3. Legal shut down of Hamtramck assembly.¹⁹

Notable here is the attack on Chrysler complemented by the not-so-implicit allegation that the UAW has not earned Black workers' dues and therefore should no longer receive them. DRUM's militant intent was made clear as they promised to not stand idly by and wait for the benevolence of the company and union to fight for justice and racial equality in the auto-

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

industry. They intended to mount a class and racially conscious attack in order to gain justice.

DRUM was true to its word. Just three weeks later on Thursday, July 7, 1968 they held a rally in a parking lot across the street from the plant with over 300 in attendance. Several neighborhood groups from around Detroit were in attendance and a conga group provided protest music. Luke Tripp ran down how the rally played out in an article ran in *The South End* on January 23, 1969. After a few speeches were given the crowd seemed motivated to take their energy to the UAW. Not by coincidence Local 3's executive board was meeting that day. The workers linked arms and marched to the union hall where they found a hostile reception. Tripp contrasts, "the workers in their 'humping' blue coverall, and their union 'representatives' laid to the bone in their mohair suits."²⁰ The executive board meeting was cancelled and a general meeting was scheduled in the auditorium where DRUM leaders laid out their demands, and claimed that the union was in bed with the company and consistently failed to address workers' grievances. Not unexpectedly, the Local 3's president Ed Liska and vice president (Charles Brooks, a Black man DRUM would denounce as an "Uncle Tom") defended their actions and claimed that Chrysler maintained a lot of power. Workers saw that this was going nowhere and left with plans to begin a strike the next day.²¹

At 5 A.M. the next morning members of DRUM gathered at the gates of the plant in order to be ready for the arrival of first shift at 6 A.M. Only Black workers (who made up approximately 60-70 percent of the plant) were interfered with, and they were given a political rundown as to the importance of the strike. White workers, once they realized that

²⁰ Luke Tripp, "D.R.U.M.- Vanguard of the Black Revolution: Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement States History, Purpose and Aims", *The South End*, January 23, 1969, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

²¹ *Ibid.*

they would not be approached either continued into the factory, went home, or remained on the picket lines if they were sympathetic to the cause. Over 70 percent of the Black workforce stayed out of the plant, building a picket line of over 3,000 workers for the wildcat. Before noon six DRUM representatives visited Local 3 headquarters to once again discuss their demands with Ed Liska and others. As reported later by Luke Tripp, “[t]hey 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”. Later in the afternoon the Hamtramck Police arrived to the picket lines equipped with gas masks and riot gear, and at this point DRUM opted to disperse the picketers rather than confront the police. Still, about 250 of the more radical and conscious workers were mobilized via carpool to take the protest five miles away to Chrysler’s headquarters in Highland Park. This, of course, was unwelcome to the corporate executives and it wasn’t long before the Highland Park police showed up, also wielding riot gear, to demand that the workers disperse. A few DRUM leaders managed to slip through the police lines to demand to speak to “policy makers” and were unsurprisingly turned away. Finally, the demonstrators decided to head back rather than directly confront the police officers. Georgakas and Surkin suggest that DRUM was “[s]atisfied with having shaken company and union and having caused the mobilization of two departments of police.”²² The shutdown continued through Friday and Saturday and a meeting was set up for Sunday where twelve leaders of DRUM would meet with the UAW’s citywide Black caucus. It quickly became clear that the younger, more radical DRUM members were tired of being told to “be patient” and work within the confines of the union as the more conservative Black caucus suggested. Still, the

²² Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 38.

caucus agreed to support DRUM's fight against racism at Chrysler. On Monday picket lines reassembled until the Hamtramck police again intervened this time handing them John Doe injunctions which the workers ripped up and threw to the ground before leaving. Full work would resume on Tuesday.²³ The *Detroit Free Press* would report that Chrysler lost the production of 1,900 cars as a result of the July wildcat.²⁴ Surprisingly, there do not appear to have been any suspensions or firings as a result of the wildcat.

Not every powerful institution was against DRUM though. In August of 1968 the influential Interdenominational Ministers Alliance (IMA), a group of prominent Black ministers, threw their weight behind DRUM, stating, "Regarding their concerns about the medical practices of Dodge Main, we strongly urge that a thorough study of the medical policy of the plant be made jointly by Chrysler Corp., the UAW and representatives of DRUM."²⁵ They also stated that they "will support them in their goals" demanding "a full investigation of the grievance procedure at the plant".²⁶

A month later, in September, DRUM was presented with another opportunity to test its strength, this time through a union election. A Local 3 trustee had died and a special election scheduled to select his replacement. DRUM leadership was uncertain whether to run a candidate but ultimately decided to proceed on several grounds: first, it could serve as a medium for gaining DRUM exposure and acceptance; second, win or lose, the campaign could "serve as a demonstration of Black solidarity and strength;" third, political activity serves to raise consciousness; and finally, the campaign could "contribute to DRUM's

²³ Tripp, *The South End*, January 23, 1969; Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 37-39; Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 92-93.

²⁴ "Black Unionists Posing Chrysler Wildcat Threat", *Detroit Free Press*, August 16, 1968.

²⁵ "Ministers Back Dodge Protesters", *Detroit Free Press*, August 18, 1968.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

membership drive”.²⁷ DRUM addressed the issue publicly for the first time in the 13th issue of their newsletter where they emphasized the vital importance of the election and laid out a necessary platform for any candidate. The platform was focused around revolutionary change to UAW structures as well as union accountability to the rank and file, specifically the Black majority at Local 3.²⁸ The 14th issue of DRUM announced support for Ron March who, while neither a Marxist nor a Black Nationalist, understood the harsh conditions within the plant, particularly as they applied to Black workers.²⁹ DRUM campaigned for March by showing that Local 3 (the second largest local in the country) was broke due to embezzlement and misuse of funds by its current leadership. DRUM was joined in its support for Ron March by the CRU (Committee for a Real Union), a radical organization made up of young white workers that stated, “To help break up this crony system, to get ourselves a real union, CRU urges everyone, white and black, to vote for RON MARCH #10 for TRUSTEE.”³⁰ A quick yet fierce campaign ensued, but not without interference. *Ramparts Magazine* would report that DRUM’s candidate was prohibited from putting up campaign signs, and that while “[s]ome candidates had helpers,” who “used ‘no standing’ zones in which to drop off voters; only cars with DRUM posters got tickets, and the cops took as long as a half hour to write them - thus tying up a car that might have brought another DRUM vote”.³¹ Nevertheless, in a field of 27 candidates, Ron March came first with 563 votes, while his closest competitor, Joe Elliot, received 521. As election results filtered in,

²⁷ Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 103-04

²⁸ Newsletter, DRUM Vol. 1 No. 13, BPM4 Reel 1/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

²⁹ Newsletter, DRUM Vol. 1 No. 14, BPM4 Reel 1/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

³⁰ Flyer, Committee for a Real Union, n.d., Bx 1 FD 8, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

³¹ “The Dodge Rebellion”, *Ramparts Magazine*, November 30, 1968, 12.

Hamtramck police infiltrated a bar where Black workers were gathered, harassing them verbally. This led to a confrontation and eventually a meeting attended by 50 Black workers, including March, a slew of police and the Mayor and Chief of Police in Hamtramck. At the meeting again, the workers were attacked.³²

Although March gained a plurality in this election, rules required a runoff as no candidate had gained an absolute majority. Although March was not expected garner many more votes in the runoff (as the votes from most other candidates were thought to most likely shift to Joe Elliot), Local 3 did not sit idly by. The demographics of Local 3 had changed immensely over the past three decades, so while in the sixties the majority of workers were Black, most retirees were Polish-Americans. Retired workers were permitted to vote in Local 3 elections, but few did so regularly. In order to insure victory, Local 3 leadership sent a letter to its retired workers imploring them to vote in this election, claiming that a Ron March victory could threaten their retirement benefits. March gained a significant number of votes in the runoff, but still lost, 2,091 votes to 1,386.³³ The 15th issue of the DRUM newsletter charged:

What did the conspirators do in the election? The white reactionary forces issued 15 traffic tickets to Ron March supporters cars. They tore and rapped down Ron March posters. They launched vicious attacks with axe handles on our black brothers peacefully assembled in the parking lot off Joe Campau and Clay. They rampaged the Union Hall spraying Mace in the eyes of our black brothers and beat them with axe handles. They solicited the aid of the notorious Michigan Chronicle to write a headline story to frighten the black workers at Hamtramck assembly plant... and then they finally stole the election from black workers... Therefore D.R.U.M. declares that Ron March duely and honestly won in the election for trustee.³⁴

³² Derrick Morrison, "Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement", *Young Socialist*, November 1968, 10-11, 18.

³³ Ibid. Geschwender, *Race, Class, & Worker Insurgency*, 107.

³⁴ Newsletter, DRUM Vol. 1 No. 15, BPM4 Reel 1/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

DRUM would continue to demand improvements from the company and the union and held another mass rally at Chrysler's Highland Park headquarters on October 24, 1968. By this time resources were running low, so DRUM organized a fundraiser/raffle set for November 17, 1968.³⁵ An event flyer listed five topics to be covered by speakers: 1)History of the Black worker 2)Role of the Black worker 3)History of D.R.U.M/ "Its principles & programs" 4)Organizing the Black worker (city-wide) 5)Combat liberalism in the U.A.W. Three prizes were listed for the raffle, first prize being a "new M-1 Rifle", second prize a "new shot gun", and third prize a "bag of groceries".³⁶

Meanwhile, a new RUM, the Eldon Revolutionary Union Movement (ELRUM) was formed at the Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle Plant. The leaders of ELRUM were associated with DRUM leadership and emulated the DRUM tactics and organization. The Eldon Avenue plant held special importance because it was Chrysler's only gear and axle plant, which meant that a strike at this plant could stall all Chrysler production. Eldon Avenue, like Dodge Main, was a majority Black; ELRUM quickly gained a membership base that larger than DRUM's. In the 4th issue of its newsletter, ELRUM described the demographic makeup of employees at Eldon. Of about 5,000 hourly employees at Eldon, 3,500 were Black yet, only 47 were employed at a level higher than "common production slave". Perhaps even more astonishingly, there were only six Black workers were employed in the skilled trades,

³⁵ Eric Arnesen, *Encyclopedia of U.S. Labor and Working-class History, Volume 1*, s.v. "DRUM, FRUM, ELRUM", (New York: Routledge, 2007).

³⁶ Flyer, Rally for Black Workers, n.d., Bx 1, Fd 6, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

compared to nearly 500 whites.³⁷ On November 5, 1968 ELRUM's organizing committee distributed a one-page leaflet announcing a meeting to be held on Sunday, November 10. On that day ELRUM was officially founded. It wouldn't take long for ELRUM to begin pressing for changes at the Eldon Avenue plant.³⁸

On January 22, 1969, a Wednesday, Black Eldon workers gathered at the union hall of Local 961 in order to stage a protest against mistreatment by the union. About 300 workers were in attendance, many of whom missed the beginning of their shift. Headed by ELRUM the workers presented Local 963 President Rickard with nineteen demands, including removal of a racist second shift nurse reinstatement of wrongfully terminated workers, hiring and upgrading of Black employees particularly in skilled positions, and safety. The nineteenth demand reads in all caps, "AND MOST IMPORTANT, A COMMITTEE TO BE FORMED TO REVIEW THE APPLICATIONS OF SKILLED WORKERS. THE COMMITTEE IS TO BE COMPOSED OF BLACK WORKERS, NOT UNCLE TOMS!"³⁹ Rickard conceded to none of the demands and Chrysler fired two workers while disciplining many more. This led ELRUM to conclude what they already knew, that the fight had to be waged not only against the corporation, but against the union as well.⁴⁰

Recognizing the two-pronged assault, ELRUM staged a wildcat strike the following Monday, January 27. Just as at the DRUM strike, white workers were not targeted by

³⁷ Newsletter, ELRUM, Vol. 1, No. 4, *Let's Compare*, BPM4 Reel 1/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

³⁸ Geschwender, *Race, Class, & Worker Insurgency*, 94.

³⁹ Flyer, Eldon Demands, n.d., Bx 1, Fd 15, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁴⁰ Summary, Untitled Document, n.d., Bx 1 Fd 15, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. And Mabel Jackson, "E.L.R.U.M. Under Attack", *The South End*, February 10, 1969, Walter P. Reuther Archives, Wayne State University.

picketers; only Black workers were approached and spoken with about the importance of fighting against racism in the UAW and the company. It appears that there were mixed reactions among the workers as some continued to report to work while “a significant number of workers did not go in,” completely halting production. ELRUM would claim success on two grounds “1) it showed Black Workers that they do have power. 2) it showed Black Workers who the real oppressor is- UAW.”⁴¹ Chrysler struck back, firing 26 workers including Fred Holsey, president of ELRUM.⁴² However, ELRUM insisted that, for long-term strategic purposes, Black workers shouldn’t yield to growing retaliation from Chrysler and lack of support or worse from the UAW. ELRUM, along with DRUM and an array of fledgling RUMs including FRUM (Ford Revolutionary Union Movement), HARUM (Health Workers Revolutionary Union Movement), MARUM (Mack Avenue Plant Revolutionary Union Movement), and UPRUM (United Parcel Service Revolutionary Union Movement), planned a protest for February 10, 1969 at union headquarters, the UAW International Union Solidarity House. ELRUM accused the company of discharging workers after they returned to work that in violation of the UAW contract, and the union of neglecting to provide the workers with representation.⁴³ A month after the protest at the Solidarity House, the UAW responded directly to ELRUM in a letter sent to all UAW members. The letter painted the Revolutionary Union Movements as nothing more than a fraternity of thugs and troublemakers, while claiming that the UAW had continuously fought for racial equality

⁴¹ Anita Hartman, “E.L.R.U.M.’s Perspective”, *The South End*, February 10, 1969, Walter P. Reuther Archives, Wayne State University.

⁴² Ralph Orr, “UAW Raps Rebel Black Workers”, *Detroit Free Press*, March 12, 1969.

⁴³ Letter, Protest at the UAW Solidarity House, n.d., Bx 1, Fd 13, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

since its beginnings in the 1930s. It continued by directly referencing the Eldon Avenue strike as illegal and unnecessary and included a section declaring:

*The UAW, however, will not protect workers who resort to violence and intimidation with the conscious purpose of dividing our Union along racial lines: for these workers would undermine our Union, the principles upon which our Union was founded and put in jeopardy the jobs which our members hold.*⁴⁴

By this point, it was clear that the UAW bureaucracy was inclined to protect its organizational interests, even by colluding with the companies, rather than take seriously the grievances prosecuted by the RUMs.⁴⁵

By early 1969, the constituent elements of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers were in place. The RUMs had taken a firm stance against exploitation by the auto companies, life-threatening conditions in the plants, and the racist policies of both the companies and the UAW. The students and writers who were now publishing Wayne State's newspaper, *The South End*, had developed a solid anti-racist, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist line and were adamant that Black workers represented this movement's vanguard. With the rise of new RUMs replicating the model and tactics of DRUM, it became clear that an organization was needed to harness the political potential and galvanize cohesion within the movement. For this purpose the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was formed.

