Our History: League of Revolutionary Black Workers

This month 56 years ago, June 1969, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was formed in Detroit, Michigan. The League was an independent, combative revolutionary Marxist labor organization that, while existing for only a handful of years, was able to organize thousands of workers in Detroit, in particular New Afrikan/Black auto workers. The League understood acutely that they could not build power through the established labor movement and had to build something new that truly represented the needs of the Black workers in Detroit, as well as the needs of the revolutionary process in the United States. They would come up against not just a government and capitalist class that would target them with state repression and firings but also a union leadership that was corrupt to its core and embedded with national chauvinism and white supremacism. At a time when many revolutionaries were theorizing about students or the lumpenproletariat being the principal revolutionary force in the United States, the League showed that the path to revolution still lies in organizing the working class at the point of production.

Despite its short lifespan, the League remains a powerful source of inspiration for all those who seek to build a new independent, combative and class-conscious labor movement. At its time and still today, they represented the alternative; unlike the state unions, they were not a loyal opposition committed to obeying contracts and union constitutions. For the most part, they did not run for office to replace the labor bureaucrats; they organized the rank and file based on the need to take power. The League organized strikes, walkouts, and other actions without concern for working through the union bureaucracy or what was allowed by the rules of the imperialist system.

The history of the League cannot be fully understood without considering the conditions of Black workers in Detroit. In 1910, fewer than 600 Black auto workers were employed in the city. However, by the 1960s, that number had skyrocketed to over 250,000[1]. This dramatic increase was driven by the migration of hundreds of thousands of Black people from the South, who were seeking to escape the oppressive conditions of Jim Crow and to find better economic opportunities in Detroit's rapidly growing industrial economy. However, what they found was that even outside of the intense national oppression in the Black Belt, they were met with intense racism and discrimination. Race is one of the primary ways US imperialism, and indeed the international imperialist system, uses to organize and perpetuate national oppression.

Black auto workers were given the most physically demanding and hazardous jobs in the plant. They were often relegated to the foundry, body shop, and engine assembly line. These were areas notorious for their intense physical labor, high noise levels, and exposure to dangerous conditions. All the safer and easier jobs were given to whites, and when whites did have difficult

1 Georgakas & Surkin, *Detroit do I Mind Dying*, 1975, p.35

jobs, two workers were assigned to a task that a Black worker was expected to do alone. Similarly, Black workers were systematically denied opportunities for advancement; for instance, at the Dodge Main plant, nearly 95% of foremen were white. Within the union, racism also persisted; almost the entirety of the UAW leadership in Detroit was white Polish-Americans. League pamphlets would discuss how the company and the state union deliberately cultivated racism in order to prevent unity between Black and white workers by buying off white workers and giving them certain advantages over Black workers.

The origins of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers date back to the early 1960s; those who would go on to found the organization had first cut their teeth in some of the most notable revolutionary and Black liberation organizations of that time period, such as the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and UHURU. A few were part of a group that defied U.S. travel bans, traveling to Cuba where they met Robert F. Williams and Che Guevara. In 1967, future League leaders John Watson, General Baker, Mike Hamlin, and Luke Tripp helped found the newspaper Inner City Voice (ICV). ICV, would go on to become the official organ of the League. It was formed following the 1967 Detroit uprising, which was one of the most militant mass uprisings the U.S. has ever seen. ICV was an unabashed revolutionary newspaper that published articles directly connected to the struggles of Black people, specifically Black industrial workers, and provided them with a revolutionary analysis.

Around this time, members of the ICV helped start an informal study group of Black workers and intellectuals. Instrumental in developing this group was ICV contributor and experienced revolutionary General Baker. He was part of the group that had traveled to Cuba in the early 1960s and was previously a member of the RAM, one of the first organizations to apply Mao Zedong's ideas to the United States. Baker understood profoundly the need to organize workers at the point of production and was an auto worker at Dodge Main, one of the largest automobile factories in the world at the time. He had a reputation for relentlessly agitating revolutionary ideas to his coworkers, and he brought workers from Dodge Main out to the study group. Unlike most "Marxist" study groups, which focus on ideas in abstraction from their relation to material conditions, the one headed by Baker and the ICV focused on connecting revolutionary theory to the struggles of Black workers and specifically discussing how they could apply this theory to organize in the auto factories of Detroit.

