



BETWEEN BLACK DETROIT AND THE UAW: RACIAL DISCRIMINATION IN
DETROIT'S AUTOWORKERS UNIONS

Edited and Introduction by Chris Cahoon

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INTRODUCTION

In this anthology, I explore intersections of race and class in America, specifically the ways in which the experiences and conditions of workers are marked by race. I focus on Detroit from the 1930's to present day as a site of both industrial development and racial conflict, where I aim to illustrate the experiences of Black workers in the auto industry as well as the larger shifts in social and political circumstances in Detroit that shaped the experiences of Black workers. I develop this theme by tracking the formations of DRUM and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, two black workers unions created in response to racial discrimination from both the auto companies and the larger, white-led workers union UAW. By focusing on black unions and their relationships to the UAW, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which the UAW does or does not meet the needs of black workers, as well as depict instances of discrimination both in auto factories and within the UAW. Furthermore, I aim to analyze the effectiveness of black unions as either reform movements within the UAW or autonomous groups acting outside of and at times against the UAW.

My initial interest in Detroit came as someone who visited Detroit and did not know much about its history and how it came to be in its current state of economic crisis and racial tension. A guiding factor in my creation of this anthology is both to fill my own gaps in understanding of the historical and contemporary conditions of Detroit and to provide a resource for others who are in some way involved with or interested in the city of Detroit and wish to understand its history.

In my research, I originally aimed to identify and track factors that lead Detroit from the arsenal of democracy in the 1940's to a symbol of urban crisis in present day. Through this historical approach, I wanted to depict the conditions of Black workers through this shift and describe their efforts to change their circumstances. My initial searches into the Detroit auto industry led me to descriptions of the UAW and DRUM, two organizations which played significant roles in the experiences of Black workers. Therefore, I narrowed my focus to DRUM and its relationship to the UAW, as this theme allowed me to examine the experiences and struggles of Black autoworkers in a specific context. To this end, I came up with five areas of focus for my anthology. First, I collected resources that present an overview of Detroit's economic history, marking its industrial growth during the 40's to its decline in the 80's and now recent state of bankruptcy. Second, I introduce the UAW and briefly describe the experiences of Black workers in the Detroit auto industry. The third section responds to the second and presents the core focus of my anthology: it demonstrates instances of racial discrimination from both auto companies and the UAW and depicts the formation and activity of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement. It is in this section that I address specifically the ways in which the UAW does or does not meet the needs of black workers. In the fourth section, I introduce the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and illustrate its attempt to organize black caucuses into a class movement for political power. In the fifth and last section, I present two resources that describe the role of the UAW today and the contemporary conditions of Black autoworkers in Detroit.

In part one, the first resource is an article called "Detroit: The New Motor City" from a site of online academic seminars by Stanford University. In the article, Glenn Counts, Steve Ronson and Kurt Spenser give a history of the automobile industry in Detroit, detailing the

impact of the UAW and proposing hybrid cars as a possible solution to revive the Detroit motor industry. In its history of the “Motor City,” the article describes the growth of motor companies after World War II. It then explains how the demand for American automobiles fell as the Japanese began to make more efficient cars; eventually, Detroit motor companies became international in order to compete and continue to profit, and as a result thousands of Michigan workers lost jobs.

Next is “Detroit in Decline: Auto Industry, Segregation and Politics,” an article by Huffington Post writer Sharon Cohen. In the article, Cohen tracks Detroit’s economic fall, citing the expansion of the auto industry away from powerful unions and the loss of industrial jobs due to Japanese auto imports. Cohen also discusses Detroit politicians’ reluctance to address economic problems and racial strife due to black migration and subsequent white flight.

The final resource in part one is a book review by Karen Miller of Thomas Sugrue’s The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit. In her review, Miller describes Sugrue’s argument that deindustrialization, white flight and urban decline were the results of political and economic decisions. Sugrue argues that the three most significant factors for the persistence of urban poverty in Detroit are the flight of jobs, racial discrimination in the workplace and residential segregation by race.

In part two of the anthology, the first article gives a company history of the UAW. The article describes how the UAW was initially formed in 1935 by the AFL to organize workers in Detroit, and then Walter Philip Reuther took over and grew its members to 300,000 by 1937. Reuther and the UAW organized strikes against General Motors and developed the strategy of “Pattern Bargaining” in which the UAW targeted one of the “Big Three” automakers for a strike and relied on its competitors to create leverage for making a deal.

The second resource is an excerpt from a book called Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW. This academic publication is written by August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, both former professors at Kent State University. The passage I include describes the Ford Motor Company as both an opportunity for jobs and a place of discrimination for Black workers.

Part three of the anthology includes an article called “The Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement” in which labor historian and former autoworker Martin Glaberman provides an analysis on the formation of DRUM. Glaberman describes how DRUM was formed after a wildcat strike at the Hamtramck plant of the Chrysler Corporation in response to speedup, discrimination, and lack of racial representation in leadership positions at the plant. I found this article on libcom.org which is “a resource for all people who wish to fight to improve their lives, their communities and their working conditions.” This site provided multiple articles used in this anthology, all of which contributed significantly to my anthology as they are written in the 60’s by actual DRUM members.

My next resource is an article called “African American auto workers strike for union democracy and better working conditions.” This article is from the Global Nonviolent Action Database, a project of Swarthmore College. The article describes DRUM and its activity of producing a weekly newsletter as well as making demands of the UAW and the Dodge plant. The author, Kate Aronoff, comments that while it remains unclear what policy changes DRUM was able to force by Chrysler, its actions provided a powerful voice to Black workers that would otherwise have been silenced.

The third resource in part three is another article from libcom.org called “DRUM: vanguard of the black revolution,” written in 1969 by Luke Tripp. In the article, Tripp details the activity of DRUM, specifically its initial wildcat strike at the Hamtramck plant, its list of demands to Chrysler, and its protests at both the Chrysler headquarters and the UAW executive board meeting.

The next two resources are also from libcom.org. The first, called “The butcher shop: Hamtramck Hospital,” is an article from a DRUM newsletter depicting the racist practices and negligence of the First Aid center at the plant; the author encourages readers to join DRUM as well as to keep an eye out for “Toms.” The second article, called “The carrot and the stick: December 11, 1968,” is also from a DRUM newsletter. The author describes how the Chrysler Corporation gave a meaningless, symbolic contribution of money to black communities while simultaneously giving a sizable donation to the Detroit Police Department, presumably to bribe them to continue to harass DRUM members. The author also describes the death of a Black worker at the Chrysler plant and writes a letter in response to the plant manager.

In part four, the first resource is an article from libcom.org by Martin Glaberman called “Black Cats, White Cats, Wildcats: Auto workers in Detroit, 1969,” which was published in SPEAK OUT, a socialist periodical in Detroit. In the article, Glaberman describes the efforts of the UAW to prevent wildcat strikes and the consequent formation of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

As the second resource, I include an article from the socialist magazine *Jacobin* called “When the Union’s the Enemy.” In the article, writer Andrew Elrod describes the League of Revolutionary Black Workers as a group formed to organize independent black power within the labor movement for the explicit purpose of a socialist revolution. The article also includes an interview with Cleo Silvers, a former organizer with the League, who describes conflicts between Black workers and the UAW.

The third resource in part four is an article from libcom.org called “The League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the coming of revolution,” which was published in *Radical America* in 1971. In this article, writer Eric Perkins describes the LRBW as a class movement which aims for national change through the political power of Black workers.

In part five, I include an article from the World Socialist Web Site in which writer Tom Eley provides a response to a New York Times article describing the UAW. Eley refutes the notion that the UAW has long been an antagonist of the “Big Three” automakers and provides evidence that the UAW has and continues to work with corporations to prevent strikes and increase company profits.

The second and last article in part five is a New York Times article written in 2008 by Mary Chapman called “Black Workers Hurt By Detroit’s Ills.” In the article, Chapman describes how Black Detroiters were especially hit by the collapse of Detroit’s economy as they held most of the jobs in the auto industry. The article highlights Black-owned car dealerships that are still trying to survive in today’s economic crisis.

The sources in this anthology collectively address issues such as the ways in which the UAW does or does not meet the needs of Black workers and the effectiveness of Black unions in changing racist practices in policies in the UAW and auto factories. Many articles depict racial discrimination first and foremost in the motor companies. As described in multiple sources, the

Hamtramck plant had a majority of Black workers, yet local UAW and plant management, as well as city administration, were all white. Factory owners relegated the black workers to the heavy and dirty low-paying jobs, and tasks performed by two white workers were assigned to one black worker. At the plant, Black workers were not adequately treated for injuries and illnesses. Furthermore, when white soldiers returned from WWII to find their jobs taken by Blacks, many Black workers were forced out of jobs, experienced discrimination and were victims of hate crimes.

The large and powerful UAW did little to support its workers facing racial discrimination. The union became bureaucratic and failed to address the needs of its majority Black workers. The white leadership gave retired workers (majority white) a vote in union elections, which prevented Black workers from electing anyone who might speak for them. In this way, I argue that the UAW did not address the needs of its Black workers and instead employed racist policies similar to those at the plant.

In response to discrimination by both motor companies and the UAW, DRUM was formed during a wildcat strike protesting an increase in production without increase in workers at the Hamtramck plant. A wildcat strike is one that is not authorized by the union; in this way, DRUM was formed by workers acting outside of the UAW. DRUM's stated objective was to destroy racism at Hamtramck plant and local UAW; their method was to expose the truth through weekly newsletters and forge black unity with protests and strikes. To these objectives, I argue that DRUM was effective by acting outside of and at times against the UAW. DRUM newsletters pointed out UAW complicity with Chrysler's abusive, racist practices; DRUM called for Black workers to stop paying dues to UAW; through strikes, DRUM shutdown production of the big three, Ford, Chrysler and General Motors, for periods of time. DRUM effectively forced company management to respond directly to Black workers' demands, rather than working through the white-dominated UAW. While it is unclear what concrete policy changes DRUM achieved, the organization met its stated objectives. Through the newsletters, DRUM gave voice to Black workers who could express their experiences with racism in the plant; with strikes, the organization created solidarity and showed the strength among Black workers.