⁴⁴ Letter, UAW Letter to Rank and File, March 10, 1969, Bx 4, Fd 25, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Emphasis included in original.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Chapter Three

Chronology of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers

1. INTRODUCTION

In response to effective external pressures placed on the RUMs from the auto-industry, the UAW, and local police departments, it became increasingly evident that cooperation and planning was needed. The League was created to serve as a democratic centralist organization that coordinated RUM activity and constituted a more developed revolutionary ideology.¹ League activities include spearheading wildcat strikes, running and supporting radical Black candidates for union offices, and backing Black workers who had been wronged by either the company or the union that was supposed to be supporting them. As in the last chapter, I examine activities chronologically in order to show that at any given time mobilization is occurring on multiple fronts. As I lay out this chronology, I hope to show that League intended to combat racial oppression and class exploitation simultaneously because, as they declare in their General Program, “our Black community is virtually a Black working class, because of our relationship to the basic means of production. Black workers comprise the backbone of the productive process in this country”.²

2. THE LEAGUE OF REVOLUTIONARY BLACK WORKERS MOBILIZED

By March of 1969 different elements of the Detroit Black radical movement, including DRUM, FRUM, ELRUM, Wayne State students and *South End* writers, came

¹ The democratic centralist structure of the League represented aspirations rather than a fully developed Leninist party.

² The General Policy Statement and Labor Program of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, n.d. Bx 1, Fd 86, ALEC, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.

together to found the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in attempt to bring coordinate the actions of the Revolutionary Union Movements. By June the League was legally incorporated and by October it had established a headquarters in Detroit at 179 Cortland St. The League would pick up steam and gradually add more member RUMs (although none would come to be as influential as DRUM and ELRUM), including JARUM (at Chrysler's Jefferson Avenue assembly plant), UPRUM (United Parcel Service), HARUM (health workers), NEWRUM (Detroit News), MARUM (Mack Avenue plant), CADRUM (Cadillac's Fleetwood factory), DRUMII (Dodge Truck), and MERUM (Mound Road engine plant). Each member RUM acted semi-autonomously, but in accordance with the League's general policy.³

A seven-man Executive Committee was appointed to direct the actions of the League; it included (ex)-factory workers General Baker, Luke Tripp, John Williams, and Chuck Wooten, students journalists John Watson and Mike Hamlin, and a young radical lawyer, Ken Cockrel. This group, although young and inexperienced, kept tight reigns on the organization.⁴ They brought an interjection of Marxist rhetoric to the primarily nationalist rhetoric of the original RUMs. However, they intended to "reinterpret Marxism in the language of the community" in order to relieve the already overburdened workers of "dead-weighted... Marxist terminology." They claimed: "the working class can change society at the point of production. But there are two working classes at this stage of American capitalism - Black and white. The Blacks form a 'subproletariat.' They can be organized on

³ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 69-71.

⁴ *Ibid.*

a caste basis, but can work revolutionary change on a class basis.”⁵ The differences between a more nationalist-inclined worker base and a Marxist-inclined leadership would become a source of friction as the League developed.

One of the League’s first courses of action was to draw up an explicit list of charges against the UAW International and send it to Walter Reuther. They attacked the letter sent out by the UAW to the rank and file in the wake of the successful ELRUM strike on January 27, 1969, asserting that it was “replete with untruths, distortions and exaggerations designed to heighten racial prejudice against militant black workers.”⁶ Furthermore, it threatened union members with non-representation in explicit violation of union by-laws. The second charge stated that the UAW practiced racial discrimination, hiring less than 75 Black representatives for almost 1,100 Black employees. This becomes especially problematic when you take into account “the special problems” that face Black workers.⁷

In a similar vein the League produced a letter making charges against Local 961, the local that represented workers at the Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle plant. First, that the union allowed the employer to impede distribution of DRUM and ELRUM literature by confiscation, harassment, intimidation, and threats, when passed out in a legal manner; second, that the Local “has permitted, accepted, and reinforced the employer’s discrimination against black workers on racial criteria;” third, that the union failed to process grievances leading to work under “abnormally dangerous conditions;” fourth, that the union participated

⁵ Pamphlet, Robert Dudnick, “Black Workers in Revolt: How Detroit’s New Black Revolutionary Workers are Changing the Face of American Trade Unionism”, *Guardian Pamphlet* March 8, 1969, Bx 4, Fd 12, DGC, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁶ Letter, Charges Against International, n.d., Bx 2, Fd 22, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁷ *Ibid.*

in the suppression of ELRUM literature and tacitly endorsed the suppression by the company; fifth, that Black union members were illegally disqualified from voting in union elections in order to steal union control away from radical Black workers; and finally, that the union disqualified certain Black union members from being candidates for local office.⁸

During his tenure as Editor-in-Chief of *The South End* (September 1968-June 1969), John Watson caused quite a stir, producing articles with a revolutionary tone. There was a three-part series honoring Malcolm X, numerous stories about the RUMs, and a masthead reading “One Class-Conscious Worker is Worth 100 Students.” The paper’s edgy tone drew the attention of Wayne State’s President, certain groups of students, and in one case that of Detroit TV-2 reporter Joe Weaver. On February 10, 1969 Weaver showed up to the *South End* office hoping to do an interview with John Watson regarding the controversial content in his newspaper. Watson refused, and subsequently asked Weaver to leave. The rest of the story is disputed, but while Watson and other members of the *South End* staff were in the process of escorting Weaver (and his crew) out of the office, Weaver and Watson exchanged blows. Subsequently, Weaver filed charges against Watson. Charged with assault and battery, the case centered around who “attacked” first. In a trial that included competing testimony from witnesses, and a (partially obstructed) recording of the occurrence, Watson was acquitted after 22 minutes of deliberation by a jury made up of five white and one Black juror.⁹

⁸ Letter, Charges Against Local, n.d. Bx 2, Fd 22, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁹ Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 148; “Watson on Trial Tomorrow”, *South End*, March 5, 1969, Walter P. Reuther Archives, Wayne State University; “Weaver Loses to Revolutionary”, *South End*, March 12, 1969, Walter P. Reuther Archives, Wayne State University.

Ken Cockrel (the League's resident lawyer) represented Watson during this trial, having only recently passed the Michigan bar exam. Since legal tie-ups can stall movements and drain resources (even when the accused is acquitted, as was Watson), this tactic was repeatedly employed against the League and its members. Cockrel served as the lawyer for any League members who had charges brought against them and also defended Black workers and activists outside the League.

One such instance arose when the Republic of New Africa got into a shootout with the Detroit Police Department. The RNA, a Black Nationalist group whose goal was to set up a separatist Black government in the southern United States, held its second annual "National Legislative Convention" at the New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit, beginning on March 28, 1969.¹⁰ The RNA, with an openly militarized wing known as the Black Legion, had just finished escorting one of its leaders, Gaidi Obadele, out of the church and into a car located in an alley. Two officers spotted the gathering and called in that they had seen several Black men with rifles. It is uncertain what was said or who fired first, but a shootout promptly ensued that killed one officer severely wounded another. Dozens of police officers massed at the scene as the RNA retreated back into the church. In the subsequent shootout, several hundred shots were fired and four RNA members were injured. One hundred forty-two RNA members were arrested, booked, and put on "impromptu" trial that night.¹¹ The League came to the aid of the RNA in by holding a "Cabaret Benefit" for the "New Bethel Defense Fund" in order to remunerate the four lawyers that worked on the

¹⁰ The League had connections with this church as its minister, C. L. Franklin was a member of the IMO that endorsed them.

¹¹ Christian Davenport, *How Social Movements Die: Repression and Demobilization of the Republic of New Africa*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 223-25.

case pro bono.¹² Secondly, Kenneth Cockrel, along with Justin Ravitz, O. Lee Molette, and Sheldon Halpern, successfully defended those charged in the New Bethel Incident.¹³

Drum simultaneously contested another election for Local 3 leadership, this one for vice-president. DRUM decided to run Don Jackson, touted in the eleventh issue of the second volume of the DRUM newsletter as someone willing to risk his own livelihood for the good of Black workers, while casting his main competitor, Andy Hardy, as a sellout willing to put a Black face to the UAW and company's racist policies. They set up a campaign rally for Jackson to be held at Vernon Chapel on March 23.¹⁴ Both Andy Hardy and Don Jackson managed to move past the first round of the election, held on April 8, and into the runoff. The fourteenth issue of this volume of DRUM urged Black voters to vote for Jackson even though abstention might be thought "justifiable since no matter who Black workers have elected in the past the results have been the same. 'No representation of Black workers by the U.A.W.'s Local 3.'" They reiterated that Don Jackson would change the racist status quo.¹⁵ Despite this relatively successful campaign, Andy Hardy received 2,600 votes in the runoff to Don Jackson's 1,600. DRUM again charged that forces had been set in motion to counter its momentum. In its fifteenth issue, the DRUM newsletter stated that on the day of the runoff the Detroit Police went to Jackson's house and confiscated his license plates, accusing them of being stolen. After a few hours they were returned, but not without successfully preventing Jackson's car from being used to carpool voters to the polls. The

¹² Flyer, New Bethel Defense Fund Benefit, n.d., Bx 4, Fd 21, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

¹³ Summary, The New Bethel Case, n.d. Bx 4, Fd 21, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

¹⁴ Newsletter, DRUM, Vol. 2, No. 11, *DRUM's Candidate*, BPM4 Reel 1/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

¹⁵ Newsletter, DRUM, Vol. 2, No. 14, *It's Up to You!*, BPM4 Reel 1/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

newsletter further charged that retired workers were not properly identified and that voting machines were removed from the local the day after the elections, violating the UAW rule requiring a 72-hour waiting period before removal.¹⁶

The League took its first action on a national scale when it participated in the Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC, pronounced Bed-C), held in Detroit from April 25-27. Sponsored by the National Council of Churches, the Episcopal Church, and the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO), along with other smaller organizations, BEDC was intended to be a lengthy discussion on current economic issues among Blacks and the future of Black prosperity.¹⁷ While Georgakas and Surkin speculate that some these organizations may have desired a discussion promoting Black Capitalism, the League and its allies steered the conference in the direction of Black Socialism.¹⁸ The keynote speaker, Robert S. Browne, asserted that the conference should work within economic and political restraints imposed by the white power structures, rather than combat the root issue, lack of Black access to these same power structures.¹⁹ Members of the League played a major part in the conference, as six of the seven members of the League's executive committee were appointed to the BEDC's 24-member steering committee. General Baker, the only member of the League's executive committee not to be appointed, had refused to participate in the BEDC on ideological grounds.

¹⁶ Newsletter, DRUM, Vol. 2, No. 15, BPM4 Reel 1/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library. And Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 114-15.

¹⁷ Jerry K. Frye, "The 'Black Manifesto' and the Tactic of Objectification", *Journal of Black Studies* 5, no. 1, (September 1974), 65-76.

¹⁸ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I do Mind Dying*, 78.

¹⁹ Robert S. Browne, Speech, Keynote Speech BEDC, April 25, 1969, Bx 1, Fd 3, DGC, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

At the conference many speeches, covering an array of ideas were given. James Boggs, who was closely associated with the League and had a plethora of experience as an autoworker and in communist movements spoke about “The Myth and Irrationality of Black Capitalism,” discussing the inseparability of the development of capitalism from the development of racism in the United States concluding, “development for the black community at this stage in history means social ownership, social change, social pioneering and social reconstruction.”²⁰ John Watson, in a speech titled “Objective Conditions Facing Black & Third World Workers,” associated semi-colonized Black Americans with colonized people in the “third world”, claiming that they lived under similar conditions. Furthermore, Watson argued, these super-exploitative conditions were worsening as Nixon instated wage freezes while simultaneously allowing for increases in productivity via production line speedups. And, since white and Black workers were continually pitted against one another the “old left” had given up its revolutionary ways, it was up to a Black and third world vanguard to organize the struggle against the corporate, capitalist, ruling class and build socialism around the world.²¹

James Forman’s *Black Manifesto*, calling for white Christian churches and Jewish synagogues to pay 500 million dollars in reparations, appears to have dominated discussion at the BEDC. Forman called for activists to read the document out loud, invited or not, to the preacher/priest/rabbi and the congregation during services. The Manifesto called for the money to be spent to establish and support Black-controlled agriculture, media, research,

²⁰ James Boggs, “The Myth and Irrationality of Black Capitalism” (speech, Black Economic Development Conference, Wayne State University, Detroit, April 25-27, 1969).

²¹ John Watson, Speech, Objective Conditions Facing Black & Third World Workers, n.d., Bx 5, Fd 6, DGC, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

education, and support programs.²² Forman presented the manifesto for the first time at Riverside Church in New York on May 4, 1969. This strategy generated more negative than positive responses; producing some resources, but nowhere close to the 500 million dollar goal.²³ DRUM received \$8,000 from this initiative with an indeterminate amount going to the League as well. Perhaps more consequentially, after the conference was over James Forman decided to remain in Detroit as a member of the League's central staff of the League, gradually centralizing power for his own use.²⁴

The League used much of these funds to establish infrastructure for political education: its own print shop, its own publisher, its own film production unit, and its own bookstore, under the marque "Black Star" and under the primary supervision of John Watson and Mike Hamlin. Black Star produced several films, one on the history of the League titled *Finally Got the News*, and a second "dealing with drugs in the ghetto as well as an array of films on various revolutionary groups around the world. The also published two pamphlets, one theoretically based by Ernie M. Kalimoto, and another entitled *The Political Thought of James Forman*.²⁵

The most important and prominent of these productions was *Finally Got the News*. This hour-long documentary balances race and class analysis, historical tracing, and expressive anger. Unlike similar documentaries made about the Black Panther Party and other similar groups at the time, members of the League played a crucial role in the production of this film. The documentary opens with imagery of African children being sold

²² James Forman, *Black Manifesto*, (proposal, Black Economic Development Conference, Wayne State University, April 25-27, 1969).

²³ Frye, "The 'Black Manifesto'", 65-76.

²⁴ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 78-83.