From these discussions, a group of eight workers at Dodge Main, led by General Baker, began to meet regularly in the ICV office and coordinate work inside the plant. The fruits of this work would bear just over half a year later. On May 2nd, following a week of extraordinarily intense speed-ups, 4,000 workers[2] walked out of Dodge Main. This action was mostly unplanned and involved both Black and white workers; however, General Baker and Bennie Tate from the ICV

group emerged as leaders within the picket lines that formed and stretched into the overnight shift. The picket was short-lived; management photographed those on the line and used these photographs to discharge and discipline picketers who were picketing illegally due to the no-strike or walkout clause in the agreement signed between UAW leadership and Chrysler. The punishment was disproportionately handed out to Black workers; of the seven picketers who were fired, five were Black, including both General Baker and Bennie Tate.

Despite the repression and the firings, the May 2nd walkout played a pivotal role in the development of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM). In the midst of the picketing after the walkout, at a bar across the street from Dodge Main, future League leaders Chuck Wooten, General Baker, Ron March, and a group of six workers decided that they needed to form an organization to organize Black workers to fight the racial discrimination and for better conditions inside the plant; DRUM was born. DRUM was immediately faced with the task of responding to the May 2nd walkout and its lingering impacts. In the June edition of the ICV, General Baker penned a letter to both the UAW and Chrysler, criticizing both. Baker's letter was a direct response to his firing, which was given for violating the "No Strike or Lockout" clause in the collective bargaining agreement between Chrysler and the UAW.

DRUM began a weekly shop paper, which it distributed both covertly inside the plant and openly at the gates outside of it. The first issue covered the May 2nd walkout, and the second issue laid out DRUM's program. The paper quickly garnered a following among Black workers at the plant, and within six weeks many were calling for concrete action. In response, as a way to test its strength, DRUM issued a call to boycott two bars located across from the plant that Black auto workers frequented because they did not hire Black workers. This call resonated with the working masses, and 95%[3] of Black workers took part in the boycott; other similar actions also garnered large support. This success inspired DRUM members to directly challenge Chrysler and the UAW. The ninth issue of the DRUM newsletter carried a list of 15 demands to both the union and Chrysler. To back up their demands on July 7th, they organized a march that was attended by 300 workers; they marched directly to UAW Local 3 headquarters. DRUM had planned the protest to coincide with the union executive board meeting. When the workers arrived at the local, they stormed into the building and the panicking union bureaucrats canceled their meeting and allowed the protesters to voice their demands. DRUM detailed how the union in collaboration with the company worked to systematically worsen the conditions of Black workers. DRUM stated it would shut down Dodge Main in disregard of the union contract.

The next day, DRUM members and supporters arrived at the gates of Dodge Main at 5 am in order to be prepared for when workers arrived for the 6 am shift. Learning from the May 2nd walkout, DRUM recruited many community members and students to walk the picket line in order to make it more difficult for management to distinguish who was a worker. 3,000 Black

workers supported DRUM's call and went on strike, standing outside the plant in a massive picket. The majority of white workers scabbed and went to work; however, a large number honored the picket and went home. Around midday, six DRUM members went to the Local 3 union hall to meet with the union, where DRUM presented their grievances again.

At the same time, the police arrived at the picket, standing across from the picket, they began putting on tear gas masks and got into riot formation. One officer came forward and ordered the strikers to disperse. DRUM organized a carpool, and the strikers headed to the Chrysler headquarters, where a large rally was held. The wildcat strike lasted three days and led to a massive loss in production for Chrysler. 70% of Black workers at the plant had supported the strike, and notably, no one was fired.