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Detroit: The New Motor City

Glenn Counts, Steve Ronson, and Kurt Spenser
Poverty & Prejudice: Breaking the Chains of Inner City Poverty (1999)

Detroit, Motown, the Motor City. Michigan and Detroit in particular became the center of the auto industry at the beginning of the twentieth century due to a number of factors. Steel, the Great Lakes shipping industries, and a large and growing workforce all contributed. Perhaps the most striking force though was the unique collection of inventors, dreamers, and designers that made the Detroit area their home. Ransom E. Olds, Henry Ford, the Dodge brothers, David Dunbar Buick, Walter P. Chrysler, and even the French explorer who founded Detroit, Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, all are household names today, not because of any outstanding achievement, although there were many, but because the cars which they produced or which bear their names are a part of the fabric of everyday American life.

The Big 3 auto makers, General Motors, Ford and Chrysler were all formed and headquartered in Detroit by 1924. (Wright, Richard A.) After fledgling beginnings and the national struggle of the Great Depression, the American automotive industry entered its Golden Age with the end of World War II. America was experiencing nuclear, scientific, economic, and automotive hegemony. American Automobiles were luxurious, reliable, powerful, low priced, and beautiful. The World and Nation took notice. The Detroit area economy boomed, attracting masses of labor to fill the assembly line positions in the factories which had been converted after the war to produce spark plugs, transmissions and trucks as opposed to tanks and B-24 bombers. In 1952, Charles Wilson, Secretary of Defense to Eisenhower and former president of GM, told a House Committee, quite honestly, that what was good for General Motors, was good for the Country. What was good for GM was then certainly good for Detroit. The economy of the communities surrounding Detroit were revolving around the boom of the assembly and parts plants of the Big 3, and GM in particular, which soon grew to become the world's largest corporation.

The first sign of any trouble came in 1956, when the Big 3 saw a minor slump in their sales, and the doubling of import sales. The change in the market was due to the growing popularity of European compact cars. Detroit did not panic. They began working on scaled down models of their successful lines, and some new compact models. The push toward the compact market was not very strong though as the era shunned anything foreign. Those that drove imports were dismissed as oddballs, flakes, college professors and leftists. In reality though, they were trendsetters, and the market shift was a sign of things to come.

During the civil rights movement, the blue collar assembly line economy and inner city social problems proved to be a dangerous mixture. The 1960's showed the country that Detroit had its share of problems, and in the 1970's, the outside world crashed in on Detroit. The Middle East put the fear of gas shortages into America. Washington blamed Detroit for the problems of air pollution, safety, and fuel economy. It was a public relations nightmare. After the second oil crisis in 1979, the large rapid rise in the cost of gasoline caused America's love affair with the automobile to go sour.

Buyers now wanted smaller more efficient cars, and the Japanese had the best. Detroit had been devoting most of its attention to political and judicial battles. The Big 3 were busy pleasing politicians by meeting air pollution and safety standards through downsizing its oversized designs. These cars were not attractive to the consumer. What had made American cars so great in the 1950's and 60's was now their greatest hindrance. Their cars simply were not attractive consumer products. The Japanese had done an incredible job in this area.

Detroit was dispirited and its economy was faltering. In the early 1980's Chrysler was sliding towards financial disaster. GM poured 50\$ million into the development of a new rotary engine, but couldn't get it to work, while a small Japanese firm, Mazda did. Ford was losing money so fast that there was talk of not only pulling out of Detroit, but North America all together. The Japanese were selling about one of every four cars sold in the United States.

Detroit's communities sensing the impending danger of all of this scrambled for an answer, a scapegoat. Buy American bumper stickers soon became the hottest selling item in Detroit Posters which read "Pearl Harbor II" showed pictures of Japanese bombers dropping cars on the North American continent. Overpasses were graffitied with slogans like, "friends don't let friends drive imports" and "imports are for assholes". The distrust of the Japanese was back in Detroit.

As plants began to lay off workers, the animosity grew, and in 1982 drew national attention when two laid off auto assembly line workers chased down and beat to death a Chinese American, Vincent Chin outside a bar. Chin who was getting married later in the week happened to be an assembly line worker himself. His attackers, father and son. The tragedy personalized the out of control downward spiral which Detroit was caught in. The Auto industry which had seemingly brought so much to the Detroit area was now bringing poverty, racism and even death.

The people in Detroit however wanted to believe in the Big 3 and the American dream that they were raised on: If you worked hard and your company prospered, then you would also prosper. What was the answer? The people of Detroit thought that it was to work harder and buy more American cars so that the company wouldn't lay more workers off. This, however was not the solution. It wasn't the solution because the assembly line workers didn't actually understand fully the problem. The Big 3 seemed content to let everyone think that the Japanese were the root of all evil, when in reality, it wasn't the Japanese that were causing the layoffs in Detroit.

While the initial market shift caused the Big 3 to initially lose money, they actually recovered quite quickly and turned things around financially despite the horrible scene which persisted in Michigan. How could this be? The Big 3 had adapted to the growing global market by becoming more and more global themselves. The total internationalization of the auto industry, which is what the Buy American sentiment was actually trying to resist, had already happened. By the 1980's, what was an American car and what wasn't was unclear. Engines and transmissions were built in other countries, and assembled in the United States with American nameplates. Foreign nameplates were also rolling off assembly lines in the U.S. by this point. Was a Japanese car put together by American workers in America really a "foreign" car? These issues were understood by America's businessmen, but not the assembly line worker. What the blue collar majority knew was that they were working hard, their companies were once again prospering, but they were losing their jobs.

General Motors and the factories located just northwest of Detroit were the most tragic example of this. Flint was the birthplace of GM, the World's largest corporation. Until the late 70's the two had grown and prospered together. But, in the mid 1980's GM began laying off thousands and closing plants which had been the city's lifeline for over fifty years. It was finally announced that eleven GM plants were to be closed and moved to Mexico in order to cut costs. But, since 1983, GM's car sales had risen, and the company had posted record profits reaching 19\$ billion, yet GM laid off over 50,000 people in Flint alone by 1989.

It clearly wasn't the Japanese that the Detroit auto workers had to worry about, it was their "own" profit seeking corporations that were putting them out on the curb. The scenes in Flint and other areas were and still are dumbfounding. In Flint over 28,000 had lost their homes and left town by 1989. For those that remained, they saw entire neighborhoods boarded up, city blocks deserted, and rat population which outnumbered humans two to one due to the fact that the city could not afford to pick up trash more than once or twice a month. Scenes seemed to appear out of the 1930's. Upwards of 20,000 people standing in one line to collect government surplus butter and cheese, Record unemployment rates reaching 25%, record suicide and murder rates, increases in spousal abuse, alcoholism, a crime rate higher than Miami, and general social decay. Flint is no longer a picturesque Midwestern town, it is a battle zone.

This is the backdrop on which present day Detroit sits, and unfortunately or fortunately another drastic change is upon the auto industry. An impending energy crisis is on its way. Even the most generous estimates give less than fifteen years before oil prices skyrocket. Much like the oil crises of the 70's this new oil shortage will necessitate change. Detroit's communities do have an opportunity to take advantage of this.

The Unions through community urging must become increasingly international as the global corporations expand even further into smaller countries. And second, the Detroit automotive communities must invite the next generation of vehicles to be manufactured in Detroit.

Detroit Decline Causes Include Auto Industry Collapse, Segregation And Politics

By SHARON COHEN (2013)

Blue-collar workers poured into the cavernous auto plants of Detroit for generations, confident that a sturdy back and strong work ethic would bring them a house, a car and economic security. It was a place where the American dream came true.

It came true in cities across the industrial heartland, from Chicago's meatpacking plants to the fire-belching steel mills of Cleveland and Pittsburgh. It came true for decades, as manufacturing brought prosperity to big cities in states around the Great Lakes and those who called them home. Detroit was the affluent capital, a city with its own emblematic musical sound and a storied union movement that drew Democratic presidential candidates to Cadillac Square every four years to kick off campaigns at Labor Day rallies.

The good times would not last forever. As the nation's economy began to shift from the business of making things, that line of work met the force of foreign competition. Good-paying assembly line jobs dried up as factories that made the cars and supplied the steel closed their doors. The survivors of the decline, especially whites, fled the cities to pursue new dreams in the suburbs.

The "Arsenal of Democracy" that supplied the Allied victory of World War II and evolved into the "Motor City" fell into a six-decade downward spiral of job losses, shrinking population and a plummeting tax base. Detroit's singular reliance on an auto industry that stumbled badly and its long history of racial strife proved a disastrous combination, and ultimately too much to overcome.

"Detroit is an extreme case of problems that have afflicted every major old industrial city in the U.S.," said Thomas Sugrue, author of "The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit" and a history professor at the University of Pennsylvania. "It's been 60-plus years of steady disinvestment, depopulation and an intensive hostility between the city, the suburbs and the rest of the state."

All of the nation's industrial cities fell, but only Detroit hit bottom. Staggering under as much as \$20 billion in unpaid bills, Detroit surrendered Thursday, filing the single largest municipal bankruptcy in American history.

"What happened in Detroit is not particularly distinct," said Kevin Boyle, a history professor at Northwestern University who has written extensively about his hometown. "Most Midwest cities had white flight and segregation. But Detroit had it more intensely. Most cities had deindustrialization. Detroit had it more intensely."

Detroit's first wave of prosperity came after World War I and lasted into the early 1920s, driven by the rise of the auto industry. "It was the Silicon Valley of America," Boyle said. "It was home to the most innovative, cutting-edge dominant industry in the world. The money there at that point was just staggering."

More affluence followed in the late 1940s and early 1950s as the auto industry was booming. Tens of thousands of blacks migrated from the South seeking jobs on the assembly line and a foothold in the middle class. In 1950, Detroit's population peaked as a metropolis of more than 1.8 million, making it the nation's fifth-largest city. The transformation was dramatic. "You've got a vast city of working people who no longer have insecure lives, people with high school and less than high school degrees who can earn enough to buy a house, a car, a boat, and sent their kids to Wayne State University," Boyle said.

But by that time, Detroit's decline had already begun.

The auto industry had started to expand beyond the city and was building plants and putting offices in suburban and rural areas, and eventually sought refuge from the city's powerful unions in the nation's Sunbelt states and even overseas. Between 1947 and 1963, Detroit lost 140,000 manufacturing jobs, said Sugrue, the Pennsylvania professor.