²⁵ Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 146.

into slavery and slaves working the fields. John Watson then links the use of slaves in the process of “primitive accumulation” and the growth of industrial capitalism to Black people’s current position:

You’ll find that throughout the history of America that black people have been in that same position. You find that that’s true today. You don’t find too many black people that’s white collar workers. You don’t find too many black people that are skilled tradesman. You find other kinds of cats who are sitting in factories actually converting raw materials into finished products through their own sweat and blood. I mean, that’s essentially what it is, you know, is the transformation of sweat and blood, literally, into finished products.²⁶

Continuing, the documentary addresses the abhorrent and inhumane safety conditions found in the plants and the irrationality of ownership under capitalism, “There’s a cat who will stand up and say to you he’s in mining, and he sits in an office on the 199th floor, and it’s a mother-fucking building on Wall Street, and he’s in mining. He’s sitting up in Wall Street and his finger nails ain’t been dirty in his mother-fucking life.”²⁷ They also show video of an important protest held during a UAW special convention at Cobo Hall where Black workers are gathered to demand representation from the union. Towards the end the documentary addresses the position of white workers, who are also exploited and “for the most part recognize it,” yet tend to “blame the nigger on the street”, and the position of Black women who are forced into the workforce significantly more often than their white counterparts and despite their needs are the “last hired and first fired.”²⁸ The film enjoyed moderate success,

²⁶ *Finally got the News*, (Black Star Productions, 1970), accessed March 11, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgJd_MvJVzg.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

and was even picked up by a few paramilitary revolutionary groups in Italy as an example of how struggle could be waged.²⁹

When Local 961 of the Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle plant was set to hold elections in May of 1969, ELRUM organized a slate of eight candidates either involved with the ELRUM movement or committed to the cause of combatting racism within the UAW and Chrysler: Elroy Richardson for president, James Franklin for recording secretary, Leon Johnson for treasurer, Fred Holsey (president of ELRUM), Robert McKee, and Charles Hale for trustee, Alonzo Chandler for union guide, and James Edwards for union steward for Departments 78, 80, and 82.. Before the election, *The South End* ran an article supporting ELRUM and these candidates.³⁰ Three ELRUM candidates won runoffs including James Franklin for recording secretary, and Leon Johnson for treasurer. Most notably, Elroy Richardson beat incumbent Ed Rickard, described by ELRUM as an “ass kisser whose basic concern is collecting union dues and keeping chairman of the board Lynn Townsend happy,”³¹ by a margin of 1,480-966.³²

With contract negotiations with each of the big three auto companies impending (contracts were to expire on September 30, 1970), and a long fight anticipated, the UAW held a special convention to discuss strike benefits at Cobo Hall in Detroit on November 8-9, 1969. It was anticipated that more than 2,700 delegates from 1,500 locals would be in attendance.³³ With economic conditions looking bleak, the *Detroit News* reported that Nixon

²⁹ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I do Mind Dying*, 121-23

³⁰ “ELRUM! We Will Win Without a Doubt”, *The South End*, May 14, 1969, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

³¹ Newsletter, ELRUM Vol. 2 No. 4, *The Real Deal*, BPM4 Reel 1/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

³² “Militants of UAW Win Upset”, *Detroit Free Press*, May 18, 1969.

³³ Jack Crellin, “UAW Considers Strike Pay Boost”, *Detroit News*, November 8, 1969.

was calling on the union and companies to “exercise restraint in the areas of wages and prices in order to fight inflation”. Reuther seemed less than keen on the idea replying, “Let the sacrifice be made by the people who can afford the sacrifice”.³⁴

The League saw this conference, however, as an opportunity to protest racism within the UAW and get some public exposure for its cause. Two different (although similar in content) flyers were produced to hand out around the plants and at Wayne State. The flyer intended for workers claimed that, instead of raising strike benefits, Walter Reuther and his camp “are going to use this convention to raise the dues of the overtaxed, overworked, super-exploited black workers in order to further line their pockets” and reemphasized the lack of Black representation within the union. The march at Cobo Hall was set for November 9 at 11 A.M.³⁵ The League issued a hefty list of demands, calling for a Black UAW president and vice president, a revision of the grievance procedure, recognition of the League as “the official spokesman for black workers,” a doubling of the workforce, and an end to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war.³⁶ A letter was also sent to Reuther in order to inform him of their plan to protest the event and provide him with a shortened list of their demands.³⁷ However the letter, along with other forms of intelligence-gathering may have prompted the UAW, as Geschwender suggests, to end the conference early on the 9th avoiding direct confrontation with League members.³⁸ The League was joined by others displeased with the

³⁴ Jack Crellin, “Reuther Rejects U.S. Plea to Curb Wage Demand”, *Detroit News*, November 9, 1969.

³⁵ Flyer, “Protest U.A.W. Racism: March on Cobo Hall”, n.d., Bx 1, Fd 21, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

³⁶ Flyer, “Confront the Racist UAW Leaders”, n.d., Bx 1, Fd 24, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

³⁷ Letter, “Open Letter to Walter Reuther”, n.d., Bx 1, Fd 24, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

³⁸ Geschwender, *Race, Class, & Worker Insurgency*, 96-97.

direction of the Union, including the United Caucus, dissatisfied with present leadership; 30 and Out, a group of young workers demanding that full pension be honored after thirty years of service regardless of age; and a white group allied with the League called the Detroit Revolutionary Organizing Committee.³⁹

Ushering in 1970, DRUM made another attempt to contest elections in Local 3. With mid-March elections impending, DRUM planned a special convention scheduled for February 28 to be held at St. Joseph's Church in order to vote on DRUM's slate of candidates. A flyer handed out to advertise the event explained that slate would feature Black revolutionaries exclusively, without "cutthroat pollacks, known white racists, and head scratching Uncle Toms". There were six criteria for participation in the convention:

1. That you be Black; 2. That you be honest; 3. That you be committed to Black Liberation; 4. That you support DRUM's program; 5. That you have a history of plant struggle; 6. That you have integrity.

The difference between honesty and integrity is clarified as "an honest person can be bought, a person with integrity cannot be bought".⁴⁰ Candidates were decided through nominations made by convention attendees, defended and subsequently voted on by all in attendance ⁴¹

The DRUM slate of candidates included Ron March for president, Don Jackson for vice-president, Gerald Wooten for financial secretary, Carlos Williams for treasurer, Charles Roberts, Betty Griffith, and Grover Douglas for trustee, Don Gaitor for Sergeant-at-arms, and

³⁹ Jack Crellin, "UAW Considers Strike Pay Boost", *Detroit News*, November 8, 1969. Ralph Orr, "600 Press Reuther to Push Early Pension in Talks", *Detroit Free Press*, November 10, 1969. Flyer, "\$500 Sell-out", November 1969, Bx 1, Fd 17, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁴⁰ Flyer, A Black Workers Convention, n.d., Bx 1, Fd 14, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁴¹ Schedule, Convention Schedule, February 28, 1970, Bx 1, Fd 14, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library Wayne State University.

Laffayette Philyaw for guide. DRUM also ran a long list of candidates for positions as delegates; Earl Robinson, “Big Mitch” McClellan, Jimmy Square, Raymond Johnson, Gerald Wooten, Charles Roberts, Ron March, Willie James Hutchinson, Grover Douglas, Joyce Bivins, Portia Redmond, Lee Cain, George E. Smith, Albert E. Hicks, Kenneth Roy Massengile, Richard Jackson, Jerome Harvard, Donald Jackson, Samuel Powe, Lafayette Philyaw. Eugene Watkins, Leon Pickett, George Carter, and Don Gaitor. DRUM produced election flyers in both English and Arabic in order to appeal to a growing Arab workforce in Detroit who they felt suffered from similarly exploitative conditions. It’s interesting to note that all of the candidates up for executive positions also ran for positions as delegates with the exception of Carlos Williams (treasurer) and Betty Griffith (trustee).⁴² Perhaps more compelling is the lack of success that DRUM had in this election, as the only candidates that were able to force a runoff were Carlos Williams and Betty Griffith. Both lost.⁴³

DRUM released a special emergency newsletter charging electoral manipulation on March 17-18. They claimed that when the polls opened only 3 voting machines were in working condition. Furthermore, the levers for Ron March, Don Jackson, Gerald Wooten and several delegates malfunctioned throughout the day. Stalling tactics were used, such as kicking the plugs out of the sockets for many of the machines or opening curtains while voting was ongoing. Many voters became frustrated and left the polls either without voting

⁴² Flyer, DRUM Slate and DRUM Delegates, n.d., Bx 1, Fd 10, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁴³ Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 115-17. Since Williams and Griffith were the only candidates who were not also listed as DRUM slate delegates it raises the question as to whether this was just coincidental or if some other explanation is necessary, such as organizational confusion or incoherence. Unfortunately, there isn’t enough information available at the moment to make any viable speculations.

or with an incomplete ballot. The Hamtramck Police Department occupied the union hall, preventing DRUM protestors from challenging these tactics.⁴⁴

While DRUM was continuing its push into union electoral politics, a series of events (referred to on pages 29-31) involving the poor working conditions at the Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle Plant inspired more militant action by ELRUM and its allies. On Wednesday, April 15, 1970 there was a dispute in Department 73 between a Black worker, John Scott, and his white foreman, Ervin Ashlock (who was accompanied by two other foremen). The interaction occurred over a question concerning Scott's production output. It is unclear what exactly was said, but the foreman later claimed that he feared Scott intended to stab him because "he had his hand in his pocket." Ashlock "preemptively" threatened Scott by grabbing a pinion (weighing about 12 pounds) and telling Scott that he will "bash your brains in". A witness to the event said that Scott's hand was never in his pocket.⁴⁵ Chrysler responded by firing Scott and taking no action against Ashlock.⁴⁶

It seems that the union at least feigned concern, as they immediately called for a reinstatement for Scott and punishment for Ashlock, though without result. ELRUM, in coordination with other radical groups in the plant, called for a wildcat, and around 6 P.M. on Thursday, April 16th most of the second shift workers left the plant. They kept the plant shut down until the first shift Monday morning when employees returned on instruction from the

⁴⁴ Report, DRUM Special Pigs in the Polls, n.d., Bx 1, Fd 10, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁴⁵ As if holding one's hand in your own pocket may have somehow warranted Ashlock's action.

⁴⁶ Synopsis, John Taylor, Walk Out at Eldon, n.d. Bx 2 Fd 29, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Article, John Taylor, "Wildcat at Chrysler", *The Metro*, n.d., Bx 2, Fd 29, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Article, "An Industrial Horror Story", n.d., Bx 2, Fd 29, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

UAW. The strike was a moderate success as John Scott was returned to his position with full back wages and Ashlock was transferred to a different plant. A vote to retroactively authorize the wildcat was held on April 27th and passed with a 93% approval. The company agreed to take no reprisal, but on May 1st Chrysler fired six stewards and a trustee who had led the workers out of the plant during the April 16th wildcat. At this point Local [3?] leadership (led by ELRUM-friendly president Elroy Richardson) authorized another wildcat strike that began at 12:30 A.M. on May 2. Negotiations were ongoing, but the International Union was nowhere to be seen. The Chief Shop Committeeman and another steward lost their jobs, making a total of nine fired. Four of the nine were eventually returned to work but only after sustaining monetary and disciplinary penalties.⁴⁷ Out of this came a multiracial Eldon Workers' Safety Committee, associated with ELRUM, which "researched the legal rights workers had in plants, organized interracial pickets, and distributed safety literature."⁴⁸

Mamie Williams' and Gary Thompson's deaths occurred within this context, leading directly to a third wildcat strike led by the Eldon Workers' Safety Committee and supported by ELRUM. This one, it seems, did not garner as much support as the previous two, but it did elicit a response from the plant manager Harry T. Engelbrecht to all Eldon Avenue employees stating that he was "convinced that the vast majority of Eldon people want to come to work and want to perform their jobs conscientiously." He continued by implying that those leading the strike were not concerned with the welfare of the Eldon Avenue employees; "the fact that hundreds of our employees were deprived of their wages apparently did not concern them". Finally, he assured the employees that Chrysler was taking every

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ David M. Lewis-Colman, *Race Against Liberalism: Black Workers and the UAW in Detroit*, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 99-100.

legal step “to insure your safety and to keep our plant operating. To this end, it was necessary to discharge those employees who were responsible for, or elected to participate in, the disruptions at our gates”.⁴⁹ Four employees were terminated for participation in the strike: James Edwards, Alonzo Chandler, Robert McKee, and John Taylor. Three of the four were members of ELRUM, and John Taylor was one of ELRUM’s closest white allies.⁵⁰ The three wildcats during April and May cost Chrysler approximately 22,000 axles.⁵¹

The most talked about Eldon Avenue incident occurred on July 15 when James Johnson walked into Department 78 and shot and killed two foremen and a jobsetter. The League and ELRUM were active in his defense, even though he had never previously associated himself with the movement. Kenneth Cockrel took on his defense assisted by white Marxist lawyer Justin Ravitz (another close League associate). They argued that, per the constitutional guarantee of a jury of one’s peers, the trial jury had to be integrated in terms of both race and class. Out of twelve jurors, ten had work experience in Detroit, two were auto-workers, and three were married to auto workers. The jury was also integrated by race and gender. Georgakas and Surkin summarize Cockrel’s defense:

The defense’s presentation was complex. Johnson’s relatives and friends came from Mississippi to testify about his boyhood in one of the backwater regions of America. They told all the familiar Southland horror tales. These included an account of how a five-year-old James Johnson had seen the dismembered body of his cousin on a highway following a lynching. The jury learned that Johnson had enlisted in the Army, only to be discharged for psychological problems. They learned the details of a work history in which an inferior education and racism led from one poor job to another in a pattern characterized by emotional outbursts and threats from both Johnson and various employers. They learned, too, that Johnson had finally found a

⁴⁹ Letter, Harry T. Engelbrecht, Letter to all Eldon Avenue Employees, June 4, 1970, Bx 2, Fd 14, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁵⁰ Article, “An Industrial Horror Story”, n.d., Bx 2, Fd 29, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 99-100.

⁵¹ Lewis-Colman, *Race Against Liberalism*, 100.

steady job at Eldon, where he had worked for three years supporting members of his family as well as himself. His attorneys presented evidence that Eldon was one of the most dangerous plants in the United States and that the UAW was unable or unwilling to protect workers on the shop floor. As a climax to the defense, Cockrel took the entire jury to the scene of the crime so they could judge conditions for themselves.⁵²

The jury eventually found that James Johnson was not responsible for his actions, and the judge, who disagreed with the jury's ruling, "recommended most vehemently that Johnson be kept in custody for the rest of his natural life",⁵³ otherwise, he contested, Johnson would kill again. Johnson suffered extreme racial harassment while institutionalized, but he did eventually receive a worker's compensation ruling in his favor providing \$75 a week and requiring that Chrysler provide back pay from the time the incident occurred.⁵⁴

By fall of 1970 the League appeared to make a strategic shift away from direct plant involvement. By this time, most of the most active and radical members of the League and the RUMs had been systematically terminated from the plants, and the companies along with the union saw to it that radical voices within the plants were silenced. Some of the League's remaining resources went to establish a book club called Control, Conflict, and Change. Some of the the League cadre saw the establishment of the book club as an important step in political education. However, the club didn't reach its intended demographic as its 700 person membership was made up mostly of white middle class liberals, with only a spattering of radicals. Furthermore, only two percent of its membership was Black. It did however expose unlikely candidates to the likes of W.E.B. Du Bois, Karl Marx, and Rosa Luxembourgh among other important radical writers.⁵⁵

⁵² Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 10-11.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 9-11, 86, 98-99, 165.

⁵⁵ Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 150.