Their successes over the summer transformed DRUM from an organization of eight people into a large organization that was supported by a significant section of Dodge Main workers. During the summer, a trustee in the UAW Local 3 died, and a special election was scheduled for early September. DRUM members struggled over whether they should run a candidate, with many believing that running a candidate would be compromising with the sellout UAW leadership. Ultimately, however, the line to run a candidate won out, and DRUM selected Ron March to run for the trustee position. In the first round of the election, March won with 563 votes, over forty more than his nearest competitor; this triggered a runoff election. Almost immediately, the union and police began to move to suppress March and DRUM supporters, attacking Black workers, ticketing cars, and in one incident, storming a meeting and pulling guns on fifty people. The UAW's leadership began heavily soliciting its retired white members to vote in the runoff. March was defeated in the runoff by a vote of 2,091 to 1,386.[4]

Despite March's loss in the election, the work of DRUM had inspired many workers throughout Detroit. Over the fall, workers would attend DRUM meetings to learn from the experiences of the group and form their RUM organizations. Throughout the next two years, more than a dozen RUMs would be developed, including outside of the auto industry with UPRUM at UPS, HARUM made up of harbor workers, NEWRUM consisting of newspaper employees, and HRUM among healthcare workers. RUMs even developed outside of Detroit, with RUMs being built at the General Motors plant in Fremont, California, and the Ford plant in Mahwah, New Jersey. The RUMs employed creative tactics to succeed in their organizing efforts. For instance, the Eldon Avenue Revolutionary Union Movement (ELRUM) divided up the labor among workers and supporters. In order to avoid surveillance, supporters, instead of plant workers, would stand outside the gate several times a week distributing ELRUM's shop paper, "Wildcat." Inside the workplace, ELRUM workers had different tasks; some were tasked with distributing the shop paper inside the plant, while others purposely avoided being openly identified with ELRUM so that management and the union could not target them. These tactics allowed them to

successfully build up the forces to launch a 2,000-person wildcat strike at the Eldon Avenue plant.

The rapid expansion and growth of the RUMs led many within DRUM to feel the need to centralize the RUMs in a revolutionary labor center in order to better coordinate and develop them. While General Baker and Chuck Wooten had been the driving force behind the development of DRUM, they lacked the organizational, technical, fundraising, and administrative skills necessary to develop such an organization. To overcome this, they brought in intellectuals from the ICV: Ken Cockrel, Mike Hamlin, John Watson, and John Williams. All of whom had worked with Baker in other organizations over the years and previously discussed the need for a revolutionary workers' organization. Over the next six months, they would meet regularly to struggle over and coordinate the formation of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Throughout this time, they published articles and position papers articulating to members of the RUMs and Black workers across Detroit their intention for this organization. In June 1969, the League was officially formed. It was structured around several committees led by a central committee known as the executive committee. The group that had led the discussions to form the League made up this committee. Glanton Dowdell, who helped form the Detroit Black Panther Party, served as the head of intelligence and security, maintaining discipline within the organization. From the start, however, there was a contradiction within the leadership of the organization; the revolutionary workers' organization only had two workers, Baker and Wooten, in its leadership; the rest were intellectuals with little connections to the workers in the plants.

The formation of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers marked a qualitative leap in the organization of the RUMs. For the most part, many of the RUMs had been previously heavily built on spontaneous actions. With the League's formation, there was a concerted effort to consolidate the various RUMs into a more cohesive and strategically unified organization. The League aimed to provide a structured framework that could better coordinate labor actions, articulate a unified political message, and extend its influence beyond individual plants. The organization also brought additional community and student support for the actions of the RUMs. The Black Student United Front was formed directly by the League in 1969, comprised of high school students who, along with engaging in struggles within their schools against white supremacy in the school system, leafleted and picketed at the plants for the League. Glanton Dowdell and later Mike Hamlin served as the advisors to the students, ensuring that they developed in a direction that utilized the students as a key auxiliary force to the in-plant workers' struggles.

With the initiation of the League, there also was some orientation away from the workplace organizing on which the RUMs had built themselves. John Watson was a skilled fundraiser, and through his participation with James Forman, a former member of SNCC, at the National Black Economic Development Conference, he was able to secure large amounts of funding for the League. A portion of this went to the RUMs to fund and develop their activities; however, much

of the money went to other places. The League established a large number of offices across the city, with only the Cortland office being specifically oriented to in-plant organizing. The League engaged in a series of media projects and was able to establish a print shop, Black Star Press, and a bookstore, Black Star Book Store. Its most notable media effort was the film, “Finally Got the News,” a close-to-hour-long film documenting the League’s activities.