A decade later, as Japanese auto imports started gobbling more of the U.S. market, the hemorrhaging of jobs continued. Membership in the United Auto Workers topped out at 1.5 million in 1978 and stands today at about 400,000, said Mike Smith, the union's archivist at Wayne State University's Walter Reuther Library.

"In a way, it's not unlike a small town that has a textile factory for 50 years, then all of a sudden it closes up and the whole town is decimated," Smith said. It wasn't an uncommon plight: The cities that rose alongside Detroit came to be known as the Rust Belt.

Like Detroit, Pittsburgh was a community defined by its dependence on a single industry. But as steelmaking crumbled under pressure from foreign imports and the decline of the U.S. auto industry, the city's population dropped by more than 40 percent between 1970 and 2006, according to a 2013 report from the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland.

But during those years, Pittsburgh also forged a new identity around health care and technology. It retrained former steelworkers, invested heavily in higher education and launched a controversial campaign to redevelop more than 1,000 acres of industrial brownfields, replacing decaying lots with luxury homes, office and retail buildings, and 27 miles of riverfront parks. Detroit's unraveling can't be blamed solely on the city's reliance on one industry that itself buckled. Some point to the city's political leadership and its reluctance over the years to make tough decisions.

"I think it (the fiscal disaster) was inevitable because the politicians in Detroit were always knocking the can forward, not confronting the issues, buying off public employees by increasing their pensions," said Daniel Okrent, a Detroit native who wrote a Time magazine cover story on the city in 2009. "They were always kind of confronting the impending crisis by trying to make it the next guy's crisis."

Racial strife also infected the city. Sugrue, the Pennsylvania professor, said some of the tensions surfaced long before the city's infamous 1967 riots. Two decades earlier, between 1945 and 1965, he said, there were more than 200 violent racial incidents of whites attacking blacks in Detroit and almost all stemmed from the first or second black families moving into an all-white neighborhood.

The migration of blacks into Detroit, which helped power its economic rise, was followed by an exodus of white residents for the suburbs. In the last decade alone – from 2000 to 2010 –

Detroit lost about a quarter-million residents. The city's current population of roughly 700,000 is about 83 percent black.

"Unlike cities such as Chicago or Philadelphia, where segregation produced disinvestment in certain neighborhoods, the nature of segregation in Detroit meant that the entire city suffered disinvestment," Douglas Massey, a sociology and public affairs professor at Princeton, said in an email.

What's left is a Detroit defined by a barren landscape of deserted neighborhoods and abandoned buildings that overwhelms the very recent rebound in parts of downtown. The consequences of that population loss and segregation extend beyond the declining property values and erosion of the city's tax base. The result is an isolated city.

"The racial divisions between the city and the suburbs until very recently remained very hard and fast, creating an us vs. them mentality," Sugrue said. "There's very little political will ... by suburbanites and other parts of the state to provide financial support." Indeed, it was the state's Republican governor, Rick Snyder, who ultimately pushed control of the overwhelmingly Democratic city's decrepit finances into the hands of an emergency manager and signed off from the state capital in Lansing to his recommendation that Detroit file for bankruptcy. There appears to be little appetite there for a bailout.

"Cities are less powerful in the federal government and state capitals than they were 40 years ago," Sugrue said.

For those directly impacted by the collapse, watching the deterioration of Detroit in recent years has been agonizing.

"The neighborhood is so different – the street lights go off, there's more violence and gunfire, the elementary school I went to is closed and boarded up," said Sareta Cheatham, a filmmaker and screenwriter who has lived in Detroit all her 42 years. "I remember as a child winning the 'beautiful block' awards . just to see the decay is something that bothers me." Cheatham said her 92-year-old neighbor was robbed last year and thieves have tried to break into her home and garage. "My heart won't let me leave," she said, later adding, "One more attack and I'm out."

As for the bankruptcy filing, Cheatham said that has been "gutwrenching" and leaves her wondering "Is it going to get worse? Can it get any worse?"

Or will it signal the beginning of Detroit's turnaround and comeback?

Boyle, the history professor, has reservations about what is actually possible in a place that's fallen so far.

"I don't think it'll ever come back to the city it once was," he said. "The bankruptcy is not in itself a solution. It will presumably clear the debt. Something will have to happen for it not to repeat this pattern five or 10 years from now. Hopefully this will make life livable in this city. I think it's doable. But I'm not sure there's the will to do it."

The Structure of Urban Crisis

Reviewed by Karen Miller (1997)

Thomas Sugrue's well-researched and incisive portrait of postwar Detroit offers readers important insights into debates about the contemporary urban crisis and its relationship to race and post-industrial decline.[1] Sugrue implores historians and social scientists to rethink their assumptions about the "origins" of the urban crisis. He persuasively argues that those phenomena usually associated with deteriorating cities--particularly de-industrialization and white flight--were not "responses" to the urban rebellions and social discord of the 1960s. Rather, they were the structural circumstances which "created" anger and frustration among African American residents and ultimately inspired the red hot summers of the 1960s. De-industrialization and white flight, Sugrue demonstrates, changed the contours of Detroit well before 1967. In fact, these processes began in full force in the 1940s, and by the 1950s they had already affected the city's geography and reshaped residents' understandings of race and urban politics.

Sugrue is not the first historian to suggest that the structural roots of urban poverty and inequality precede 1960. However, his work goes beyond this relatively bland assertion. He demonstrates that plant closings, automation, chronic waves of unemployment, and the movement of industry to suburban, rural and other hard-to-unionize areas in the late 1940s and 1950s detrimentally effected the economies of urban centers in the North. Furthermore, he shows that neighborhood based struggles against residential integration exploded in these decades, arguing that in order to understand national politics in this era, historians need to spend more time focusing on local struggles. "Housing," Sugrue explains, "became a major arena for organized political activity in the 1940s, where Detroiters, black and white, fought a battle that would define Detroit politics for decades to follow" (55). Sugrue thus attacks the notion implicit in social scientists' accounts of urban decline that race relations in Northern cities were relatively harmonious before the black power movements and urban rebellions of the 1960s, arguing that explosions of racial antagonism were central to Detroit's culture as early as the Second World War.

Sugrue separates his book into three sections: "Arsenal," "Rust," and "Fire." He uses the first section to lay out the economic, racial, and physical geography of the city in the 1940s and to expose its relationship to electoral politics, arguing that white Detroiters lost confidence in liberalism and the New Deal state as a result of their experiences "defending" their neighborhoods against black homebuyers. While Detroit had far more single family houses than any other large city, and while it was comparatively spread out, overcrowding and a rapidly expanding population put enormous pressure on Detroit's housing stock by the beginning of the Second World War. No areas were more crowded than black neighborhoods, whose boundaries were far better defined--and enforced--than any other part of the city. This strain forced black residents to push on the geographic constraints imposed on them by greedy landlords and a racist culture.

Black Detroiters devised numerous strategies to manage their community's expansion. Sugrue argues that white Detroiters experienced these tactics as threats to their own economic and social stability. Any suggestion of imminent integration, he suggests, left white homeowners desperate, afraid that their single most important investment--their house--would become

worthless. The redlining practices of the Federal Housing Authority reinforced and reflected white homeowner's anxieties, for the FHA refused to insure mortgage loans to improve or purchase houses in black and integrated areas.

Sugrue is quick to point out, however, that FHA redlining practices cannot fully explain the defensive hysteria, the white violence against black residents, or the lightning-paced abandonment of block-busted areas. These trends can only be understood as part of an emerging political identity based on white homeownership and forged in opposition to liberal politicians and the New Deal state. White homeowners, he suggests, understood the defense of their neighborhoods as a defense of their rights as citizens and their freedom as individuals to make choices about their lives. Thus, white homeowners developed a political language to define themselves as a political interest group whose struggles were antithetical to the rights of African Americans. Sugrue connects these trends to electoral politics, demonstrating that conservative politicians swept into the city's administration by deploying caricatures of racial anarchy, miscegenation, and integration as the decisive outcome of liberal policies. Sugrue further argues that this was the pre-history to Michigan voters' overwhelming support for George Wallace's presidential campaign in 1968 and 1972, and to the emergence of Reagan Democrats in the 1980s.

In the second section of his book, which he calls "Rust," Sugrue chronicles the disparity between the experiences of Detroit residents and popular images of postwar affluence and harmony, paying particularly close attention to the disproportionate impact of economic restructuring on African Americans. Labor shortages combined with black activists' work on a local and national level forced employers to hire African Americans into previously segregated sections of factories during the Second World War. However, discrimination from the city's increasingly conservative unions meant that black workers had many fewer opportunities to achieve upward mobility than their white ethnic counterparts, even when Detroit's industrial economy was healthy. Thus, while the integration of factories and neighborhoods was not particularly numerically significant--the city remained largely segregated, and black workers continued to be shut out of the majority of well-paying jobs--Sugrue demonstrates that integration had an enormous impact on the attitudes of black and white residents and on their relationships with each other and the city. Black Detroiters, bolstered by civil rights successes and by the anti-fascist rhetoric of the war, successfully organized activist groups and displayed a new sense of entitlement to equality on the streets. White Detroiters took a defensive posture towards these moves by black residents, intent on holding on to whatever privileges they already enjoyed and seeing any gains made by African Americans as a threat to their own well-being.

Sugrue's integration of economic and social history helps us better understand the decisions of Detroit residents in the 1940s and 1950s. In fact, his attention to the material conditions within which Detroiters made choices about housing, politics, and race, sheds new light on the complicated relationship between white and black residents. In his third section, "Fire," he closely examines those white neighborhoods whose residents actively participated in Neighborhood Improvement Associations and which were the sites of violent clashes with black "pioneers." He concludes that the three most "defended neighborhoods"--those neighborhoods which mobilized the "fiercest resistance" to integration--shared certain demographic similarities. These three neighborhoods were all "bastions of single family homeownership" with

"predominantly blue-collar populations" and "lower rates of female labor force participation than the city as a whole." They shared a "quasi-suburban atmosphere," were all "within a few miles of large auto plants" and "all but one was ethnically heterogeneous, with sizable Roman Catholic populations" (235-7). Furthermore, it was this segment of the white working class which was most actively defending its exclusive domain over the ever shrinking pool of skilled and semi-skilled work in the city's factories.