In May of 1971 Elroy Richardson was up for reelection as president of Local 961. ELRUM by this point had determined that Richardson was no radical. so they threw their support behind the more controversial Jordan Sims. Sims was actively involved in the 1970 strikes and had engaged in numerous confrontations with management. The first round of the election took place on May 14-15 and ended in Sims going into a runoff with Frank McKinnon, a white worker who was also involved in the 1970 wildcats (Elroy Richardson finished third). The runoff election, held on May 26-27, attracted more than 2,000 voters; Jordan Sims lost by just 36 votes. Furthermore, 254 votes were disqualified on charges of delinquency on union dues.⁵⁶ Sims contested the results and eventually won a second runoff election under the rationale that there was confusion about who should and shouldn't be voting.⁵⁷ Sims lost the new election by twelve votes, but two years later (after the dissolution of ELRUM and the League) was successfully elected as president of Local 961.⁵⁸

In an attempt to expand the Revolutionary Union Movement beyond Detroit to a national scale, members of the League proposed creation of a Black Workers Congress, an organization independent of the League, of which the League would be an influential component.⁵⁹ This ambitious endeavor was undermined by declining plant activity, limited resources, and ideological conflict. Before the founding convention of the BWC in September of 1971, three members of the League Executive Committee, Michael Hamlin, John Watson, and Kenneth Cockrel (along with James Foreman), resigned from League

⁵⁶ Letter, Law Offices of Glotta, Adelman, and Dinges, October 15, 1971, Bx 2, Fd 11, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 201-02.

⁵⁷ Letter, Leonard Woodcock, UAW Response to Jordan Sims, November 8, 1971, Bx 2, Fd 15, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁵⁸ Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 201.

⁵⁹ Although the role of the League in the BWC was contested among League leadership who had differing tactical visions.

activity.⁶⁰ They cited “class and ideological contradictions” as the reason for leaving.⁶¹ The remaining members of the League responded with accusations that the aforementioned group was petty bourgeois and feared the “dictatorship of the proletariat”.⁶² The League was then expelled from the Black Workers Congress as the separatists took over planning. Although around 500 people attended the founding convention for the BWC, neither the remnants of the League or the burgeoning BWC would survive beyond 1972.⁶³

Thus the League lasted for only a short time, but some scholars have suggested that the League represented one of the most politically sophisticated manifestations of the Black Power movement. Although replete with contradictions, the League effectively contested the powers that be, forcing both the UAW and the auto companies to address their existence through repression and denial of resources. Moving forward, I would like to analyze the actions of the UAW and auto companies that repressed League activities and restricted its access to resources in order to show that without these external pressures the League could have continued to mobilize against capitalism and racism at the point of production.

⁶⁰ Charles L. Lumpkins, *Encyclopedia of African American History: 1896 to the Present*, Ed. Paul Finkelman, s.v. “Black Workers Congress”, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁶¹ Essay, John Watson, Michael Hamlin, and Kenneth Cockrel, “The Split in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers: Three Lines and Three Headquarters”, Bx 1, Fd 19, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁶² Essay, John Williams, Rufus Burke, and Clint Marbury, “Rationale for Revolutionary Leadership (Dictatorship of the Proletariat)”, Bx 1, Fd 25, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

⁶³ Charles L. Lumpkins, “Black Workers Congress”. Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 154-155.

Chapter Four

Analysis of External Demobilization Factors

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past three chapters I have traced the history of Black automobile workers in the city of Detroit, along with their relationship with the companies and the union. Despite the UAW's promise during the 1942 Ford unionization campaign to fight for racial equality, Black workers still suffered from poorer conditions, less access to white collar and skilled jobs, and less representation in the UAW. In this context, two elements, the Revolutionary Union Movements and radical newspapers, would join together to become the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. The RUMs targeted companies at the point of production via wildcat strikes and targeted unions during local elections by appealing to a nationalist ideology, while receiving coverage from the radical newspapers that they otherwise would not have received from mainstream media. The League served to coordinate various RUM activities, and propagate these activities through different written and media organs.

The League functioned with substantial external constraints. As anticipated, the targeted companies, Chrysler, Ford, and GM, reacted with hostility and actively attempted to dismantle the Black radical forces mobilized against them. The UAW used its full institutional resources and Red Scare tactics to demobilize the League. Martin Glaberman argues that after Ford was unionized the union was incorporated into the management of the plant through full-time employment of committeemen and a union dues check-off (as opposed to individual payments).¹ Rather than recognize the material conditions of Black

¹ Martin Glaberman, "Black Cats, White Cats, Wildcats: Auto Workers in Detroit", *Radical America* 8, (January-February 1975): 25-29.

auto workers relative to white auto workers that led to the existence of Black radical groups such as DRUM/ELRUM and the League, the UAW actively combatted radical Black workers' groups, while simultaneously claiming that "our union has done more to further the Black man's cause than any other in the nation."² Finally, local police forces acted in congruence with company and union to bring legal legitimacy to the constraints put on the League. Therefore, pressure on the League was being exerted from three separate points: the companies, the UAW, and local police forces. Demobilizing force from companies (capitalist entities) and the local police (enforcers of private property) is expected; that coming from the union (supposed representative of the working class), less so.

In this chapter I will analyze how the League was affected by the external demobilizing, repression and via resource deprivation. Christian Davenport describes repression as "coercive actions undertaken by political authorities directed against someone challenging their beliefs, institutions, and actions or the context or conditions within which the government exists."³ While this is an adequate definition of what repression's means (coercive action) and targets (challengers), it limits the repressing group to the state. In this case, repression was undertaken by powerful and politically influential companies and the union, as well as the state. Davenport describes resource deprivation as "the systematic hindering of SMO efforts to generate the human and financial resources necessary to continue engaging in challenging behavior." He continues, by explaining that "one of the only consistent findings relevant to the topic of interest that has been explored is that moderate SMOs (aimed at reform and nondisplacement of leaders) are likely to receive

² James L. Kerwin, "Mazey Calls Black Militant Violence Great Peril to UAW", *The Detroit News*, March 16, 1969.

³ Christian Davenport, *How Social Movements Die: Repression and Demobilization of the Republic of New Africa*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 29.

resources from funding organizations” as opposed to radical movements seeking changes in leadership and ideology.⁴ I hope to show that these two external factors - especially the UAW’s repression and denial of resources - led to the removal of the most radicalized workers in the plants from positions of influence. This, I will claim, was the primary causal factor in the demobilization of the League.

While repression of the League came from three agents - the companies, the UAW, and the state - those agents tended to function in a coordinated manner. One example of a basic timeline of repressive events goes as follows, The League takes a dissenting action (i.e. strike, running for union office); the challenged responds with a repressive action (i.e. firing workers, hindering Black worker votes); the League files grievances and claims wrongdoing; the UAW (Local or International) either makes no attempt at addressing the wrong or cuts a deal that allows for racial moderates to return to work or maintain influence in the union (eliminating more radical union militants); if need be, the police step in to repress worker militancy until order is restored.

Repression demobilized the League most effectively by limiting League and RUM members and their sympathizers’ access to employment and office. This meant firing (and subsequently not rehiring) them as leaders of wildcat strikes, preventing radicals from gaining legitimized power in the union machine, and explicitly targeting Black workers who acted more militantly than union officials preferred. These acts of reprisal pressured workers remaining in the plants to distance themselves from the radical organizations.

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers and its affiliates constantly functioned in a state of extreme financial constraint. Funds for the organization came primarily from the salaries

⁴ *Ibid.*, 23-25.

and savings of its leadership, as well as voluntary donations from members. The League pushed for but was never able to obtain compulsory dues allocation from the checks of Black workers, and as such never obtained a steady stream of financial resources. However, the League devised ways to obtain resources via other channels such as fund-raisers, participation in the Black Economic Development Conference, and in one instance winning elections that allowed it to control Wayne State University's newspaper (with access to its budget for production and distribution, as well as plebiscitary legitimization of its power). For the purposes of this thesis, resources include finances, human resources, and access to legitimized power. I believe that access to legitimized power allows for access to an indeterminate amount of resources beyond what is readily quantifiable.

This chapter will first cover the six strikes organized entirely or partly by DRUM/ELRUM. Second, three protests of the UAW organized by the League and its affiliates will be examined. Third will be analyzed company disciplinary actions taken against workers in the struggle against racial oppression and exploitation as this is a particularly important form of repression in the demobilization of the League. Fourth, five local elections participated in by League affiliates, three Local 3 and two Local 961, will come in for scrutiny. Finally, the state's role in repression and resource deprivation via surveillance, arrest, trial, and restraint on publication at Wayne State University will be considered. Wherever possible, I compartmentalize repression and resource deprivation, but in many instances these two sources of external demobilization were so tightly juxtaposed that they must be considered as an ensemble. A summary of the forms of repression and resource deprivation is provided in table format at the end of the chapter.

2. REPRESSION AND RESOURCE DEPRIVATION

League-associated groups were the primary actors in wildcat strikes six times during the existence of the RUMs, two under the direction of DRUM and four under the direction of ELRUM (although three of the four occurred in close and related succession).¹ The strikes occurred in reaction to “niggermation”, unsafe working conditions, or UAW/company repression of other RUM/League activities. Some were supported by a mix of Black and white workers, others primarily by Black workers. Finally, each strike met repression from the company, the UAW, the local police, or a combination of the three, systematically removing the most radical elements of the movement from employment or office.

A proto-DRUM wildcat began on May 2, 1968² due to a drastic speedup (see pages 39-40). Although Black and white workers participated equally in the three-day work stoppage, punishment was disproportionately handed out to Black workers; five out of seven workers fired were Black, and nine out of ten workers suspended were also Black. Out of these workers, only two were permanently terminated: General Baker Jr, and Bennie Tate, two of the most radicalized workers in the plant and both future members of DRUM.³

The second DRUM strike lasted for four days and began on July 8, 1968 (see pages 43-45) in response to Local 3’s refusal to address racism and unsafe conditions within the plant. This time only Black workers were approached, and (with only a spattering of white sympathizers) Black workers made up the majority of the 3,000 person picket line. During

¹ There were other strikes, in other plants where RUMs played a role, but were not the primary actor.

² In this instance, DRUM is used loosely, as it was not an official organization yet but the elements that would come to create it were all in place.

³ James A. Geschwender and Judson L. Jeffries, “The League of Revolutionary Black Workers”, in *Black Power: In the Belly of the Beast*, ed. Judson L. Jeffries (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 139.

the course of the strike, protests were also set up at Local 3 and Chrysler's headquarters in order to demand concessions; of course none were granted. Repression occurred from the first day when the police showed up in riot gear to disperse the picketers at Dodge Main (Hamtramck Police Department) and the protesters at Chrysler Headquarters (Highland Park Police Department). Further repression occurred on the following Monday (the fourth day of the shutdown) when police issued cease and desist orders to remaining picketers. The UAW eventually arranged for 12 DRUM leaders to meet with the UAW caucus in an attempt to subsume the younger more radical workers under a racially moderate UAW-sponsored group.⁴

The first ELRUM strike occurred on January 27, 1969 and lasted only one day (see pages 49-51). It occurred in the wake of a massive purge of radical Black workers who had gathered at Local 961 in order to demand rights for Black workers in the plant causing many workers to be late to their shift. Just as at the second DRUM strike, the picket lines were made up primarily of Black workers, while white workers were not impeded in entering the facility. In response the company tripled "plant protection guards," and increased plant security measures, installing security cameras, and increasing lighting fixtures. Furthermore, the Detroit Police Department was put on 24-hour patrol in the neighborhood of the plant. After the strike, according to the Detroit Free Press, 25 Black workers were discharged "at random" for "misconduct".⁵ What is more, the UAW did not offer any of these workers

⁴ Luke Tripp, "D.R.U.M.- Vanguard of the Black Revolution: Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement States History, Purpose and Aims", *The South End*, January 23, 1969, Walter P. Reuther Archives, Wayne State University; Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying, A Study in Urban Revolution*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), 37-39; James A. Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 92-93.

⁵ Ralph Orr, "UAW Raps Rebel Black Workers", *Detroit Free Press*, March 12, 1969.

representation, calling them “separatists” and accusing them of “violent acts”. While many of the workers eventually were returned to work, two permanently lost their jobs, including the president of ELRUM, Fred Holsey.⁶

The final three ELRUM strikes occurred in rapid succession between April 16, 1970 and May 27, 1970, inspired by a series of deaths or firings of John Scott, Mamie Williams, and Gary Thompson (see pages 66-68). Each strike was supported by white and Black workers (although it is likely that Black workers made up the majority). It is notable that ELRUM maintained a loose but fickle alliance with Elroy Richardson, President of Local 961, at this time. Six stewards and one trustee were terminated sixteen days after the original walkout despite a retroactive approval of the strike within the Local and Chrysler having given its word that it would not take disciplinary action against participating workers. A second strike, ordered by Elroy Richardson in response to these firings, resulted in the firing Jordan Sims, a chief shop committeeman, and another steward. Four of the seven stewards fired would eventually gain back employment, but not unconditionally. Clarence Thornton, largely considered a “good steward”, was obliged to sign a contract stating that if he caused any more trouble he would be fired permanently. As a result, when James Johnson approached him just over a month later for help, he was unable to do anything, which eventually led to Johnson killing three people in the plant. The third wildcat, after Gary Thompson’s death, directly led to the firing of three ELRUM members (James Edwards, Alonzo Chandler, and Robert McKee), as well as ELRUM’s closest white ally (John Taylor). The plant manager, Harry T. Engelbrecht, also sent a letter to all Eldon Avenue Employees

⁶ Anita Hartman, “E.L.R.U.M.’s Perspective”, *The South End*, February 10, 1969, Walter P. Reuther Archives, Wayne State University; Ralph Orr, “UAW Raps Rebel Black Workers”, *Detroit Free Press*, March 12, 1969; James L. Kerwin, “*Mazey Calls Black Militant Violence Great Peril to UAW*”, *The Detroit News*, March 16, 1969.

condemning radicals for disrupting production as harmful to the employees themselves. This chain of events clearly shows a systematic effort to rid the plant of voices speaking out against unsafe working conditions and racist practices.⁷

The RUMs and League would also instigate protests at their locals and the UAW headquarters. These protests would not produce repression as explicit or blatant as that seen during and in the wake of wildcat strikes because the union found it easy to deflect the protests. The RUMs/League would present their demands, and union leaders would either feign interest in supporting the workers or practice outright avoidance.

Actions in the wake of the two DRUM wildcats of 1968 demonstrate the union's unwillingness to support the demands of the Black workers, and more cynically systematically remove power from the hands of the most radically inclined in the movement. While the union claimed to have worked out a deal to bring five of seven terminated workers back to Dodge Main conditionally if the union removed its strike vote, they insisted that it was impossible to get the other two (General Baker Jr. and Bennie Tate) back to work. DRUM members and other Black workers responded to this by chanting "seven or none". A union steward, Edith Fox, then suggested that the two workers be put on the union payroll instead, a suggestion that DRUM agreed to. However, Ed Liska, president of Local 3, refused to allow a vote on this motion, causing DRUM workers to storm out.⁸

⁷ Article, John Taylor, "Wildcat at Chrysler", *The Metro*, n.d., Bx 2, Fd 29, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University; Article, "An Industrial Horror Story", n.d., Bx 2, Fd 29, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University; Letter, Harry T. Engelbrecht, Letter to all Eldon Avenue Employees, June 4, 1970, Bx 2, Fd 14, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University; Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 98-101.