Another development that came with the formation of the League was its solidarity work. The organization played a key role in developing the Motor City Labor League, a predominantly white counterpart to the League of Revolutionary Black Workers that sought to organize white workers in plants in conjunction with the efforts of the RUMs. In recognizing the developments of capitalism, the League saw early on that factories could now be packed up and moved across international borders in a way that would have been extremely difficult in previous decades. They understood that to overcome this, revolutionary trade union organizations would need to develop strategies around these conditions. The League formed international relationships with revolutionaries abroad, specifically in Italy, where a section of Italian communists had made similar realizations about their establishment trade union movement in Europe to what the League had made in the United States. Regularly, members of the League would visit Italy, and Italian revolutionaries would travel to the United States.

These out-of-plant activities, while bringing a high level of exposure and influence among the student radicals of the New Left to the organization, also intensified internal contradictions. General Baker, Chuck Wooten, and other in-plant organizers felt that John Watson, Ken Cockrel, and Mike Hamlin, who were primarily responsible for organizing these new out-of-plant activities, had become disconnected from the day-to-day struggles of workers. They believed that they were attempting to expand the organization too rapidly and that these new efforts were diverting too much energy away from the immediate task of developing workplace struggles, which should have been the League’s principal focus. While Watson, Cockrel, and Hamlin maintained that building up their media projects, student work, and ties to other organizations immediately was instrumental in advancing the League, they believed that by developing in these areas, they would, by proxy, be able to develop their in-plant struggles.

Through late 1969 and 1970, discipline began to break down within the League. Glanton Dowdell, who was the head of intelligence and security, had been developing a revolutionary discipline within the organization; however, in August 1969, due to threats on his life, he was forced into exile in Sweden. The League accrued a number of people who were workers who had lost their jobs or were students who had been kicked out of their parents’ houses due to their organizing. Often, these people would misuse the organization’s resources, drink heavily, or get into fights. The League did not have a list of expectations for members’ behavior and allowed many of these individuals to continue to participate in the organization without any rectification. Despite women making up a significant portion of the organization’s membership, male

chauvinism was rampant in the League. Women were not given opportunities to take on leadership positions within the organization, were frequently harassed at some League offices, and certain leaders within the organization openly cheated on their wives with members and supporters of the organization. These issues were never addressed within the organization.

The League suffered from poor political education as well, owing to most of its rank and file joining the organization through the spontaneous struggles of 1967 and 1968. Many had never been involved in any sort of political activity before they joined the RUMs. The rank and file of the organization was incredibly uneven, with most having a revolutionary nationalist but not Marxist understanding. In an effort to overcome this, political education classes on the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought were set up for all League members. However, these courses were often conducted in a format contrary to the sort of studies through which DRUM was founded in part through. The League's efforts to improve political education were often filled with stereotyped party speak and intellectualizing disconnected from workers day to day struggles, leading to the studies not resonating with those who attended.

From the inception of the DRUM, workers and activists from across the United States reached out to the Detroit-based group to learn how to establish similar organizations in their own cities. The League of Revolutionary Black Workers was formed to unify Detroit's Revolutionary Union Movements into a cohesive political entity. Many members of the League were eager to explore effective strategies for expanding the RUM model to major cities nationwide. The idea to form a national organization known as the Black Workers Congress (BWC) had existed as early as April 1969. In 1970, the League put out a "Manifesto of the International Black Workers Congress," a call for the formation of this national organization, which also listed 32 objectives for it. The League hoped that the BWC would link the struggles of Black people in the South and rural areas to those of the North and urban areas. Watson and Hamlin spent significant time traveling the country, meeting with various organizations and revolutionaries to build for a founding conference of the organization. However, soon General Baker and many of the in-plant organizers began to feel that the formation of a national organization was premature. At that time, many of the RUMs were in a tactical retreat, and they felt the League needed to resolve its own local issues before it could attempt to form a national organization.

Contradictions continued to intensify between the in-plant organizers led by Baker and the intellectuals led by Watson, Cockrell, Hamlin, and Forman. In December of 1970, criticisms from the organization's central staff, the de facto middle management of the organization, were shut down by Cockrell and Watson. Political critiques transformed into personal antagonisms, and infighting began to break out within the organization. In April 1971, Baker ally Ernie Mkalimoto and his supporters were purged from the organization on claims they were attempting a coup. These contradictions reached a breaking point when Cockrell, Hamlin, and Watson issued an ultimatum to the rest of the Executive Committee calling for a purging and complete

reorganization of the League around strict Marxist criteria. They also stated they would resign unless there was complete unity on this. When they did not receive the support they desired, on June 12, 1971, they resigned from the League to the surprise of most of the organization's membership.