This demographic portrait of white resistance is central to Sugrue's argument about the political shape of white homeownership for it supports his claim that the most virulent defenders of white neighborhoods were the relatively stable segments of Detroit's working class population. These residents, he explains, were on the "front lines" of grassroots struggles against integration. White working class homeowners did not have the same recourse to mobility as their middle class and less economically stable counterparts; they could neither afford to buy a new house--especially if the value of their current property were diminishing--nor could they simply pick up and abandon their homes.

Sugrue thus concludes that white Detroit residents were increasingly disenchanted by the postwar liberal coalition because of their experiences and frustrations in their own neighborhoods. He argues that it is only after we understand the politics of homeownership in the 1940s and 1950s that we can understand why stable, white, blue collar workers came to equate liberalism and the New Deal state with blind allegiance to the rights of African Americans and with indifference to the plight of white workers. On the front lines of battles against integration, they saw themselves as the foot soldiers in a struggle for individual rights and for freedom from tyrannical and coercive liberal government.

Sugrue frequently reminds his reader that deindustrialization, white flight and urban decline were neither "inevitable," nor "immutable." Rather, they were products of "political and economic decisions, of choices made and not made by various institutions, groups, and individuals" (11). Thus, part of the reason that Sugrue attempts to integrate structural analysis with social history is because he is trying to understand the relationship between the conditions which shape experiences and human agency. However, his interest in structure often comes at the expense of a more intimate understanding of how people experienced the statistical realities that he highlights and can make his portrait seem like it was the only possible avenue. For example, in the last section of his book, he outlines black residential mobility in the 1940s and 1950s, offering an extraordinarily compelling statistical look at white neighborhood defenders. While each of these three chapters is rich in detail and attentive to the complexity of Detroit's geography, they all offer a relatively anonymous portrait of the city and of political action. Thus, instead of animating the concerns of individuals Sugrue discusses the actions and anxieties of Detroit residents in the aggregate. Too often, the historical agents in his book are "African American leaders," "open housing advocates," "white church groups," "civil rights organizations," members of the "Catholic Interracial Council," etc. Thus, relatively face-less groups seem to be making decisions and holding opinions.

This anonymity also means that the connections Sugrue makes between residents' experiences in their neighborhoods and their workplaces are based on statistical observations, since he does not follow any individuals from home to work. This makes it difficult to understand how white and black Detroiters understood the complicated connections between

their work experiences and their experiences as urban residents. Furthermore, as other historians have noted, the work cultures in each factory were quite distinct, with different policies and practices about race and integration. But, because Sugrue talks about work experiences in the aggregate, he misses how different work cultures may have cultivated different relationships to integration at home.

The categories that Sugrue develops and uses, and the groups that he discusses, are extremely useful for understanding the city and for making sense of urban politics and race relations. In fact, as I have suggested, Sugrue's insights are fresh, innovative and invaluable. However, it is hard to get a feel for grassroots politicization through the brief anecdotes that he offers which seem secondary to his structural observations. While Sugrue was clearly constrained by his sources, he could have spent more time animating the sources that he did find and building on these observations. While he does explain that "hundreds" of white residents wrote angry letters to politicians about integration, and cites some of these communications, he seems to use these sources only to support his larger observations, rather than finding new paradigms or ideas from the letters themselves. Furthermore, while he does use oral history collections housed in the Labor Archives at Wayne State University, he does not seem to have conducted his own interviews, and while it may have been difficult to find white "defenders" to talk about their experiences, he may have been able to find some contemporaries to discuss their impressions of the impact of these struggles on city politics. (It is difficult to be sure about this, since Princeton University Press did not include a bibliography).

Ultimately, the strengths of Sugrue's book far outweigh its weaknesses. His meticulous structural analysis of Detroit's transformation from a wartime boomtown to a city struggling with postwar recession combined with his detailed account of white homeowners' often violent efforts to maintain control over the racial composition of their neighborhoods makes this an invaluable book for scholars interested in the twentieth century city.

UAW (International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America) History

International Directory of Company Histories (2005)

There were occasional attempts to form unions in the auto industry but they failed, solidifying Detroit's reputation as the "graveyard of organizers." The American Federation of Labor (AFL) tried twice during the 1920s to unionize autoworkers along craft lines rather than as a industrial union. The auto industry thrived in the late 1920s, but after the 1929 stock crash ushered in the Great Depression of the 1930s, demand for new cars plummeted leading to mass layoffs and creating fertile ground for labor unrest. A number of strikes broke out in Detroit in 1933, achieving little, but in June of that year the new Roosevelt administration passed the National Recovery Act, which included a provision that guaranteed workers the right to organize and bargain collectively, leading to increased efforts to organize autoworkers. The AFL continued to take a craft union approach to the auto industry, although unskilled production workers clearly had no trade. The AFL began signing up workers but it was not until August 1935 that it formed the United Automobile Workers union under its auspices. The organization was poorly led and ineffective, but that would change with the rising influence of one of its members, Walter Phillip Reuther, who would build and lead the UAW for decades and rise to the highest ranks in the labor movement.

Reuther was born in Wheeling, West Virginia, in 1906, the son of a German-born brewery-wagon driver who was a staunch trade unionist and Socialist. A high school dropout, Reuther, along with his brothers Roy and Victor, moved to Detroit in 1927, took a job at the Ford plant and became a supervising die maker. During the early 1930s, he became more of an activist, joining the Auto Workers Union, formed years earlier by the AFL and taken over by Communists in 1925 as part of their effort to organize Detroit. Reuther was laid off at Ford--in his mind, at least, because of his union activities--then in 1933 traveled to the Soviet Union, where he and Victor worked in the Gorki auto works, which needed workers experienced with the Ford equipment it had acquired. Reuther returned to the United States at a pivotal time in the labor movement: in 1935 Congress passed the Wagner Act which stated that if a majority of employees at a company voted to be represented by a union, then it became the bargaining agent for all. Although it would be another two years before the United States Supreme Court confirmed the Wagner Acts' constitutionality, labor organizers were given a shot in the arm. Later in 1935, Reuther attended the AFL convention in Atlantic City, where the organization remained conflicted over the industrial union issue. Reuther returned to New York, and despite having no job he procured a union card and in early 1936 became a member of small UAW Local 86, soon becoming its president. In April, he was a delegate at the UAW convention, where not only would the organization elect its first president, it would essentially declare its independence from

the AFL. Reuther quickly established himself in the union and was elected to the general executive board.

As the president of the amalgamated Local 174, covering all of Detroit's west side, Reuther, aided by his brothers, began launching strikes against parts factories and assembly plants. Although he was not a major factor in the 1937 sit-down strike at Flint, Michigan, resulting in General Motors recognizing the UAW, his brothers were involved, and the Reuther name benefited from the victory and solidified his reputation. Of more importance to the building of his image was the "Battle of the Overpass" that took place on May 26, 1937. In front of the Ford River Rouge plant, Reuther and other UAW organizers, who had permits to distribute leaflets, were surrounded and severely beaten by a group of 40 Ford hirelings. A Detroit News photographer won a Pulitzer Prize for the pictures he took of the encounter, and the image of the bloodied Reuther only served to elevate his status. Although the UAW failed to organize Ford on this attempt, with the help of the surrounding controversy it succeeded in swelling its membership ranks to about 300,000 by the end of 1937.

However, even as the UAW was taking on the auto industry, it had to contend with internal conflict over who was going to control the union. In 1938, an uneasy coalition fell apart, resulting in a split, with UAW president Homer Martin a year later taking a splinter group into the AFL, leaving the rest of the union under the auspices of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). R.J. Thomas was installed as president, and he quickly appointed Reuther director of the General Motors Department, essentially a paper organization at the time.

Reuther took on GM at a weak point, concentrating on its tool and die makers, building on the successful strikes of more militant shops to build a walkout against all of GM's tool and die makers. Unable to retool for 1940 models, the company had no choice but to recognize the UAW as the bargaining agent for GM's tool and die makers, the first in a series of dominoes that were to fall. Next, GM production workers were brought into the fold, leading to other industry victories, with Ford finally capitulating in 1941. It was also during this period that the UAW began organizing aircraft workers, competing against the AFL's machinist union. Later, in the 1950s, the Farm Equipment Workers union would be brought into the fold, resulting in the present-day combination and the union's official name: The International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America.

At the same time that he was becoming the automakers chief antagonist, Reuther was solidifying his power in the UAW. Finally, in 1946, he defeated Thomas in a tight election, then over the course of the next year gained control of the other national offices. He purged the organization of all opposition and entrenched himself in power, no doubt making enemies along the way. In April 1948, he survived an assassination attempt, suffering a shotgun wound that crippled his right arm. The crime was never solved.

Despite his sympathy with socialism, Reuther quit the Socialist Party in 1939, then in the 1940s became a leading member of the anti-Communist Left, purging Communists from the ranks of the UAW as well as the CIO. He supported Roosevelt's New Deal legislation, but it was not until Harry Truman's victory in 1948 that he finally embraced the Democratic party as labor's only viable champion in government. He and the UAW became a force in Democratic politics, leading to the union's pivotal role in electing John F. Kennedy to the presidency in 1960s and

influencing civil rights and welfare legislation during Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" initiative.

Pre-eminent among his abilities as a labor leader was Reuther's keen aptitude for collective bargaining. He developed the concept of "Pattern Bargaining," targeting one of the "Big Three" automakers for a strike and relying on the zeal of its competitors to take advantage of the situation to drive the company to the bargaining table. Once a deal was struck, it established a pattern and the other automakers fell in line. As a result, the UAW won a string of significant victories, resulting in higher wages and improved benefits. In 1948, a settlement with GM established the concept of an annual wage increase tied to a cost-of-living adjustment. A deal with Chrysler in 1950 brought with it employer-funded pensions, and in that same year medical insurance was granted by GM.

In addition to his role at the UAW, Reuther became president of the CIO in 1952 and was instrumental in finding common ground with the AFL, leading to the 1955 merger that resulted in the AFL-CIO. But the more progressive Reuther and conservative AFL-CIO president George Meany would eventually fall out during the 1960s. Reuther became disenchanted with the war in Vietnam, while Meany maintained loyal to the administration. Moreover, Reuther believed the labor movement was failing to stay current and not connecting with new reform moments, such as peace, minority rights, and the environment. The rupture between the two men culminated in 1968 when the UAW left the AFL-CIO, but no other unions followed its lead. The UAW would not return to the AFL-CIO until 1981.