⁸ "Negroes Stalk Out of Union Meeting", *Detroit Free Press*, August 19, 1968.

On January 22, 1969, ELRUM held a protest of about 300 workers at Local 961, listing 19 demands (see page 49). Local union leadership again refused to hear the grievances of its constituency or to view it first hand. This time, however, repression came from the company as two Black workers were fired while many others were suspended for missing work. It is illegal to punish an employee missing work on union business, so Although there is no evidence that the local asked Chrysler to fire these workers as a warning to the radicals, the UAW could have contested these firings by claim the workers as being “on official union business,” since it is illegal to punish an employee for missing work on union business. These terminations and suspensions led to the ELRUM wildcat beginning on January 27, 1969.⁹

In response to the League-wide protest at the UAW’s special convention at Cobo Hall on November 9, 1969 (see pages 62-64), the union adjourned the convention before the protest got started. This allowed union leadership to avoid direct confrontation at the meeting, a sly but effective way to repress ideas. Still the protest proceeded, and images of the march can be seen in the movie about the *League Finally Got the News*.¹⁰

One of the main ways that the companies were able to demobilize the League after strikes and protests was by terminating the most radical workers. This restricted the power of the Revolutionary Union Movements by making in-plant organizing difficult if not impossible. Furthermore, union locals and the UAW International were pleased to see radical elements of the union displaced from their rank-and-file. Two other important types

⁹ Summary, Untitled Document, n.d., Bx 1 Fd 15, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University; Mabel Jackson, “E.L.R.U.M. Under Attack”, *The South End*, February 10, 1969, Walter P. Reuther Archives, Wayne State University.

¹⁰ Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 94; *Finally Got the News*, (Black Star Productions, 1970), accessed March 11, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgJd_MvJVzg.

of disciplinary actions were used to intimidate workers and deter them from participating in the RUMs. The *fire-rehire* threatened the worker (and family) with joblessness, sometimes creating a sense of gratefulness upon regaining employment. The period of joblessness could last anywhere from a few days to several months, and back pay was not guaranteed. It is important to note that sometimes workers were rehired without UAW intervention, as companies occasionally decide to bring back a fired employee rather than pay the expense of searching, hiring, and training a new employee. *Suspensions* were usually unpaid and lasted between five days and a month. Victims of both the fire/rehire and the suspension were often reinstated with harsh warnings and stipulations about participating in strikes or supporting “illegal” union actions within the plant that dissuaded workers from further radical activity, at least openly.

Over the course of the six strikes and three union protests documented in this paper nine of the most radical and politically involved workers were fired. Two others, Chuck Wooten, a member of the League’s executive committee, and Sydney Lewis, a high-ranking member of the League, were fired from Dodge Main for reasons not directly related to strikes or protests, bringing the total to eleven. Other prominent League/RUM members to be permanently fired were General Baker (cofounder of DRUM and the League), Fred Holsey (President of ELRUM), Jordan Sims (radical worker and union Local 961 candidate), Bennie Tate (high-ranking League member), James Edwards, Alonzo Chandler, and Robert McKee (ELRUM members), and John Taylor (white ELRUM/League ally). Also as a direct result of the events analyzed in this paper between 34 and 40 Black workers associated with the League and/or the RUMs were fired/rehired. At least 20 of these were confirmed members of ELRUM but the number is likely higher when DRUM and the League are taken in

consideration (unfortunately this information is unavailable). Between 49 and 69 workers were suspended for their actions and it is unclear how many were confirmed members of the League/RUMs. The numbers aforementioned represent known estimates and should be considered as conservative, as it is likely that other members and affiliates received disciplinary action that was not directly related to the strikes or protests.¹¹

A successful showing in union local elections could potentially have built the burgeoning Radical Union Movement. RUMs alleged that union locals unions engaged in acts of repression including but not limited to hindering Black UAW members from voting, beatings, disqualifying votes, intimidation, and encouraging retired workers (more likely to be white and racist, but unlikely to participate without outreach) to exercise their right to vote. Ultimately, the UAW locals were overwhelmingly successful in preventing radical Black workers from obtaining union office, usually resulting in the election of moderate Blacks, more conducive to the UAW's collaborative approach to labor relations.

ELRUM and DRUM participated in five elections, running or supporting 20 candidates for local executive offices and 24 candidates for delegate positions. The candidates' range of association with the RUMs spanned from loosely associated to president of a RUM. They also spanned across each executive position at the locals, including three runs for president, two for vice-president, and multiple runs for trustee. Of the 20 candidates that ran for executive office, three ran successfully although many others ran close races that

¹¹ High and low estimates were calculated using numbers from Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*; Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit I Do Mind Dying*; various *South End* articles; DRUM and ELRUM reports; and where possible reports in *The Detroit Free Press* and *The Detroit News* as cited throughout the paper.

forced runoffs.¹² However, the three winning candidates were among those more loosely associated with the RUMs. While it is difficult to verify every claim of repression that the RUMs and the League assert it would be difficult to imagine all of the claims being fabricated, and it is easy to imagine, given the UAW's open hostility to the Black radical unions, and the racism prevalent among the rank and file of the UAW, that some underhanded work occurred.

In the first election (see pages 45-47), Ron March, a candidate for trustee of Local 3, was able to force a runoff against incumbent Joe Elliott despite severe repression. According to DRUM claims, Ron March was the only candidate prevented from placing campaign signs in the plant. The Hamtramck Police Department got ticketed Ron March campaign workers (though no others) who were providing carpool services to March supporters. These vehicles, vital to bringing in March supporters who may have otherwise been unable to vote, were also impeded by police officers who took unnecessarily long to write the citations. March's victory in the first election incited extreme violence against his supporters including axe handle beatings and mace sprayings perpetrated by the HPD that were witnessed by both the Hamtramck mayor and chief of police. The runoff election incited an unprecedented propaganda campaign, including an article written in the *Michigan Chronicle* to dissuade Black workers close to retirement from combatting the status quo. Local 3 sent out a letter pleading with retired workers, most of them racist Polish-Americans, to exercise their right to vote, claiming falsely that if March won he would threaten their retirement benefits. Finally,

¹² It is unclear how many (although it is likely that none) of the delegate candidates won their respectful elections.

March obtained statements from workers stating that they were fearful of voting due to police presence.¹³

When Don Jackson ran for vice-president of Local 3 (see pages 57-58), the UAW International sent a letter sent to all its members condemning Black radicals as separatists. DRUM also charged that they were not permitted to inspect the voting machines, which were removed from the precincts before the required 72-hour waiting period ended. The Detroit Police Department confiscated Don Jackson's license plates and accused him of grand theft auto, thereby preventing him from helping to carpool voters to the polls. Finally, when three members of DRUM filed formal protest, they were all arrested on their way home.¹⁴

ELRUM's first attempt at union electoral politics (see page 62) was also the League's first successful bid for office. Of eight candidates that ELRUM endorsed in the May 1969 Local 961 election, three won, including, Elroy Richardson for president, James Franklin for recording secretary, and Leon Johnson for treasurer.¹⁵ To the best of my knowledge, ELRUM made no claims of election corruption; two factors may have contributed to this. First, the successful election of three out of eight candidates may have seemed a moderate victory within the context of the repressive conditions confronting the League and RUMs, so it may have seemed best to those strategists to emphasize short-term success in order to encourage further participation. Second, union reaction to candidates such as Elroy

¹³ "The Dodge Rebellion", *Ramparts Magazine*, November 30, 1968, 12. Derrick Morrison, "Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement", *Young Socialist*, November 1968, 10-11, 18. Newsletter, DRUM, Vol. 1, No. 15, BPM4 Reel 1/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

¹⁴ Newsletter, DRUM, Vol. 2, No. 15, BPM4 Reel 1/3, Northwestern University Library. Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 114-15.

¹⁵ "ELRUM! We Will Win Without a Doubt", *The South End*, May 14, 1969, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Newsletter, ELRUM Vol. 2 No. 4, *The Real Deal*, BPM4 Reel 1/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library

Richardson may have been less extreme as he was less closely associated with ELRUM than were previous DRUM candidates. Richardson would come to show after his election that his relationship with ELRUM was tenuous.

In mid-March of 1970, DRUM ran an entire slate of candidates in the Local 3 elections (see pages 64-66), nine for executive positions, and 24 for delegates. Despite being RUM's most ambitious electoral run, only three executive candidates forced runoffs and none were elected. It is unclear how the candidates for delegate fared, but it is likely that they did nearly as poorly or as poorly as the candidates for executive positions. DRUM would claim in a newsletter entitled *Pigs in the Polls*

On Wednesday morning at 5:00 A.M. when the polls opened only 3 voting machines were in working condition and all day Thursday levers on various voting machines were broke. Ron Marchs' [sic] lever was broken all day long and Don Jackson's lever was broken all evening. Gerald Wooten's lever was out off and on all day and many delegate's [sic] levers were broken. Plugs were being kicked out of their sockets and lights going out on machines. Curtains were flying open in the middle of votes, registering the vote before the voter was finished. Many votes were lost because Black brothers became frustrated and left the Local hall because of all the confusion. A Hamtramck Fireman came in and began opening every voting machine and refused to show any I.D.

They go on to say that when DRUM supporters went to the union hall to protest the terrible conditions they were "forcibly evicted" by the Hamtramck Police Department.¹⁶

In the final ELRUM election, running Jordan Sims (see page 70), the first round took place on May 14 and 15 1971. Sims contested Elroy Richardson who had fallen out of favor with ELRUM due to what they saw as a lack of action for the Black working class and a second challenger Frank McKinnon.¹⁷ Sims won a plurality by a margin of 806 votes to 739

¹⁶ Report, DRUM Special Pigs in the Polls, n.d., Bx 1, Fd 10, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 115-17

¹⁷ There were other candidates but these three would be the most influential.

over second place McKinnon and a runoff election was scheduled for May 26 and 27. During the runoff armed guards occupied the voting facilities. Also, as the election was won by McKinnon 36 votes (1,178-1,142), it was important that 254 votes were disqualified on the pretense that the voters were delinquent on their union dues. The vote was challenged on both accounts, but was only granted on the account that it was unclear who should and shouldn't be voting. Armed guards were still used in the redo of the runoff and Jordan Sims lost the revote by 12 votes.¹⁸

The same repression that stymied DRUM and ELRUM candidates for union office prevented the League from gaining access to financial resources and legitimated power. As executives of Locals 3 and/or 961, League and RUM members could have directed resources toward their organizations' projects. They could have provided support to employees fired and disciplined for participating in wildcats. They also would have been in position to put pressure on the International to step in and take a stance against racism within the union. Furthermore, it would have brought recognition to the RUMs and allowed for growth in terms of human resources, by way of attracting membership to existing RUMs and opening up avenues to new RUMs in Detroit and eventually elsewhere. Most importantly, they could have pushed the union to do more to protect the rights of workers, particularly Black workers, that the union defended weakly if at all in its drive to cooperate with the auto companies.

It is clear that the Detroit Police Department was keeping close tabs on the League and its members. One revealing DPD file shows that they were keeping detailed records on

¹⁸ Letter, Law Offices of Glotta, Adelman, and Dinges, October 15, 1971, Bx 2, Fd 11, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University; Letter, Leonard Woodcock, UAW Response to Jordan Sims, November 8, 1971, Bx 2, Fd 15, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University; Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 201-02.

General Gordon Baker's activities and associates during the 60s and early 70s, including records of his associations with all of the members of the League executive committee and other influential members of DRUM and the League. It was not uncommon for undercover police officers to follow Baker during everyday activities, for instance leaving home and heading to work at the Dodge Main Plant. In another instance, an officer followed him from his home to the laundry mat, then out to the liquor store for a six-pack, and back to the laundry mat, until he went home. It also shows that the DPD sent undercover informants to League events such as the October 1969 rally at Chrysler Headquarters, the November 1969 protest at Cobo Hall, and the May 1971 demonstration at Solidarity House. While the file on General Baker was the only one that I was able to access, it would be surprising if files on other prominent League members such as John Watson and Kenneth Cockrel were not also kept. Another file was on the League specifically that kept many of its publications and propaganda materials.¹⁹

The League was fortunate to have Ken Cockrel, a young, talented, revolutionary lawyer on their executive committee, but this did not prevent various groups from using legal tactics to tie members of the League up in court, thereby draining its financial resources and forcing it to devote time to legal defense that could otherwise have been used to mobilize. Cockrel remarks that “[m]ost all of the members of our central staff had to go to trial sometime in the year of 1969”. Mike Hamlin, Chuck Wooten, John Williams, John Watson, and Luke Tripp of the Executive Committee were put on trial, in addition to DRUM leader Ron March and ELRUM president Fred Holsey. While Cockrel and his partners had great

¹⁹ Detroit Police Department, General Gordon Baker Jr. Files, BPM4 Reel 2/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

success in defending League and RUM members - none were convicted²⁰ - consistent legal pressure on prominent radicals in the League acted as constant drain on the League's resources. I would like to focus on one case in particular involving Ken Cockrel as the defendant.

Cockrel was charged with contempt of court on April 19, 1969 as he was defending Alfred Hibbitt, a man accused in the New Bethel incident. During the presentation of the defense's case, Judge Joseph Maher declared that he was finished listening to the defense as they were embarking of a "fishing expedition," and then proceeded to increase Hibbitt's bail from \$25,000 to \$50,000.²¹ In reaction, Cockrel exclaimed, "We've got a judge here who doesn't know anything about the law, and I'll state that categorically. We've got a judge here who is himself lawless and a law violator... They're not judges, they're prosecutors, they're not police; they're racists, rogues bandits, thieves and pirates... This honkie dog fool who calls himself a judge: this racist honkie who violated a law we didn't even write," and that by doing this was denying his client due process. Cockrel's defense took place in late May (after over a month of preparation) and consisted of a legal team of seven prominent area lawyers (excluding Cockrel himself). They set out to prove that Cockrel was not only not in contempt of court, but that every one of his statements was true. Legal experts, lawyers and judges, from across the country were prepared to speak on his behalf against the Maher's actions. After the first day of court ended in an extended six-day recess, the charges were dropped and Maher agreed to decrease Hibbitt's bail to \$10,000. Cockrel said of the

²⁰ Dan Georgakas, and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2012) 74-75, 165.

²¹ We needn't explore the fact that bail, as an institution is racist and classist in and of itself.

trial, “This is a vindication of the position we took. I have no regrets for what I said, I think my characterizations were accurate”.²²

This case serves as only one example of the time and financial strain that legal proceedings can have on a movement. This was true in the case of John Watson (see pages 55-56) as well as any number of others that occurred during the existence of the RUMs and the League. While it may be a stretch to call the number of cases a conspiracy against the movement, it would be an oversight to ignore important role that legal proceedings had in drawing time and resources away from plant strikes and union protests. Furthermore, despite the success of Ken Cockrel and his partners at defending members of the League from convictions, it is clear that resources and energy were spent just to keep key members of the movement out of jail and able to continue to wage struggle against the exploitative forces.