Cockrell, Forman, Hamlin, and Watson shifted their focus to the creation of the Black Workers Congress, which, now, instead of being the national organization of the League, would bar what remained of it from joining. A significant section of League members went with them to the BWC; however, most either remained with the Baker faction or left organizing entirely. On September 5, 1971, the BWC held its national convention in Gary, Indiana, with over 400[5] delegates in attendance. Some of the representatives from the South had already begun RUM groups in Atlanta and Birmingham before the convention. However, many who arrived at the convention were surprised to hear about the split within the League, which was supposed to be the foundation and model of the national organization. Little time at the convention was devoted to the topic of organizing Black workers; instead, significant time was spent on setting up a national newspaper, developing elaborate structures, and other bureaucratic topics. Over the years, the BWC would attempt to apply proletarian ideology to a US context through its writings on Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, and the Black national question. However, the BWC failed to ever attract a mass base or develop serious organizations among the working class, remaining for the most part a group of intellectuals isolated from the masses. The BWC would dissolve in the mid-1970s after a series of splits and purges.

The faction led by General Baker and Chuck Wooten merged with the California-based Communist League. This grouping in Detroit would go semi-underground for the next two years, involving itself in a rigorous process of study, ideological development, and self-criticism. Many of the petit-bourgeois members who had sided with Baker and Wooten were forced to proletarianize. When they re-emerged in 1973, what were the in-plant organizers of the League had entirely remodeled themselves. In contrast to the poor political education of the League, they had become well-studied Marxists, able to recite large sections of texts by Mao verbatim. However, its numbers had been significantly reduced through this process. The Communist League in Detroit would focus on in-plant organizing with some of its members, like Jerome Scott, becoming leaders in the string of wildcat strikes which would rock Detroit in the early to mid-1970s. Ultimately, the Communist League, while emphasizing in-plant organizing, failed to regain the momentum or support that the League had had. The Communist League continues to exist in Detroit to this day; however, it now goes by the name the League of Revolutionaries for a New America, and has fully pivoted to eclecticism, renouncing Marxism and moving away from labor organizing.

This degeneration had been years in the making, as despite their early practical success, the

5 Georgakas & Surkin, *Detroit do I Mind Dying*, 1975, p.159

League and General Baker had been unable to truly put proletarian politics in command, and thus never fully united around a coherent Left line within the organization. Such degenerations and problems were typical of the New Communist Movement which, unlike the Communist movement of the 1910s-1940s, was unable to develop an actual revolutionary vanguard party of the class.

Throughout the 1970s, inspired by the successes of the League and the city's large industrial economy, nearly every single "communist" organization in the country sent its members to Detroit to attempt to engage in workplace organizing. However, for the most part, these organizations failed to understand what made the League of Revolutionary Black Workers successful. Instead of applying the militant tactics of the League, which fiercely opposed both the company and the state union leadership, along with taking bold actions in disregard for strike bans in collective bargaining agreements or legality, these organizations largely took the path of boring from within. They attempted to tactically collaborate with the leadership of the existing unions to slowly garner support leading towards the strategic goal of taking over the union through an internal election. A strategy that has failed revolutionary organizations countless times for more than a century.

Despite its brief existence, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers continues to inspire those committed to building a militant class-conscious labor movement. At its peak, the League stood in stark contrast to the establishment unions of its time. While the state unions function in collaboration with the ruling class, signing no-strike pledges, policing their own members' rebellious acts, and agreeing to abysmal contracts, the League operated differently. Rather than seeking to replace union bureaucrats through elections, the League focused on organizing rank-and-file workers around the necessity of seizing power. They orchestrated strikes, walkouts, and other direct actions, often disregarding no-strike clauses and legal constraints, to challenge both corporate management and union leadership. As possibly the only significant labor center since the 1970s to take this approach, they remain an organization that must be studied and understood by all aspiring revolutionary unionists.

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