Black Detroit and the Automobile Industry

August Meier and Elliott Rudwick (2007)

Detroit presents in microcosm an unusually vivid and illuminating case study of the evolving relationships between blacks and the new industrial unions during the Great Depression and World War II. It possessed in the Ford Motor Company one of the largest and least discriminatory employers of black labor in America, and in the United Automobile Workers (UAW) one of the most racially egalitarian leaderships among the CIO unions. The city also had a substantial and articulate black middle class, and its Urban League and NAACP affiliates were among the most influential local black advancement organizations in the country.

Moreover as a major center of war industry, Detroit received considerable attention from the FEPC and the war manpower agencies. Accordingly, developments in the Motor City during the UAW's formative years epitomized the complex interplay among all these elements—management practices, black and white workers' attitudes, the racial policies of the new industrial unions, the actions of wartime federal bureaucracies, and the gradual shift in opinion among black elites—that ultimately led to a close working alliance between blacks and the CIO.

1

I'm goin' to Detroit, get' myself a good job,
Tried to stay around here with the starvation mob.

I'm goin' to get me a job, up there in Mr. Ford's place,
Stop these eatless days from starin' me in the face.

*Blues song of the 1920's*²

In 1934, with the depression crisis beginning to make economic problems a salient concern for the NAACP, and with a collective bargaining agreement in the auto industry apparently imminent, the Association's Secretary, Walter White, noted that the black worker had found unusual opportunities in the Detroit factories, where "he has encountered many forms of discrimination . . . yet . . . has attained skilled and better-paid jobs to a greater degree" than anywhere else.³ Essentially this unusual position of black labor was due to the Ford Motor Company, which in its Detroit area plants employed about one-half of the blacks in the entire auto industry,⁴ and which enjoyed the virtually unanimous admiration of the city's black community.

It was during the labor shortage of World War I and the resulting migration from the South to northern industrial centers like Detroit that Negroes had first gained a foothold in auto manufacturing. Several firms turned to this untapped reservoir, and Packard, which in May 1917 had 1100 blacks on its payroll, was actually the first significant employer of Negroes in the industry. A high

company official explained, "We have found in the Packard plant that the Negro . . . is a good worker, considerably better than the average European immigrant."⁵ Dodge was another leading manufacturer which began to hire a substantial number of blacks at that time, working closely with the Detroit Urban League in the recruitment and supervision of its black labor force.⁶ But by 1919 Ford, rapidly expanding its recruitment among the migrants,* was emerging as the city's leading employer of blacks, the number in the company's work force rising from a mere 50 in January 1916 to 2,500 four years later (out of a total of 57,000). As Ford enlarged its operations in the 1920's and developed the gigantic River Rouge plant, its workers included more and more blacks—5,000 by 1923 (out of a total Detroit area work force of 110,000) and 10,000 by

1926. No other company came near that figure; at that time Dodge Brothers, the second highest, employed only 850. In the latter part of the decade, between ten and twelve thousand blacks worked among the 100,000 employees at the Rouge, while even during the wide fluctuations in employment that accompanied the depression of the 1930's blacks held their own in this vast plant where they were concentrated. (Thus in 1937 they numbered 9,825, nearly 12 percent of all workers there.)⁷

Ford was not entirely unique; elsewhere at certain small companies blacks formed an even higher proportion of the work force (about 25 percent at Bohn Aluminum and 30 percent at Midland Steel, a maker of steel body frames for Chrysler and Ford), and at Briggs, a body manufacturing company that was the fourth largest employer of blacks in the industry, the approximately 1300 Negroes constituted nearly 10 percent of the work force. Yet in terms of sheer numbers Ford was without peer. Between 1937 and 1941 the company, averaging 11,000 Negroes, employed perhaps two-

thirds of the blacks working in the city's automobile factories—over five times as many as any other car manufacturer in Detroit. Chrysler, which had absorbed the Dodge Company, ranked second with about two thousand. At General Motors, which in absolute numbers rivaled, and state-wide even exceeded, Chrysler in its total employment of blacks, the 2800 Negro employees in 1941 formed a minuscule 3 percent of its Michigan work force, and most of these were actually employed in the outlying cities of Pontiac, Saginaw, and Flint, rather than in Detroit itself.⁸

These differences among the manufacturers indicated a highly uneven distribution of blacks within the industry which, when analyzed, reveal discriminatory practices even among companies most inclined to hire them. Although the proportion of blacks in the industry nationwide stabilized at around 4 percent, few were to be found outside of Michigan.⁹ Even Ford virtually refused to utilize blacks except as menials at its plants outside of metropolitan Detroit,¹⁰ and in the Motor City, as noted earlier, confined them almost entirely to the massive River Rouge complex. Similarly at Chrysler, blacks worked almost entirely in the Dodge Division, especially at Dodge Main in Hamtramck, while at General Motors the small concentrations of blacks in production were to be found at Buick in Flint, at Chevrolet Grey Iron foundry in Saginaw, at Pontiac, and at Chevrolet Forge Spring and Bumper in Detroit.¹¹

The Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement

Martin Glaberman (2010)

The first major stage has ended for a new form of black organisation based on black industrial workers. The organisation is the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and is made up of black workers at the Hamtramck Assembly plant, formerly Dodge Main, of the Chrysler Corporation. Hamtramck is an industrial suburb completely within the city limits of Detroit. Both the town and the plant were for many years overwhelmingly Polish. Now the plant is 70 per cent black but the union local (UAW Local 3), the plant management and lower supervision, and the Hamtramck city administration is essentially Polish.

DRUM was formed in May 1968 during the course of a wildcat strike that protested against an increase in production without an increase in man-power. Most of the plant porkchoppers were off in Atlantic City at a union convention and the plant was shut down by a joint effort of older Polish women from the Trim Shop and young black workers. Since that time, DRUM has called and led four additional wildcat strikes, including one in July in which 3000 black workers shut the plant down for two and a half days, preventing the production of 3000 cars.

DRUM demands, in addition to the specific issues of speedup, discrimination, etc., include black control of the local union and black control of Management, from the lowest to the highest echelons. They have succeeded in disrupting the main Chrysler office and administration centre and they have held a sit-in in Solidarity House, national headquarters of the Walter Reuther's UAW. Although racism exists throughout the plant, in the management, the union, and rank-and-file workers, there has been significant white participation in all of the wildcats associated with DRUM. DRUM publishes a weekly newsletter that is distributed throughout the plant. There have been signs that the path being broken at Dodge is being followed with the formation of similar organisations at Ford and at Chrysler. At Chrysler, a group of young white workers have formed CRU – Chrysler Revolutionary Union.

Having established itself with direct rank-and-file activity, DRUM decided to take advantage of an accidental vacancy on the local union executive board to run a candidate for that office (trustee). DRUM's candidate, Ron March, made it clear that he was not following the usual course of union caucuses in attempting to get a share of the power. There was no pretence that a revolutionary black trustee would effect any change in the union. The election, in September, was conducted under conditions of tremendous harassment of black people generally and DRUM people in particular by both the union officials and the police and city administration of Hamtramck. Black workers were beaten, electioneering groupings were broken up, bars around the plant were invaded and parking tickets were liberally distributed to all cars of DRUM supporters. They were, in addition, invasions of the union hall by the pigs and the clubbing and

macing of union members without any criticism from the white and uncle tom local union leadership.

March won the largest vote in the election but had to compete in a run off against a white candidate who had the backing of the union machine. In early October, March was beaten in the final election. In part this was a consequence of the built-in conservatism of the union election machinery. Reuther has for a number of years now added retired workers to the union electorate so that local union executive boards no longer reflect the actual workers in a plant. As a result, retired Polish workers could be brought to the polls to vote against the young black workers who were bearing the brunt of the growing exploitation.

Discussion with young black workers at Dodge indicated that most people are sure that March also got a bad count. In any case, the election sewed to strengthen DRUM. The campaign was used to put forward DRUM proposals throughout the local union. In addition, the basic character of DRUM as a day-to-day action organization instead of the usual caucus limited to electoral activity was confirmed. Nobody has any illusions about the possibilities of beating the Reuther machine at its own game. Nor is anyone especially worried about charges of dual unionism.

Although DRUM was formed in May of this year, it did not spring fully formed out of thin air. Part of the basis for DRUM in a city like Detroit was the insurrection of the summer of 1967. The power of the black industrial working class was indicated, if indirectly, by the fact that the July days saw the shutdown of three giants of American capitalism: Ford, Chrysler and General Motors. In addition, there has long been a tendency in the black movement in Detroit which had a serious concern for the black industrial worker (as distinct from simply the unemployed or marginally employed). This has been most recently reflected in the powerful and lively, if irregular, paper, Inner City Voice, edited by John Watson. DRUM is, in some respects, an offshoot of Inner City Voice (as is a black high school paper that is appearing).

The signs are that DRUM will grow and spread. This is not, of course, assured. But whatever the future course of events what has already happened is of tremendous importance for revolutionary developments in the United States. When talk and action about the white power structure moves from local sherriffs and city administrations to General Motors, Ford and Chrysler, there is not much further to go.

April/May 1969

African American auto workers strike for union democracy and better working conditions (DRUM), 1968–1970

Kate Aronoff (2011)

Detroit, Michigan had long served as a world center for auto manufacturing. A number of U.S. automobile manufacturers centered their operations in the city, including Ford, Chrysler and General Motors. For decades, as well, the city was a center of racial conflict in the country. Following World War II, a number of white soldiers had returned to Detroit to find their manufacturing jobs “taken” by women and, more so, African American men. A number of Black workers were forced out of their jobs, though many remained. In the factories and in the city itself, racial tensions arose, with industry, the police force, and the city on the side of whites.

In response to unemployment, discrimination, and hate crimes, to name just a few factors, a number of the city’s African American residents formed organizations to deal with white harassment and abuse, as well as to assert a voice in the city’s largely white-controlled political scene. These community organizers were also rank and file labor activists working in one of many automobile factories in the greater Detroit metropolitan area. Following a series of violent race riots in January of 1967, African American autoworkers began to organize caucus-style discussions on police brutality, race, and labor in the city. Discussion members began to publish the *Inner City Voice*, a radical newspaper circulated in Detroit’s African American neighborhoods. Voice editors, comprising of a number of rank and file activists, began organizing more of their colleagues to take action.