As editor-in-chief of Wayne State University’s student newspaper, John Watson turned *The South End* into a revolutionary organ reporting not only on radical movements across the globe (e.g. Palestine, Cuba, and South Vietnam), but primarily on the various manifestations of the Black power movement occurring in the United States. As editor John Watson had access to “a daily run of 18,000, a printing budget of \$100,000, an editor’s salary of \$2,400, and a staff payroll of 23,400”.²³ Watson used these resources to distribute the paper not only to Wayne State students, but also in the Black working-class neighborhoods where he had previously distributed *The Inner City Voice*. However, this did not come without controversy and pushback. The paper came under particularly strong fire for its open

²² Newspaper article, John Oppedahl, *Cockrel Cleared of Charges*, “The Detroit News”, June 4, 1969, Bx 2, Fd 7, DGC, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Newspaper article, Kathy Warbelow, *Comrade Cockrel: The Marxist who would be Mayor*, n.d., Bx 2, Fd 7, DGC, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

²³ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 44.

support of Palestinians in their fight against Israeli oppression and displacement. In one instance, a right wing student group calling itself the New Wayne Committee collected 2,000 signatures asking WSU President William R. Keast to remove the radical newspaper editor.²⁴ WSU President William R. Keast, also saw *The South End's* coverage as problematic, although he did reluctantly admit that John Watson had a right to stay on as editor-in-chief. In a revealing letter from William R. Keast to John Watson, which Watson published in the February 10, 1969 edition of *The South End*, it is clear that Watson and Keast had had multiple meetings and that Keast pleaded with Watson to tone down the rhetoric and “balance” the coverage by covering more university-based activities. In the letter Keast claimed:

I now say to you in candor and in disappointment, that I have not seen any substantial evidence of progress toward the objective of a strong, independent, and responsible student paper... I cannot believe that this kind of performance, and these results, are what you and your colleagues on the *South End* staff intend... I urge you to reconsider immediately the position of the paper and your responsibilities as its editor.²⁵

While Keast was ultimately unsuccessful in ousting Watson as editor, he was successful in inducing the paper to tone down its rhetoric and include more “university relevant” material.²⁶ While this does not represent a seizing of resources, it does show that groups in power can exercise indirect control over the use of resources even when radicals in direct possession of those resources use them legally.

²⁴ “Student Petition Hits WSU Paper”, *Detroit Free Press*, February 19, 1969.

²⁵ William R. Keast, Letter to John Watson, *South End*, February 10, 1969, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

²⁶ Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency*, 149.

In this chapter I have examined two ways that external pressures acted upon the League to demobilize it. The first was repression from three actors: the companies, the UAW, and the state (police departments). These groups repressed the League through continuous surveillance, by terminating and disciplining radical workers, and by committing election fraud. Repression acted as a demobilizer by displacing the most radical elements of the movement from positions of influence, creating an environment of intimidation that pushed sympathizers away from association with the League and the RUMs. The second form of external pressure was resource deprivation. Resource deprivation dug into already scarce financial resources, monopolized time and effort of key organizers, diverted the use of certain resources into more moderate avenues, and denied the League legitimized power. A systematic external assault on the most radical elements of the movement, the denial and removal of these elements from positions of power or influence, all within the context of a union that was ambivalent at best and malevolent at worst, caused the League to begin to demobilize.

Table 4.1 Repression and Resource Deprivation

Event/ Perpetrator	Repression	Resource Deprivation
Strikes: Companies	Termination; Suspensions; Intimidation/threats; Increased plant security measures; “Moral” appeals to workers	Terminations; Suspensions
UAW	Lack of representation; Attempts to subsume into more moderate movements	Lack of representation
Police	Use of riot gear; Dispersing picket lines; Cease and desist notices; Increased patrol	N/A
Protests: Companies	Terminations; Suspensions	Terminations; Suspensions
UAW	Preventing union membership votes; Denial of benefits; Refusal of representation; Avoidance of confrontation	Denial of benefits; Refusal of representation
Police	N/A	N/A
Elections: Companies	N/A	N/A
UAW	Encouraging (racist) retired workers to vote; Making false claims about RUM candidates; UAW International letter condemning “separatists”; Malfunctioning voting machines; Blatant election rule breaking; Voter disqualification	Loss of access to financial resources; Loss of influence over union resources; Loss of organizational recognitions (human resources); Loss of access to “legitimized power”
Police	Ticketing RUM supporters; Beating RUM supporters; Intimidation; Stalling; Arrests; Armed occupation	N/A
State: Surveillance	Police surveillance of General Baker, events attended and actions	N/A
Trials	Arrests and charges leading to legal trials	Monopolizing time of human resources otherwise available for organizing; Legal fees
South End	N/A	Manipulation of resource allocation toward more moderate coverage

Chapter Five

League Ideology and Factionalization

1. INTRODUCTION

Our historical tracing suggests that the League and its components, while never a completely ideologically or tactically coherent group, organized flexibly and effectively when proceeding from a material base. However, when heavy repression diminished its influence in the plant, ideological differences became more nettlesome. Furthermore, continued resource scarcity pressured the League to consider tactical changes that weren't popular amongst all elements of the League.

In this chapter I will examine ideology and factionalization as secondary factors in the League's demobilization. In "League Ideology" I will discuss the distinct ideologies of the RUMs and the revolutionary newspaper and how, despite certain differences, they came together to become the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. In "League Split" I examine three documents and a retrospective interview by ex-League members discussing what they interpreted as the crucial issues leading to the split in the League. Finally, in "Factionalization", I will show how ideological and tactical schisms led to internal strains which ultimately spelled doom for an already struggling League.

2. LEAGUE IDEOLOGY

The Revolutionary Union Movements and the radical newspaper arose from different experiences, held different positions relative to the means of production, and contributed different ideological viewpoints to the League, each of which is worth exploring independently. DRUM, the original RUM and model for the others, laid out its ideology

most clearly in its Constitution, and fourteen-demand program. The revolutionary newspapers, whether they be *The Inner City Voice*, *The South End*, or *Spear*, most clearly expressed their ideological orientation in interviews given by John Watson, the editor of each. Crossover in terms of staff and objectives pushed the two constituent elements of the League into a degree of ideological consonance. The groups' common ideological expression can be found in the League's *General Program and Labor Program*." Although this statement was more detailed and explicit than DRUM's fourteen-demand program or Watson's interviews, it does not represent a significant ideological shift for either of the elements represented in the merger.

The RUMs represented the element of the League more influenced by Black Nationalism, and they drew very important links between their struggle for liberation within the United States and struggles for national liberation across the globe, particularly in Vietnam. The first sentence of DRUM's *Constitution* reveals the vitality of such a connection:

We the super-exploited black workers recognize the historic role that we must play and the grave responsibility that is ours in the struggle for the liberation of black people in racist U.S.A and people of color around the world from the yoke of oppression that holds all of us in the chains of slavery to this country's racist exploitative system.

They maintain that because of the important position in production held by Black workers as colonized people within the imperialist hegemon, "only a struggle led by black workers can triumph our powerful reactionary enemy", essentially claiming that Black workers are the revolutionary vanguard whose success in thwarting racism in the United States is the precondition for other successful struggles. Furthermore, DRUM and other RUMs were by no means ignorant of capitalist exploitation's effects on all workers, even relatively

privileged white workers. However, they insist that movements often fail because they are “betrayed from within” which in the case of racially integrated movements are dismantled “by the white leadership exploiting the racist nature of the white workers they led”. They therefore conclude that for the sake of the movement’s strategic integrity, “membership is denied to all honkies due to the fact that said honkey has been the historic enemy, betrayer, and exploiter of black people”. Yet, they do allow for relationships with white workers “on the basis of coalition over issues”, meaning that in the case of mutual concerns, RUMS could enter into coalition with radicalized white workers.¹

DRUM’s Program, a list of fourteen broad-ranging political demands made to the UAW, is oriented to material results and not tightly tied to Black Nationalism rather than Marxism. Summarized, they are: 1) “Halt U.A.W. racism” by increasing Black representation in the U.A.W. including electing a Black U.A.W president. 2) Revising the grievance procedure to solve grievances immediately by workers at the plant involved. 3) “Elimination of all safety and health hazards in the auto industry”. 4) Fighting against speed ups and increases in production standards 5) Fighting for a five hour workday and a four day workweek. 6) An immediate doubling of wages for production workers based on the rapid increase in productivity of workers without comparable pay increases. 7) A cut in union dues, to limit wastefulness of incompetent union executives. 8) “The end of the checkoff of union dues”. 9) “All UAW investment funds be used to finance economic development in the black community under programs of self determination”. 10) “We demand that the union end its collusion with the United Foundation”. 11) UAW political campaign money be turned over to the Black United Front, “for Black controlled and directed political work”. 12) “We

¹ DRUM, “Constitution”, n.d., Bx 1, Fd 18, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

demand that the U.A.W. end its collusion with the C.I.A., the F.B.I. and all other white racist spy institutions.” 13) “We demand that the U.A.W. end all interference in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the black community”. 14) That the UAW use its political and strike powers to demand a) An end the Vietnam War. b) “An end to all taxes imposed upon workers”. c) “Increases in profit and property taxes to make up the difference”. d) “Reallocation of all Federal monies spent on defense to meet the pressing needs of the black and poor populations of America”.²

The DRUM program objects to racism, unsafe working conditions, exploitation (via long hours and under-compensation), union executive elitism and bureaucracy, collusion with the powers that be, and war. It draws concrete connections between race exploitation, labor oppression, poverty, and imperialism. It does, however, omit discussion of sexism, particularly the specific oppression endured by Black women workers. Furthermore, it avoids heavily Marxist terminology other than “exploitation” and “means of production”.

The crew working on *The Inner City Voice* (and later *The South End*) was much smaller than the mass movements being built by workers (and ex-workers) in the RUMs. It was also more heavily dominated by students (albeit mostly children of factory workers) who were temporarily exempt from the necessity of selling their labor to the owners of the means of production. Three of the original writers and editors of *The Inner City Voice* who would go onto be on the first Central Committee of the League - General Baker, Michael Hamlin, and John Watson - dictated the ideological leanings of the radical newspapers they produced. Two interviews with John Watson most closely demonstrate the newspapers’ ideology.

Following V.I. Lenin who claimed:

² Program, “DRUM’s Program”, n.d., Bx 1, Fd 1, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University

In our opinion... the main thread which, if followed, would enable us steadily to develop, deepen, and extend that organization, should be the founding of an All-Russian political newspaper... [W]ithout it we cannot conduct the systematic, all-round propaganda and agitation, consistent in principle, which is the chief and permanent task of Social-Democracy in general and, in particular, the pressing task of the moment, when interest in politics and in questions of socialism has been aroused among the broadest strata.³

John Watson explained that the newspapers' editors wanted to build "a Black Bolshevik Party" and so produced a regular newspaper to "bridge between the peaks of activity," organize "the division of labor among Black revolutionaries and" create "a network throughout the community".⁴ It was as important to Watson that the newspaper be an all-Black working class political newspaper, as it was to Lenin that the newspaper be an "all-Russian political newspaper". However, these newspapers were slightly more nuanced than their RUM counterparts in their adoption of Black Nationalist rhetoric. Watson stated that "Black nationalism in and of itself represents a broad political spectrum from left to right. There are Black Nationalists who are essentially Black fascists, and you have other Black Nationalists who are essentially Black Marxist-Leninist Communist revolutionaries". He made it clear throughout the interview that his newspapers were not reactionary but rather ideologically Black Marxist-Leninist.⁵

A few notes are needed before I move on to how the fully formed ideology of the League negotiated the ideological convergences and divergences of DRUM and the newspapers. DRUM took a harder nationalistic line, leaving it a little more flexibility when

³ Lenin, V.I., "Where to Begin?," In *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 5, (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 13-24.

⁴ Interview, "Interview with John Watson", *Radical America*, BPM4 Reel 1/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

⁵ Interview, "To the Point of Production- An Interview with John Watson of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers", July 1969, Bx 4, Fd 22, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

appealing to workers around on the basis of immediate economic concerns rather than a consistent theory of exploitation. It also used harsher racialized language such as “honkey” and “Polak” that off put some older and otherwise sympathetic workers. On the other hand, the newspapers were less likely to use harsh nationalist rhetoric, opting for a more Marxist rhetoric that came off to some as elitist or irrelevant. However, both groups agreed that the strength of Black workers and their community existed at the point of production.

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers devised a more complete and thorough philosophical and ideological position than did its predecessors, but one can find contributions from each group in the formulation of the League’s *General Program*, which states, “The League of Revolutionary Black Workers is dedicated to waging a relentless struggle against racism, capitalism, and imperialism”. The *Program* emphasizes the vital connection of racism, both in the U.S. and abroad, to capitalism (as “essentially a black working class”) and imperialism (“imperialist oppression and exploitation of the world creates a privileged status for the people and workers of the U.S.”) For the League, “these two systems of privilege ... become the basis for the aristocracy of white labor” giving “white labor a huge stake in the imperialist system” rendering “white labor unable and unfit to lead the working class in the U.S.”. Furthermore, “[r]acism has been effectively used time and time again to prevent a unified colorless proletariat from carrying on a protracted revolutionary struggle against capitalism and imperialism.” Therefore, although the League ideologically recognizes a common class position of Black and white workers, they argue that in their specific conditions only the Black working class is fit to lead a revolutionary

party. This is what the League means when they call themselves a “Black Marxist-Leninist party”.⁶

Unlike its predecessors, the League took an explicit stance against the sexism perpetrated upon Black women. They recognized that “Black women at large have been viciously discriminated against in the labor market... Black women are a significant section of the reserve labor force”. Black women workers were less likely to be in union shops, and suffered heavily from sexual harassment. She was less likely than her white counterpart to be in white-collar clerical or secretarial work. The League set some goals for addressing the intersection of sexism and racism in the plants, including demands for “child care, health facilities, [and] educational facilities for children and parents.” Despite this, the League was heavily paternalistic, calling many women brainwashed by the “middle class ideal,” charging that they “ha[ve] not learned how to struggle to change [their situation].”⁷ In a retrospective interview, Edna Ewell Watson (wife of John Watson) states:

The role of women in the League was traditionalist in terms of black patriarchal ideology and political priorities. Women were positioned and constructed to be supportive of male leadership... Monogamy for females in dyads was assumed to be a value and much the norm, if not required. But womanizing among the males was acceptable. Women who wanted to be sexually expressive or experimental were labeled as ‘loose,’ ‘easy,’ or ‘whorish,’. Many of the male leaders acted as if women were sexual commodities, mindless, emotionally unstable, or invisible... There was no lack of roles for women in the League as long as they accepted subordination and invisibility. Homophobia, of course, was rampant.⁸

⁶ The General Policy Statement and Labor Program of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, n.d. Bx 1, Fd 86, ALEC, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 224-25.