Workers were interested in responding not only to the practices of the Chrysler Corporation, but also to those of the union that represented them. The United Auto Workers (UAW), at the time one of the country’s largest and most powerful unions, was also run almost entirely by white leadership. While the UAW itself had a history of militant tactics, it had grown bureaucratic and failed to represent the interests of the roughly 60% of African American workers employed at the company’s Hamtramck manufacturing plant, also known as Dodge Main. UAW president Walter Reuther, for example, would give retired workers a vote in union elections, effectively silencing the company’s more recently employed workers of color in favor of those who no longer had a day-to-day stake in the plant’s operation.

In the spring of 1968, Dodge management had instituted a speed up in production. In just one week, the plant had increased its hourly output from 49 to 68 units (cars). This required more rigorous, speedy labor from existing workers, whose increased demand was not compensated by management by either more co-workers or increased pay. In the first week of May, UAW leadership was over 600 miles away at a union convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. With the

union's white leadership away, African American workers and older Polish women workers organized a 4,000 person walkout: the first wildcat strike in 14 years to close Dodge's main plant. (A "wildcat" strike is one that is not authorized by the union.)

The majority of the Hamtramck plant's African American workforce was employed on the assembly line. Though a less highly esteemed position than other more skilled--though still automated--white-dominated jobs, the assembly line provided workers with the unique opportunity to seriously deter production by creating hold-ups. As operations at the plant slowed and eventually stopped, workers quickly organized a picket outside. Management sent photographers to document the strike, and used the pictures taken as evidence to fire seven workers, five of which were hired back shortly thereafter. Immediately following the strike, organizers formed the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) to clearly and militantly articulate African American workers' discontent. One of those not hired back, noticeably, was General Baker, a major organizer of the strike who, also by virtue of being singled out by the company, took on a leadership role within DRUM.

DRUM began to publish *drum*, a weekly newsletter by and for African American autoworkers that circulated information within Dodge Main about union and managerial practices and DRUM organizational responses. It also pointed out UAW complicity with Chrysler's abusive, oftentimes racist practices and conservatism. Early on, acting as a Black caucus at Dodge Main, DRUM called for a "dual unionism," asking that African American workers stop paying dues to the UAW. On July 8, 1968, DRUM again called for a wildcat strike at Dodge Main, this time in support of list of demands regarding racist policies on the part of Chrysler and the UAW. Prior to the stoppage, soon-to-be strikers marched to and picketed the Local 3 headquarters, interrupting a meeting of the union's Executive Board with speeches about their experience as employees and union members. It was here that DRUM presented UAW leadership with their list of demands. When officials did not agree, DRUM blockaded the Dodge Main plant and 4,000 workers walked out.

DRUM was also critical of more conservative organizations and individuals. At a November 1968 awards ceremony put on by the Detroit Urban League to honor auto companies' equal opportunity practices, noticeably uninvited DRUM members interrupted the luncheon in full, soiled work attire carrying signs and chanting slogans reproaching racist company policies. Also in November of 1968, Workers at other Detroit-area plants organized their own RUM chapters, including ELRUM at the Eldon Axle factory and FRUM, at a nearby Ford plant. Another Dodge plant, Eldon produced gears and axles, crucial car parts that, if not produced on time (or at all), could seriously deter Chrysler's overall car production in Detroit. On January 27, 1969, ELRUM called for and carried out its first wildcat strike. Chrysler fired 26 strikers in retaliation. As in the Dodge Main strike, management would eventually hire all those fired back, with the exception of strike leadership, in this case ELRUM president Fred Holsey.

ELRUM, in a plant with a higher percentage of Black workers than DRUM's Dodge Main, organized two more strikes the next year in the spring of 1970. In April, workers in ELRUM held a three-day strike to protest the firing of John Scott, was accused by management of threatening to beat a foreman in self-defense. As a result of the strike, Dodge agreed to rehire Scott as well as to fire the foreman who had attacked him. In May, 22-year old jitney operator and Vietnam veteran Gary Thompson was crushed by a box he was helping to move, workers

again struck in protest of dangerous working conditions, as well as the lack of UAW support for Thompson's family following his death.

Following 1970, divisions emerged between DRUM's Black Nationalists and Marxist-Leninists. Workers at other factories created a number of RUM chapters throughout the country, eventually forming the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. However, there existed little national infrastructure to coordinate national actions and organization. Ironically, as DRUM gained national prominence and grew more bureaucratic, it lost the support of the Black rank and file activists who had once formed its base. While the League would maintain operations for some time, its actions within Detroit would diverge from the wildcat strikes around which it had formed.

By forgoing both their employer—Chrysler—and the UAW, DRUM effectively forced management to respond directly to Black workers' demands, rather than working through the white-dominated UAW. Admittedly, it remains unclear what concrete policy changes were implemented by Chrysler and the UAW as a result of DRUM's actions. While the wildcat strikes themselves represented powerful actions, both symbolically and materially, the organization of DRUM and other RUM chapters itself constituted an action that gave African American workers in Detroit a voice in that would have otherwise been silenced.

DRUM: vanguard of the black revolution

by Luke Tripp (1969)

DRUM is an organization of oppressed and exploited black workers.

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

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

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

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

Union racist too

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

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

were involved. The disciplinary action taken against them and the overall administration of punishment was overwhelmingly applied to black workers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DRUM knew that most workers would be temporarily laid off during the coming week because of the changeover, the production of the '69- models. There was also a bill-out date at which time a certain number of units had to be produced. So DRUM planned to shut down the plant right before the bill-out time and set back the schedule of the change period. Their purpose was to demonstrate their strength and to show Chrysler that DRUM was not bull-jiving or playing. DRUM started with the first phase of their program. They listed 15 demands which dealt with the following conditions at the Hamtramck assembly plant, where about 60% of the work force is black.

(from DRUM, Volume 1, Number 2)

- (1) 95% of all foremen in the plants are white.
- (2) 99% of all general foremen are white.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Friday, the next day, at five o'clock in the morning, DRUM and its supporting groups turned black workers away at the gate. No attempt was made to interfere with white workers. The first few workers to arrive were met by a handful of pickets without signs. The workers were not hip to the shut-down date. After the pickets ran it to them, one worker replied: "Shutting down this motherfucker, whatever the reason, is cool as far as I'm concerned."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The leaders of DRUM went to the meeting expecting to find a group of militant black men. Instead they found the caucus to be made up of four old wrinkled-up kneegrows and two young brothers. DRUM's 12 hard black workers dominated the meeting. One old Uncle Remus from Local 7 rapped about irrelevant things. He talked about what he did "way back then". Another fossil continued the nonsense with a rap on Nineteenth Century unionism and a spot of reminiscence on a first kneegrow theme. The only positive thing to be achieved was an agreement by all to support DRUM in its fight against racism at Chrysler. On Monday, the following day, DRUM once again demonstrated at the plant. Chrysler officials on top of the factories were using telescopes, binoculars, and cameras to try to discern who was participating in the demonstration. A few Chrysler flunkies had the audacity to try serving injunctions against the demonstration.

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

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

In the weeks following the demonstration, DRUM has received wide support from the various church groups and other organizations in the black community. They have also won the respect of practically all the black workers not only at Dodge Main, but also at other local plants. In their efforts to slander and discredit DRUM the UAW has branded DRUM a racist, illegitimate, hate-mongering communist organization. The UAW - with its long practice of racism from its very inception which is reflected by the fact that blacks pay about a fourth of the dues in the UAW, but there are only 72 black International Representatives out of a total of almost 1100.

The UAW can call DRUM illegitimate, when its own "legitimacy" is granted by the company and supported by the courts rather than by the super-exploited black workers. The UAW calls DRUM a hate organization when it is crystal clear to all that it is the black workers who are the victims of hate.

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

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

The butcher shop: Hamtramck Hospital

from DRUM Newsletter #21

The Hamtramck so-called hospital is no better than your butcher shop. The butcher shop will kill an animal quick, but the pig doctors would prolong black people's pain forever if they could. The hospital at Hamtramck resembles a German concentration-camp hospital. These pig so-called doctors are no more than stooges for the Honky general foremen like "Wild Bill-Jimmy Briggs, Dick Gutis, and Joe Sbaren. These off-beat, cast-off pig quacks are coming very close to adding maiming and murder to their crimes against black people.

There are plenty of complaints coming into DRUM, like that of our black brother in Department 9160 who had Hong Kong flu. His foreman refused to let him go to First Aid for over an hour, claiming he was short of help. By the time the nurse took his temperature and sent him to see the doctor, the doctor had already been called by our "black brother"- general foreman and told to send him back to work. When the brother got back he told the foreman he just couldn't make it and had to see his doctor. Our brother left work and went straight to his doctor's office, where he fell out on the floor. The doctor told him that he had the new flu and was close to having pneumonia.

Another black brother went to First Aid one day to have his swollen ankle checked out. On this day there was only one nurse in the place. She told one of the black sisters who was suffering from pains in her leg and stomach that it was a factory first-aid station and she could quit coming there every time she got a pain. When the nurse got to the black brother she couldn't figure out why his ankle had swollen up even though he told her that he was a truck driver and the long hours of standing on the gas pedal had aggravated this cut on his foot. The nurse called for the butcher, whereupon the fat pig stuck his head out the door, glanced at the ankle, and said: "Put some medication on it and send him back to work".

Last week a black sister fell down the stairs, and her stupid Honky foreman didn't want her to go to First Aid. The Hamtramck First Aid sent her to Ford Hospital for an X-ray. When she got back she had a slightly - fractured wrist and a bruised leg and hip. The nut at the so-called hospital sent her back to work and put on her slip, doing left-hand work on a sit-down job.

Then there was the black brother in 1950 whose back was strained so badly he couldn't walk. They would not let him go home. He was off work for two or three months. And there was the sister in cut-and-sew who had sugar diabetes and accidentally took an overdose of medicine. She was sent back to work. And there are enough others to fill a book.

We black workers can no longer bear the brunt of the outrageous medical practices carried out by the white racist doctors, nurses, and corporate policy - makers at the medical centers here at Hamtramck assembly plant and Huber foundry. Let's prepare to move en masse against this medical policy. We would be better off treating each other than being toyed with by these white racists.

DOWN WITH RACIST MEDICAL PRACTICES!
DOWN WITH RACIST DOCTORS!

DOWN WITH RACIST NURSES!
JOIN DRUM!

Lap dogs on the rise

We must move forward. DRUM has been in existence for about six months now at the Hamtramck assembly plant. Our overall objective as outlined previously is to destroy racism at the Hamtramck plant and in UAW Local 3. Our method for carrying out our program is to expose the truth and to forge black unity. With a body of united black workers we shall be able to wipe out every vestige of racism wherever it may exist.

The foremost obstacles standing in our way at this time are the notorious Uncle Toms in our midst. It must be understood that in our history most of the revolutionary struggles of black people failed just because of the traitors from within. Therefore the Uncle Toms present are an ever-present danger to DRUM, to black workers, and to the black community at large, and even to themselves, because they are obviously unaware of the seriousness with which we have launched our just struggles.

Since DRUM has been in existence, we black workers have suffered many abuses. We have been fired on trumped-up charges, we have been attacked in the parking lot behind the bars by the fascist Polish pigs of the Hamtramck Police Department. We have been locked in the Union Hall and have been beaten and maced in the eyes by those same pigs. Our brothers have been run down by those same pigs on motorcycles. We have been generally harassed by the white-controlled racist UAW officials. We have been intimidated by white racist plant-protection guards. We have had an election stolen from us, and we have had other forces making undercover moves in our name.

Black Brothers and Sisters, we have remained patient and disciplined in the face of those abuses and sufferings. We have relied on you to decide our course of action, understanding that our suffering helps you to understand the vicious corrupt elements we are struggling against. We must now prepare to obtain "new guards for our future security".

We must prepare now and become psychologically set to deal with Uncle Toms in whatever manner the masses of black people decide. Uncle Toms are traitors; they will sell us out for 30 pieces of silver and help keep us divided. They give subsequent aid to our enemies by speaking out in the Honkies' behalf.

As DRUM attempts to flush out all of the Uncle Toms, its task gets more and more difficult. For by exposing Uncle Toms we have forced some of them to go underground and at the same time we have forced the Honkies to pay top dollar to have some of our own so-called black brothers denounce DRUM.

Because of the above facts, Uncle Toms have become so diverse that it is becoming increasingly more difficult to keep track of them. We have Uncle Toms tommying in the black community and snitching at the plant. We have Toms snitching at the so-called Solidarity House. We have Toms snitching at the Hamtramck assembly plant, the Huber foundry, and Local 3. We have Toms snitching on the department level inside the plant. We have out-of-sight Toms who stand up out front as saviors for white racism. We have off-the-wall Toms who stand up and support some off-the-wall ("it takes time") philosophy designed merely to stifle the black

struggle. And we have sneaky Toms - and these are in many ways the most-dangerous Toms. They go around with natural hair speaking about black unity, and thereby gain access to information they could not normally get.

It is obvious that with out-of-sight community so-called Solidarity House Uncle Toms, and sneaky department-level Toms, it is so hard to keep track of the many varieties of Toms that DRUM has devised a new method - a Tom chart. We suggest that all our black brothers make a sample copy of this sample Tom chart, so that when one of the Toms' names pops up, you will know just what kind of bag he is playing out of. You may also find it necessary to add names to it, and when any of these Toms come up missing you will know what happened to them and why. Join DRUM!

The carrot and the stick: December 11, 1968

from DRUM Newsletter #24

Last week while Chrysler Corporation executives were in Atlanta smiling and shaking hands with the Reverend Ralph Abernathy and all expressing their satisfaction with a "milestone agreement" on a plan to "pour \$1,000,000 into colored-owned banks in three US cities (Atlanta, Los Angeles, Detroit)", another Chrysler executive, Gwain Gillespie-the general manager of Dodge Truck operations, also was smiling and shaking hands - with Detroit Police Commissioner Johannes Spreen, and expressing his satisfaction with another "milestone agreement" -namely the gift of two Dodge Executive Suite Vans to the Detroit Police Department.

We of DRUM feel that the Chrysler Corporation's supposed plan to "pour \$1,000,000" into those three black communities is indeed a new milestone - in bullshit and nonsense - since the combined population of those three communities is, roughly, two million black people. This means that even if the \$1,000,000 were to be divided equally among the black people of the three communities, each person would get just 50¢. If they should ever really want to do some good, perhaps some of the mini-brained executive pigs of Chrysler Corporation will devote some of their not-too-valuable time to correcting racist practices in their plants in Detroit and elsewhere, instead of using it to devise bullshit pacification programs that are nothing but rank insults to the black community.

We would also like to comment on that other "milestone" -the gift of two vans to the Detroit Police Department. We agree that this too is indeed a milestone - in honesty. It clearly reveals the contempt of Chrysler Corporation in particular and big business in general for the black community. The vans were given to the Police Department to aid them in recruiting because, according to Gwain Gillespie: "Recruiting good police officers is important to us at Dodge too, because police work is in our best interest."

We know goddam well that police work is in your "best interest"-since you have used the police repeatedly to harass and intimidate the black workers in general and DRUM members in particular in recent walkouts and demonstrations; to write unjustified parking tickets; and last but not least to physically attack DRUM members and other black workers on the street and inside the Union Hall with mace and even ax handles during the election of union trustees.

Further, we can only hope that these so-called "good" policemen won't be recruited from the same pig-pen that produced "defenders of law and order" like those who attacked the black students at McMichael Junior High School when they staged a walkout, or those who savagely beat black youths at a dance in the Veterans' Memorial Building, or the homicidal psychopaths that murdered in the infamous Algiers Motel.

DRUM maintains that both so-called milestones are nothing more than perfect examples of the Honky's "carrot and stick" policy whereby he offers a carrot (\$1,000,000) to the oppressed black community with one hand, while the other hand threatens the community with a stick (the police force). The Chrysler version of the "carrot and stick" idea is doomed to fail as all other

versions have failed, most notably the attempt to use it in Vietnam. The black community is not for sale and will not be intimidated by pig policemen, "good" or otherwise. Why?

Within the space of two weeks two of our fellow black workers, young brother Gary Thompson and sister Mamie Williams, were murdered by the Chrysler Corporation. Attendance by Eldon employees at both of the funeral services was sparse, but perhaps that is understandable in view of the present economic situation. However it should be noted and noted well that not a single Local 961 union official attended Mamie Williams's funeral, and only two - Al Holly and James Cavers - came to Gary Thompson's funeral. Our Uncle Tom President and Supersonic Nigger Executive Board consisting of James Franklin, Leon Johnson, Dan Toomer, Big Davis, Charlie McNeeley, J. C. Thomas, and their ilk, along with the mass of so-called "black" stewards and committeemen, did not see fit to even send a telegram or wreath to the families of the deceased union members, much less attend the last rites.

We of ELRUM can make these statements because we were present at both of the funerals and are presently doing everything in our power to aid the families concerned. We say this not out of self-glorification, but out of a true and sincere feeling of concern for all of our brothers and sisters. The present union administration, from top to bottom, has demonstrated time and again its lack of concern with the problems of black workers at Eldon, its lackadaisical attitude regarding the deadly conditions in the plant, which have just recently taken two lives, shows that Elroy and Company are in partnership with management.

The time to break up this union-management partnership is now! The time to obtain BLACK representation is now! The time to stop all racist harassment, intimidation, degradation, and murder is right now!

Three Members of ELRUM Discharged

Three members of ELRUM (Eldon Revolutionary Union Movement) were recently discharged for their part in the safety work stoppage which took place at Eldon on May 27 and 28. The work stoppage was a direct response to the murder of Gary Thompson, the young black forklift driver who was crushed to death on Tuesday morning, May 26. Prior to this tragic occurrence the Eldon Safety Committee, a loose coalition composed by ELRUM, Eldon Wildcat, and several discharged union officials, had been putting out leaflets and papers exposing the hazardous conditions at Eldon. The Safety Committee responded to Thompson's murder with a safety work stoppage, a refusal to work until the plant is cleaned up and the deadly conditions are corrected. This action is covered under the National Labor Relations Act, giving workers the right to refuse to work under hazardous safety conditions regardless of union contracts and agreements.

Armed with this act the Safety Committee showed up at the gates on Wednesday morning with picket signs saying "Death Rides a Jitney", "No Safety, No Production", "Refuse To Work Until The Plant Is Safe", and "You Will Be Next". ELRUM had lawyers at each gate to deal with the police and any injunctions that might be issued, and the picketing began. The response from the day shift was fair, and nearly all of the afternoon shift stayed off work. However dissension

within the ranks of the Safety Committee, particularly among Uncle Tom union officials, spelled failure for the safety work struggle. Management's response to the deaths of black workers and to the safety work stoppage was to call out the Detroit Police Department and request special patrols of their Tactical Mobile Unit. James Edwards, one of the discharged members of ELRUM, was arrested on bogus assault and battery charges. (Later the charges were dropped.) UAW Local 961 made no response at all to the work stoppage, their interest being the corporation's interest, as they have demonstrated time and again.

On Friday, May 29, Chrysler discharged Alonzo Chandler, Robert McKee, and James Edwards, all members of ELRUM, for an alleged violation of the "no strike" clause in the agreement between Chrysler and the UAW. This action was clearly another premeditated act on the part of Chrysler and the UAW designed to rid the plant forever of any voice that cries for justice for black workers. The racists of Chrysler Corporation even went so far as to send out letters to all of Eldon's employees expressing phony sympathy and concern over the recent murder of Gary Thompson and denouncing the people who participated in the work stoppage.

This week Harry T. Englebrecht, lackey plant manager of the Eldon gear and axle plant, sent out letters to all of the Eldon employees in regard to the recent safety work stoppage. Below is the Englebrecht letter and ELRUM's reply to it.

To: Eldon Avenue Axle Employees:

The events that occurred at our plant last week have been of deep concern to me, as I am sure they have been to you. Most disturbing, "of course, was the tragic accident which resulted in the death of Gary Thompson, one of our jitney drivers. Rest assured that our continuing -efforts to make our plant a safe place to work in will be intensified.

This, along with your observance of good safety practices, will prevent future accidents.