Still, the League maintained the centrality of organizing at the point of production, and combating UAW practices that sustained racism in the plants. They emphasized the importance of building a Labor Strike and Defense Fund specifically for Black workers. Simultaneously, Black workers “must be educated and prepared ahead of time to the nature and purpose of specific strikes”. One way of doing this was to distribute publications in each of the plants (such as the DRUM, FRUM, and ELRUM newsletters, as well as *The Spear*). While the League recognized the importance of Black workers who were members of the surplus labor army, they insisted that it was workers in the plants who had the power to combat capitalism and effect real change. This is why they called for Black workers at the point of production to be the “revolutionary vanguard”.⁹

3. LEAGUE SPLIT

A major split in the League occurred on June 12, 1971 when three members of the seven-member Central Committee – Ken Cockrel, Mike Hamlin, and John Watson – joined James Forman in leaving the League to concentrate their efforts on the Black Worker’s Congress. Three surviving documents address the split’s central issues, including ideology, tactics, and personality. The first document was written by the splitters. The second was written by John Williams (member of the original Central Committee), Rufus Burke and Clint Marbury (long time central staff of the League). A third document was written by Marian Kramer, a long time member of the central staff of the League as well as the first woman to be elected to the Central Committee of the League (after the split occurred). Kramer’s contemporaneous account is supplemented with a 2016 retrospective interview

⁹ The General Policy Statement and Labor Program of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, n.d. Bx 1, Fd 86, ALEC, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh.

conducted by the League of Revolutionary Black Workers Media Project. I will address each in turn.

Ken Cockrel, Mike Hamlin, and John Watson's document, *The Split in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers: Three Lines and Three Headquarters*, described the "internal contradictions" as ideological and class related. More specifically the authors claimed that an "incessant struggle over the questions of ideology, policy, programs, strategy, and tactics" was occurring, with League leadership and base split into three definitive tendencies and factions. They called their faction and Forman's, "proletarian revolutionaries ... socialist political leaders and workers in the struggle to build socialism and hasten the defeat of imperialism in the world". They claimed that the second faction, "the petty bourgeois opportunists," flaunted their knowledge of Marxism-Leninism and "practiced revolution in a way that showed their disdain for not only the working class but every other stratum of the population that did not instantly recognize their 'superior theoretical virtues'" and revolutionary leadership. The third faction, "the backward reactionary-nationalist lumpen-proletariat", they described as those "whose view of revolutionary struggle was one of equating such struggle to a popularity contest, in which judges were the most reactionary, least conscious sections of the population".¹⁰

There was a clear tactical difference between the so-called "proletarian revolutionaries" and the other two factions. The splitters argued that the League needed to extend its organizing reach beyond the plant into the community. As such "the role of the other two tendencies in [community activities] ran from negligible to non-existent with the

¹⁰ Essay, John Watson, Michael Hamlin, and Kenneth Cockrel, "The Split in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers: Three Lines and Three Headquarters", n.d., Bx 1, Fd 19, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, 1-8.

latter describing the petty-bourgeois opportunist wing precisely.” Community oriented activities that the League participated in included judicial defense of Black workers, newspaper and media production, participation in the Black Economic Development Conference, and the Control, Conflict, and Change Book Club. These tactical issues brought up issues of resource scarcity and allocation, thus resource deprivation exacerbated “internal” conflicts.¹¹

The second major issue discussed in this document is Black Nationalism and the League’s relationship to white workers. The “proletarian revolutionaries” maintained their willingness “to engage in practice with whites whose revolutionary dedication and acceptance of the concept of the black vanguard” was unquestioned. They claimed that their “principled relations” with radical white organizations such as the Motor City Labor League and the Labor Defense Coalition “aided our advance materially and causes us to feel that to reject struggle on that front is tragically incorrect.” Furthermore, they charge that the “reactionary nationalist” section undermined the organization with use of “shrill cries” such as “honkies” and “devils”. What is more, they assert that “reactionary nationalism, which precedes the history of the League, is a history of bankrupt politics and policies, laced with such idealistic perversities as astrology, mysticism, infantile militarism and adventurism,” and was never explicitly accepted by the general membership of the organization.

One last point made in this document must be briefly examined. The so-called “proletarian revolutionaries” clearly sided with James Forman, who they claimed was “hated throughout this country by petite-bourgeois intellectuals” and “revolutionary nationalists”. They credited him with contributions to the League that were “substantial and there for all to

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9-17.

see,” while the other two factions opposed his pragmatic efforts to develop resources, raise funds, and perform other bureaucratic tasks functionally necessary for the existence of a mobilized organization. It seems clear that James Forman was, if nothing else, a divisive figure.¹²

In response to this pamphlet’s “organizational criticism”, John Williams, Rufus Burke, and Clint Marbury submitted a document titled *Rationale for the Revolutionary Leadership (Dictatorship of the Proletariat)*. They claimed that, in fact, the splitters were “petty-bourgeois renegades” unable to accept the dictatorship of the proletariat and insisted that the splitters “displayed utter contempt and disdain towards the workers in the organization”. This disdain was visible in three ways:

1) The subordination of the workers interest (supposedly the interest of the organization) to those of the petty bourgeoisie, i.e. globe-trotting in the name of internationalism while our base areas were crumbling- very adventurist; out right lying to the masses claiming that we were capable of closing down “ten plants at a minutes notice”; and more adventurism which manifested by trying to create a national organization without a workers base. 2) Refusal to do any type of hard physical labor whatsoever and integrate themselves with the workers not only in words but also in deeds. For, the criterion for truth is not idle jiberous or childish twaddle but social practice and social practice alone. 3) Refusal to do “mundane” tasks and involve themselves in the practical movement, i.e. distribution of literature at plants and selling of our official organ or anything beyond pushing a pencil and talking “shit”. In essence point number 10 of *Combat Liberalism* which reads “To regard oneself as having rendered great service to the revolution, to pride oneself on being a veteran, to disdain minor assignments while being quite unequal to major tasks, to be slipshod in work and slack in study.”

Essentially they were accusing the splitters of internationalism (Cockrel and Watson certainly were the League members traveling abroad most), elitism, and intellectualism. The stance seems founded on two Mao Zedong essays: “Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership” and “Combat Liberalism”. As an organizational solution, the League’s

¹² *Ibid.*, 22-24.

leadership was altered to more accurately reflect the dictatorship of the proletariat by electing more workers to the Central Committee of the reorganized League (only General Baker and Chuck Wooten remained from the original Central Committee).¹³

A second response, *On Splits*, was written by Marian Kramer,¹⁴ who believed that the organizational split could be traced to political, structural, and tactical controversies. She stated, “it is our belief that the political differences between ourselves and the splitters revolve around a lack of clarity on the National Question”.¹⁵ In a recent retrospective interview, Marian Kramer again commented on the split:

The split was a good thing for us, because it made us understand that we needed our education to go to the next level. We had just about won every reform in the factory that had to be won, and in the school system and health care, a lot of things, you know? But, so therefore that split had to move, because we needed a new direction, and I hate the fact that a lot of these folks [the splitters], felt that they had to take credit for what they didn't do.

The last sentence seems to refer to the splitters' claims that they did far more revolutionary work than did the “other two factions”. She used an anecdote to illustrate the splitters' elitism. Several women from the League were attending a women workers' conference in Toronto, where they had been asked to speak and represent the League. Members of a gay coalition from North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia approached them about a taking a trip to Vietnam to speak. The spokeswomen from the League replied that they would think about it. However, before any of the women saw the letter containing the official invitation, James

¹³ Essay, John Williams, Rufus Burke, and Clint Marbury, “Rationale for Revolutionary Leadership (Dictatorship of the Proletariat)”, n.d., Bx 1, Fd 25, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, 1-4.

¹⁴ Unfortunately, a page of the document that may have contained useful information was missing from the microfilm.

¹⁵ Transcript, Marian Kramer, *On Splits*, BPM4 Reel 1/3, Microfilm, Northwestern University Library.

Forman, Ken Cockrel, and John Watson flew off to Vietnam to represent the League in place of the women's delegation.¹⁶

4. FACTIONALIZATION

Up to this point in this chapter I have examined the ideological makeup of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers as well League members' analyses of the split (and practical demobilization) of this social movement organization. These two explorations situate us to consider what Christian Davenport calls "internal influences" of demobilization. While Davenport considers five - burnout, factionalization, lost commitment, membership loss, and rigidity - I will examine one that is the most pertinent to the League's, factionalization. For Davenport factionalization occurs when "dissident members... hit a point beyond which they refuse to go-at least collectively". This point can be ideological, "a difference of opinion regarding objectives being pursued (revolution or reform)" or "the tactics employed to get there (violence or nonviolence)". In the League's case we see both ideological (Black Nationalism and [Black] Marxism) strain and tactical (plant organizing and plant/community organizing) strain. A third and final internal demobilizing influence does not fit cleanly into one of Davenport's five categories. James Forman's entrance to and involvement in the League, subordinate to his self-promotion, drastically interrupted its organizing. I will discuss each factor in turn: ideological factionalization, tactical factionalization, and the "James Forman effect".

¹⁶ Marian Kramer, "On the Split and Critical Thinking", *League of Revolutionary Black Workers: A Media Project with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers*, accessed May 13, 2016, <https://www.revolutionaryblackworkers.org/video/>.

The League's ideological split, with (roughly) Black Nationalist RUMs on one side and Black Marxist newspapers and students on the other, poses the theoretical question of how and to what degree class is intertwined with racism. Both factions the splitters and those who remained in the League, accepted some level of class analysis as well as some level of nationalism in their analysis of race in the auto industry and the UAW. There is no evidence to suggest that "Black Capitalism" or "right-wing Nationalism" was a part of this ideological dispute, but the conflicting Black Nationalist and Marxist interpretations of the intersection of race and class found in the introduction (pages 4-9) played out in the League split.

The splitters unequivocally argued that Marx(ism) was centrally relevant to the Black worker's struggle. Like Allen, the splitters subordinated race to class, believing that the continued racist sentiment of white workers and union leadership stood in the way of a unified, racially solidaristic, worldwide proletariat. That racism persisted because white labor maintained an interest in its relative advantage over other workers. But, for the splitters, it was necessary to maintain proletarian consciousness even while combatting the racism of fellow workers. While those remaining in the League did not repudiate the importance of class, but they saw classical Marxism (in its fundamental form) as much less relevant and pertinent. Radicals who had engaged in real, long-term struggle, such as Mao Zedong, and Toussaint Louverture, interested those who remained in the League more than those devoted to intellectually elaborating the Marxist legacy. Furthermore, there was a feeling that Marx and his white academic followers were theoretically bankrupt when it came to racial oppression and Black Power. This is pithily represented a phrase some League members used, "Marx was a honkie".¹⁷ Some of these League members may have been

¹⁷ Georgakas & Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 135.

influenced by their reading of Harold Cruse, who called for Blacks to disassociate themselves from the white left, particularly the Communist Party.

Still, one can't help but notice a large residual ideological common ground between both factions. Both groups still believed that the Black working class was the vanguard of struggle and could not risk tying itself too closely to white movements. Both factions sought greater worker control over the League. However, as the splitters insisted, "the League's internal contradictions... class and ideological ... had been the source of intensive struggle throughout the organization's history".¹⁸ Why, then, did it take so long for these contradictions to come to a head? This is because mass mobilized movement always entails ideological contradictions. Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street, The Civil Rights Movement (in its various forms), and the LGBTQ movements all had/have ideological contradictions. Movements mobilize within these contradictions, not outside of them. Therefore, one cannot imagine a movement free of ideological contradictions. When movements are able to make tangible progress toward common goals, ideological contradictions are of little concern.

Tactical and strategic differences became more and more prominent as the League moved towards the split. Under the condition of scarce resources and declining influence in the plants, the future splitters moved their focus outside the plant to community organizing. Much of the money brought in by the BEDC was spent in this way, including defense of "blacks charged with ludicrous 'crimes'" such as the New Bethel case and the James Johnson case, and media production via Black Star Printing, Black Star Publishing, and Black Star

¹⁸ Essay, John Watson, Michael Hamlin, and Kenneth Cockrel, *The Split in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers: Three Lines and Three Headquarters*, n.d., Bx 1, Fd 19, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, 1-2.

Productions. John Watson even spent time in Europe attempting to disseminate the film *Finally Got the News* (with moderate success), justifying, for many, charges of internationalism. Time and resources were spent in a movement to give Detroit's Black communities control over their public schools. Perhaps most controversially, the group sponsored a Control, Conflict and Change Book Club whose participants were 98 percent white and primarily middle class. The splitters justified this move by claiming that:

This program serves a two-fold purpose; one, the development of an organizational structure of whites committed to increasing their understanding of Marxism-Leninism so as to function as discussion leaders and staff for the book club, and two, the establishment of a forum wherein less highly developed whites can make contact with Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries and their programs free of the condescension so often characteristic of such meetings between "revolutionaries" and the people.¹⁹

Others such as General Baker were against spending resources outside of the plant as they believed the League's base among workers was too small to justify expanding into non-worker-based organizing.

In a similar vein, the two factions clashed over joining the Black Workers Congress. The Black Workers Congress was originally meant to be a nationwide Marxist-Leninist union for Black workers, and the League was to be one of its main components.²⁰ But many in the League believed the worker base to be too small to justify a venture into national and international territory. For plant-minded leadership like Chuck Wooten and General Baker, time and resources would be better spent locally, in Detroit, building up the small base of

¹⁹ Essay, John Watson, Michael Hamlin, and Kenneth Cockrel, *The Split in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers: Three Lines and Three Headquarters*, n.d., Bx 1, Fd 19, DRMR, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, 9-17.

²⁰ Black Workers Congress, *The Struggle against Revisionism and opportunism: Against the Communist League and the Revolutionary Union*.

workers that they had already organized. They saw the BWC as “bureaucratic”, “adventuristic” and “bourgeois”. Subsequent to the split, the League was expelled from the BWC.

Finally, James Forman’s role in the demobilization of the League must be considered, as detailed in Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin’s poignant analysis. James Forman originally came into contact with the League during the BEDC that he was instrumental in organizing. With his hefty resume of organizational experience, bolstered by the resources he garnered from the conference, he soon became a member of the League’s Central. He simultaneously began to organize the Black Workers Congress. However, Forman’s program for the BWC ran in stark opposition to the League leadership. “Forman viewed the League as subordinate to BWC, a position in sharp contrast to the League belief that BWC would be a creature of the League.”²¹ He was able to attract Cockrel, Hamlin, and Watson to this project, then expelled the League from the BWC. Forman was criticized by remaining League members for “excessive personalism”, “theoretical simplification”, “incompetence”, “egoism”, “opportunism”, and “international adventurism”. Forman not only structured the BWC hierarchically, he attempted to foster a cult of personality built around his own theoretical perspective, “Formanism”.

In effect, Formanism substituted ideological struggle for struggle over material conditions. The focus had to remain ideological because people were recruited into study groups and organizing commissions rather than action groups prepared to deal with immediate issues. Reduced to study groups and organizing commissions, politics was effectively separated from the problems of work and daily life. The education itself was anticolonial, anti-racist, and anti-imperialist, but ideas were not presented in the context of a serious class analysis of the roles black play in America or of the state of mid-twentieth-century capitalism. Unlike the economically grounded and disciplined

²¹ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 136.

organizational approach of Marxism-Leninism, the approach of Fanon-Formanism was exemplified by loosely structured groups stressing psychological interpretations of social reality and accumulation of technical skills. Formanism was less a program for moving toward power than a defensive tactic for dealing with oppression.²²

In this way, Formanism went against the League's pragmatic, materialistic approach. While Forman successfully wooed three important leaders from the League, the BWC never gained footing and soon folded. Each of these three previous leaders would eventually turn his back on Forman. In early 1972 Ken Cockrel openly criticized Forman, calling his reports "vague, programless, and individualistic" and his person "an American Airlines revolutionary ... more interested in personal power than in the organization's welfare". As a result, Cockrel was subjected to investigation by a BWC commission, inspiring a number of important resignations from the BWC, including that of John Watson. Hamlin continued on as the BWC's national chairman, but by April 1973 he acted to expel Forman from the BWC. In a paper describing his rationale, Hamlin described Forman as "secretive, paranoid, furtive, and individualistic to the bone," concluding "JAMES FORMAN OPPORTUNITICALLY DESTROYED THE LEAGUE, DOING THE WORK OF THE BOURGEOISIE".²³

This chapter has focused on the internal contention that broke into the open as the League demobilized. It first examined the ideological perspectives first developed by the RUMs and radical newspapers, then collaboratively by the League. This process brought together the left-leaning Black Nationalism espoused by the RUMs and the Black Marxism-Leninism espoused by the radical newspapers. Second, it reviews the split in the League

²² Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 139.

²³ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 136-149.

through commentary by League members on its origins. Each member's commentary calls attention to ideological, tactical, and personal contention and strain within the organization, as well as the special, difficult to categorize role played by James. The final section on factionalization explored the League's ideological juxtaposition of the national question and Marxism, as well as its tactical differences over issues of organizing (plant vs. community and local vs. national). The chapter shows that factionalization seems to have doomed an already weakened movement in three ways: via ideological strain, primarily over the national question, and a different interpretation of the relevance of the class component to the movement; through tactical and strategic differences pitting community against plant and national against local organizing; and finally, by way of a nationally recognized yet polarizing and self-serving figure, James Forman. Forman exacerbated both ideological and tactical internal strain. In the concluding chapter, however, I will contend that these internal strains did not become pressing until the auto companies, the state, and the union had crippled both the League and the larger movement of militant Black workers that it represented.

Conclusions

This thesis has examined some of the basic principles of Christian Davenport's theoretical framework which suggests that social movements "die" because they are "kill[ed] ... from the outside *and* the inside,"¹ using a "most similar" case study to Davenport's study of the Republic of New Africa. While the League had different goals, used different tactics, and faced (some) different challengers than did the RNA, they both fit firmly into the Black Power movement occurring in the wake of moderate civil rights reform during the late 60s and early 70s. Organizing in and around Detroit at the same time, their histories coincide and overlap, most notably in the New Bethel Incident. I contend that, while both internal and external factors played a role in demobilizing the League, it would be a mistake to allot equal weight to each. I show this through historical tracing which reveals that, despite ideological and tactical differences among members of the League and its precursor organizations, it wasn't until repressive action and resource deprivation by auto companies, the UAW, and the state greatly restricted League influence within plant and union that factionalization caused the League to split and then quickly die. I place special emphasis on the role of the UAW in this process because it is a type of organization not anticipated in Davenport's framework, one which claims to act on behalf or in favor of a constituency while repressing and denying resources to rival organizations seeking support from the same constituency.

The chapter "Condition of Black Automobile Workers 1919-1968" explored the material conditions that led up to the formation of the League. An influx of Black labor, fleeing oppression and poverty in the south, searching for the gains available through waged

¹ Christian Davenport, *How Social Movements Die: Repression and Demobilization of the Republic of New Africa*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 38.

labor in the north, opened up a new source of labor previously untapped by northern capitalists. Henry Ford eagerly exploited this new labor force, hiring more Black workers than any other employer and developing a set of paternalistic relationships he with Black political and religious leaders in Detroit. Black workers across the auto industry held the most hazardous and undesirable jobs in the plant, but were skeptical of unions which opportunistically courted Black support while harboring a largely racist white rank and file. During this time period it was common to use Black workers as strike-breakers. A final showdown between the UAW and Ford in 1941 highlighted the importance of Black workers to the unionization movement. Black political and religious leaders along with the workers were split on the issue, as Ford had hired more Black workers than any other company in the auto industry, but Black workers could stand to gain materially if Ford unionized. Eventually the UAW was able to win over support of most Black workers, political, and religious leaders by embracing, at least in words, racial egalitarianism. This ushered in a two-and-a-half decade alliance between Black labor and the UAW. My analysis of this time period, however, shows that the UAW did not make good on its promises, and by the late 1960s Black workers still had less job security, worse pay at less-skilled jobs, and more dangerous jobs than white workers. Their absolute employment gains that did not keep pace with Black population growth in the Detroit region, and their influence within the union was small. Broken promises and lack of material improvement led to Black workers' growing dissatisfaction with the UAW.

The chapter "Revolutionary Union Movements and Radical Newspapers" explores two responses to growing discontent to these conditions as well as persistent racism in and around Detroit. Although, the movements had not yet formally come into existence, the

close ties between the leadership of the RUMs and the editorship of the radical newspapers allows us to view 1968 as the year that the League took shape. The first revolutionary newspaper that included John Watson (editor-in-chief), Mike Hamlin and General Baker as a part of the editorial team was the *Inner-City Voice*. Inspired by V.I. Lenin's essay *Where to Begin*, they decided to create an all-Black Marxist-Leninist political newspaper to cover the turbulent political landscape locally, nationally, and internationally. In May of 1968 the first Revolutionary Union Movement, DRUM, was formed and went on to do battle with Dodge Main via wildcat strike, and the UAW via local election. Other RUMs quickly sprung up including ELRUM, FRUM, JARUM, FORUM, HARUM, MARUM, and UPRUM. They demanded equal treatment of Black workers in hiring and promotion, improved safety conditions, and increased representation within the UAW. They viewed Black industrial workers as the vanguard of revolutionary struggle.

“Chronology of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers” covered the unification of the RUMs and the revolutionary newspapers into the League in March 1969 traced the major events during the League's relatively short life. The League functioned as a democratic centralist organization composed of various RUMs and student groups under the direction of a seven-man central committee, selected from the RUMs and the radical newspapers. The League produced a policy and program statement espousing what they called “Black Marxism-Leninism,” and organized and participated in strikes, union local elections, union protests, legal defense trials, conferences, media production, and political education.

The next chapter, “Analysis of External Demobilization Factors: Repression and Resource Deprivation,” analyzed external pressures put on the League by the companies, the

UAW, and the state. Each used distinct modes of repression and resource deprivations. The companies used termination, suspension, intimidation, increased plant security, and moral appeals to workers. The UAW used lack of representation, cooptation, avoidance, lies, manipulation, outright cheating, and denial of access to “legitimized power”. The state used violence and intimidation, legal harassment, citations, surveillance, and manipulation of resources. The UAW was far of supportive of RUM-affiliated workers when they filed grievances, and actively mobilized against RUMs in union local elections. Hence the companies were able, with the UAW’s tacit support, to successfully terminate the most radical and active members of the League while silencing sympathizers through acts of intimidations. Furthermore, by stymying attempts to gain access to “legitimized power” in the union locals, the union limited resources that the League could have been used to further its cause. The chapter concludes that external factors serve as the primary engine of demobilization of the League.

In “League Ideology and Factionalization” I explored a secondary factor in the demobilization of the League, internal strain. This came from ideological factionalization centered around the national question and the immediate relevance of Marxism (or class-focused theory more generally) to the Black workers’ liberation, tactical factionalization around issues of national versus local organization and plant versus community action, and finally the polarizing personality of James Forman which likely accentuated the ideological and tactical issues.

The novel aspect of Davenport’s theory of social movement (de)mobilization is his examination of how internal and external demobilizing factors intersect and interact. The two that have concerned us most here are the intersections of resource deprivation and

factionalization (intersection 1 in Davenport’s schema) and repression and factionalization (Davenport’s intersection 11). Davenport says of the first, “situations may exist where resource deprivations... take place at the same time as a faction develops within a dissident organization... for example, a faction may form around the issue of resource deprivation and [what?] should be done about it”.² In this case study, intersection 1 entailed resource deprivation from the company through terminations and suspensions, and from the UAW through electoral blockades and corruption limited financial and human resources along with access to “legitimized power,” causing a tactical shift to national (and community?) organizing, leading to a factionalization.

Davenport describes intersection 11 this way: “it is common in the aftermath of repressive action for SMOs to factionalize with regard to how the movement organization should respond to state action”.³ The League, however, did not experience repression just from, or even primarily from, the state. Company terminations and suspensions reinforced by UAW lack of representation, combined with UAW electoral corruption, both supported by police intimidation tactics, led to greatly diminished League influence in the plants and union locals, causing stagnation within the movement. With diminishing ability to secure material gains, the League turned to a heightened degree of ideological self-scrutiny, leading to factionalization.

Close process tracing shows that external factors preceded and helped cause the internal factors that were the proximate causes of the split in the League. This contrasts with Geschwender’s conclusion in *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers* that, “The League might have been able to survive its external

² Davenport, *How Social Movements Die*, 39.

³ *Ibid.*, 40.

enemies if it had been internally sound. It is doubtful if it could have survived its internal contradictions even in the absence of external enemies.”⁴ The most serious and aggressive contention at the plant level occurred shortly after the RUMs’ founding and before the League was created. After the May 2, 1968 strike, two of the most radicalized workers in the plant were permanently fired while three were fired/rehired. A larger purge occurred at the Eldon Avenue Plant in the wake of ELRUM’s January 1969 UAW demonstration and subsequent wildcat. Two workers, including ELRUM’s president, were permanently fired while 23-27 were fired/rehired and 40-60 more suspended. The length of time between termination and rehire varied from a handful of days to a few months and was not usually accompanied with back pay. Soon after the League formed soon in March of 1969 one of its RUM affiliates lost a second close local election, followed by UAW repression and resource deprivation. In late April, the League attended the BEDC, securing fiscal resources and recruiting James Forman to the organization. This search for new resources in the wake of earlier repression and resource deprivation foreshadowed a rise in bureaucracy, a polarization of the League’s historical leadership around a new central figure, and a partial and gradual tactical shift from plant to community that would have been less necessary had influence in the plants and union not already been diminished. In last ditch efforts to overcome the hostility of companies, union and state, ELRUM attempted a string of three wildcat strikes in from mid April to early May of 1970 and DRUM attempted to run an entire slate in March of 1970 at Local 3. The ELRUM strike effort resulted in five permanent firings (four ELRUM members and one close white ally) and 8-10 fire/rehires, while the DRUM managed to send only two slated candidate to runoff elections, winning neither. Not long after, the League

⁴ James A. Geschwender, *Class, Race, & Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 182.

ceased direct involvement in local elections (the subsequent ELRUM elections were endorsements rather than direct involvement) and strike action. The question remains, was the tactical switch made because James Forman and his followers had taken the reins and forged new path or had powerful forms of repression and resource deprivation from multiple points forced the League to retreat to volatile community work that offered more resources and faced less repression? While it seems likely that both factors had an effect, this tracing suggests that the League's tactical shift was given impetus by foreclosure of other options. The ideological conflict and factionalism that fractured the league occurred after this tactical shift.

It wouldn't be difficult to imagine a different scenario. If the UAW had functioned as an organ of workers' struggle against exploitative labor conditions, rather than an auxiliary to capital in the pursuit of profit⁵, and honestly pursued its verbal commitment to racial egalitarianism, the League would have had a crucial ally in its struggle. Under these conditions, the League could have enjoyed the following advantages: fewer resources would have been used contesting UAW racism; workers fired and suspended could have expected vigorous union pursuit of grievances and thus weaker punishments, back pay, and more autonomy and influence within the plants; League slates would have been able to compete in fair elections, resulting in access to "legitimized power" within the locals leading to access to further financial and human resources. The League's trajectory of influence and power within the plants and the locals would have been increasing rather than diminishing. A mobilized and active movement with increasing influence would not have had to make a severely constrained tactical decision between plant and community organizing, and would

⁵ This refers to Reuther's "Treaty of Detroit" as referenced on page 28, wherein the UAW gave up control of the shop floor in exchange for wage and benefit gains.

have had a local base adequate to enable national expansion. The material constraints that made ideological conflict within the League so pressing would have been substantially relaxed. The UAW's decisively negative response to the League, more so than the companies or the state, played a crucial role in the trajectory and eventual demobilization of the League.

A few other notes should be made here. Although it wasn't the focus of this thesis, the League's history can help activists and organizers learn about difficulties movements face attempting to simultaneously combat multiple points of oppression, especially race and class. Race and class, although intimately related, should not be subsumed into one another. This subsumption is problematic especially among predominantly white socialist, communist, and Marxist organizations that run along strict ideological lines. Ideological rigidity in such organizations limits their ability to act in solidarity with (rather than subsume) organizations that have similar goals, but differing ideologies that may generate new and dynamic ways to target oppression.

In a retrospective book (2012) about League Central Committee member Mike Hamlin lists eleven concrete accomplishments of the League. They are:

1. We focused the struggle for change on the working class.
2. We forced the UAW and unions across the country to change their racist policies and practices by seeing that black workers had a chance to hold office in the union consistent with their numbers in the labor force.
3. We forced Chrysler management to elevate blacks to supervision and management positions. Other large industrial organization saw the handwriting on the wall and followed suit.
4. We educated and mobilized black workers and their allies in a broad fight for justice.

5. We raised the class-consciousness of young black people in numerous cities and got them involved in the black movement.
6. We broke through and dismissed the shackles that McCarthyism had put on leftists and progressives by openly claiming that we were Marxist-Leninists and that we were ready to fight anybody over that right.
7. We organized and raised the consciousness of several groups of white revolutionaries, progressives and liberals.
8. We developed a publishing operation that produced newspapers, newsletters, pamphlets, and two books.
9. We organized a well-attended book club that met monthly to discuss radical and revolutionary books. Lecturers at the discussions were often authors of the books.
10. We developed a movie production unit that produced the film, "*Finally Got the News*" that is still in circulation 40 years later, including use in many black studies, sociology and history classes at the university level.
11. The successes that we had brought about preemptive change in workplaces across the country.⁶

While the League may have been short lived and may not have accomplished its most grandiose goals, it can serve as an educational and aspirational lesson for activists everywhere. It must be judged not only by the material gains that it won but also by the justice of its fight against exploitative and oppressive material conditions. It should not be judged solely by its ideological schisms but also by its willingness to traverse ideological contradictions that it had no part in creating through militant mobilization. Activists, even in the dimmest of times, must find a way to continue to struggle, and heed, as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers did, Frantz Fanon's counsel "Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it."⁷

⁶ Michael Hamlin and Michelle Gibbs, *A Black Revolutionary's Life in Labor: Black Workers Power in Detroit*, (Detroit: Against the Tide Books, 2012), 87-88.

⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 206.

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