I am also extremely concerned because of the disruptions that have taken place at our gates at shift-change times, resulting in the loss to plant employees and their families of many thousands of dollars in wages. I am convinced that the vast majority of Eldon people want to come to work and perform their jobs conscientiously. Regrettably, however, there is a small group of people who seem not to care about their own welfare or the welfare of others. It appears that their aim is to disrupt our operations by any means possible.

Last Wednesday, May 27, our gates were obstructed by a number of people, many of whom were not our employees. These persons had no legitimate interest in or responsibility for what goes on in our plant. Most had nothing to lose by their irresponsible demonstrations. The fact that hundreds of our employees were deprived of their wages apparently did not concern them.

You should be aware that we have taken and will continue to take all legal steps needed to insure your safety and keep our plants operating. To this end, it was necessary to discharge those employees who were responsible for, or elected to participate in, disruptions at our gates.

Although deeply disturbed by the events of last week I am encouraged by the large numbers of loyal employees who came to work despite the outside protesters and disruptors at our gates. These employees are to be commended for their patience during this time of stress. Their continued responsible conduct will serve to preserve our security and ability to earn a living.

Very Truly Yours,
Harry T. Englebrecht Plant Manager
Eldon Avenue Axle Plant

An Open Letter to Funky, Flunky Honky Harry T. Englebrecht and White Racist Chrysler Corporation

Dear Harry:

You and the white racist corporation you work for have demonstrated beyond all doubt that you're nothing but a gang of one more axle, one more car, and suck the life blood of one more worker. You say that you are "concerned" about the "events" at "our" plant last week, that you are "disturbed" by the tragic "accident" which took the life of Gary Thompson.

Yes, you, Harry T. Englebrecht, stand before the black workers of Eldon with the fresh blood of Rose Logan, Mamie Williams, and now Gary Thompson dripping from your fangs and claws, and say that you are "concerned and disturbed"!

What is the nature of your "concern", Harry? Are you "concerned" about the family of Rose Logan, now motherless because of one of your brakeless high-lows? Are you "concerned" about the family of Mamie Williams, Harry? The same Mamie Williams whom you made leave a hospital bed and a doctor's care so she could return to the death pit of Eldon Avenue?

Are you "concerned", Harry, about the pregnant wife whose husband you killed, or about the 19-month-old son whose father you murdered? Gary Thompson was only 22 years old, Harry; he survived 18 months in Vietnam, yet he could not survive a mere five months in your plant. But of course your "concern" will remove this huge burden of sorrow that rests on the families of those whose loved ones you murdered.

We suppose too, Harry, that you are "concerned and disturbed" about the outrageous and deadly conditions which exist in the Eldon Avenue gear and axle plant. We imagine it "disturbs" you to see high-lows with lopsided tires; broken horns, lights, and hydraulic lines; missing safety rails; and faulty or completely - non - existent brakes and emergency brakes. We suppose too that while you sit in your air-conditioned office sipping Cutty Sark and Chivas Regal, the dangerous oil-covered floors and the cluttered aiseways weigh like millstones on your humanitarian mind.

Yes, Harry, when you sit in your cozy leather chair in your plush office and watch black workers coming into the plant bandaged in casts and splints, wrapped up like mummies, VICTIMS of your oil-belching, rusty, and unsafe machinery, we know your "concern" brings tears, crocodile tears to your eyes.

You say the observance of good safety practices will prevent future accidents - as if a flimsy pair of safety glasses can stop five tons of cold hard steel. You say that efforts to make the plant safe are being intensified - but we know that the only thing being intensified is the already-outrageous production. You say that you are "concerned" about the employees' loss of wages - as if their wages were more valuable than their lives.

Yes, Harry, we of ELRUM clearly understand the nature of your "concern" and the reasons you are "disturbed". We understand that the lives and limbs of black workers are meaningless to profit-hungry pirates like yourself. We understand why you and all the other

racist criminals of Chrysler would spend thousands of dollars to send out hypocritical and deceitful letters, yet spend not one penny to correct the hazardous conditions which maim and kill black workers every day.

You praise the patience of the "overwhelming" majority of workers in these times of stress, but even you cannot see that patience rapidly turning to outrage and anger. Your discharge of Robert McKee, Alonzo Chandler, and James Edwards, along with other members of the Eldon Safety Committee, will not stop ELRUM from organizing that anger and outrage. The day when you could snuff out black lives with impunity is gone. No longer will we play the victims to your deadly plans of profit.

Yes, Harry, you say that you are "concerned and disturbed". Well, Harry, you will soon be in a panic - you will soon be pulling the hair out of your already-graying head, and the ulcers you now have will soon spread throughout your whole body. You see, Harry, we are concerned and disturbed, too; and we are making revolution; and we will win!

Uhuru na Umoja. Freedom and Unity.

Black cats, white cats, wildcats: Auto workers in Detroit, 1969

from SPEAK OUT, a socialist periodical in Detroit (1969)

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

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

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

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

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

NEW WORKERS

During the war years there was a tremendous influx of new workers into the auto plants. They were Southerners, black and white, and women, The demands of the war and the shortage of labor combined to give workers substantial weapons in their struggles. Black Workers fought for upgrading into production jobs (other than foundries), Women became production workers on a large scale. The union leadership attempted to surrender the bargaining powers of the workers by rushing to give the government a no-strike pledge. Union officials took places on government boards. There began the growing merger of union hierarchy with the political power structure. The resistance of workers to this process began to widen the gap between the rank and file of the union and the officials at the top. It was in Detroit that this resistance reached its high points. A struggle against the no-strike pledge was carried on in the UAW against the major caucuses in the union, This reached its peak at the 1944 convention of the UAW when the top officials were chastized and embarrassed in front of the government officials they tried to serve by the defeat of resolutions to retain the no-strike pledge.

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

REUTHER'S CAREER

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

In 1955 auto workers erupted in a wave of wildcat strikes that rejected the policy of fringe benefits combined with increasing speed-up. They made it clear that what was at issue was the inability of the union contract to provide any solution to the day-to-day problems on the plant floor. In some plants, at the expiration of the three-year contract, there are literally thousands of unresolved grievances testifying to the need of workers to manage production in their own name. Ever since 1955 Reuther has attempted to incorporate the local wildcats into the national negotiations, with very little success. In the 1967 contract negotiations in auto it took one year, one third of the life of the contract, to wear down the workers, local by local.

OVERTIME AND PRODUCTIVITY

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

BEYOND RANK AND FILE CAUCUS

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

corporations to the populations of the inner cities in industrial America. One year later was organized the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, which, with companion organizations in other plants, became part of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

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

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

When the Union's the Enemy: An Interview with Cleo Silvers

by Andrew Elrod (2014)

In 1973, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health issued a report on the auto industry estimating that workplace diseases alone were responsible for about sixty-five deaths a workday — more than 16,000 a year.

The numbers were shocking, but they gave some explanation for the dramatic upsurge in wildcat actions over the preceding half-decade — what historian [Jeremy Brecher](#) calls the “labor dimension of the Vietnam War era revolt.” The report also substantiated a claim made thereafter by labor activists: the number of autoworkers killed and injured surpassed the number of American soldiers killed and maimed in any year in the Vietnam War.

In the five years after 1968, workplace grievances inundated the union bureaucracy as newfound expectations of decency and dignity invigorated a generation of American industrial workers.

The New York Times reported that the young workers entering the labor force were “better educated and want treatment as equals from the bosses” were opposed to “work they think hurts their health or safety, even though old-timers have done the same work for years,” and “want fast changes and sometimes bypass their own union leaders and start wildcat strikes.” In the auto plants of Detroit, where an all-white management and union leadership confronted a darkening workforce, these grievances often assumed a racial edge. Of all the rank-and-file caucuses that formed in this tumultuous period, perhaps none was more militant than the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

Founded in 1969 to unify several black caucuses that sprouted up amid a strike wave, the League worked to organize independent black power within the labor movement for the explicit purpose of socialist revolution. A far-fetched goal to twenty-first century American ears, in that raucous denouement of the New Left, the League — and its short-lived national equivalent, the Black Workers Congress — advanced its cause in the political space opened by the UAW's shortcomings on working conditions and racial inequality.

For black autoworkers, upward mobility in the plant was a rarity; as Nelson Lichtenstein writes in his biography of Walter Reuther, “Black workers called the skilled trades ‘the Deep South’ of the UAW.” And though most auto work was dangerous, it was black workers who bore the brunt of the industry's hazardous tasks. In his 1976 book *Auto Work and Its Discontents*,

labor activist B.J. Widick quotes one company official as saying, “[S]ome jobs white folks will not do; so they have to take niggers in... It shortens their lives, it cuts them down but they’re just niggers.”

Despite its work funding the Freedom Riders and the March on Washington, the UAW was guilty of its own institutional racism. By 1962, it had failed to elect a single black member to its twenty-two-person executive board, despite the fact that African-Americans by then composed a quarter of the Detroit membership. By 1968, there were still just two. Locked out of union leadership, their workplace grievances ignored, many activists turned to organizing wildcat actions.

This was the context in which the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was born. Though it would quickly collapse amid competing visions of black power, the League’s emergence underscored both the institutional limits of the post-war labor movement, especially in regards to race, and the consequence of that failure: a generation of activists alienated from their union. As Lichtenstein notes, “whatever their politics, DRUM’s [a League precursor] founding cohort constituted the same species of ideologically motivated cadre who had animated the UAW in its heroic youth.” Rather than incorporate this cohort, the UAW rejected their racial grievances and condoned managerial repression of shop-floor agitation.

One of these cadre was Cleo Silvers, a former social worker with VISTA in Harlem who had organized with the [Black Panthers](#) and [Young Lords](#) before turning to independent rank-and-file organizing. I recently spoke with Cleo about her time with the Revolutionary Union Movements in both New York and Detroit during the early 1970s.

You came to New York City as a social worker with VISTA, after which you began working at Lincoln Hospital. How did you end up in Detroit organizing autoworkers?

I met Jim [Forman] and several other friends in the process of the work that I was doing with HRUM, the Health Revolutionary Unity Movement, which was about organizing independent organizations of workers in the health care industry. That came from the struggles initiated at Gouverneur Hospital, at Lincoln Hospital, and several other hospitals in New York City.

The major struggle for hospital workers was around the issues of increasing education needs of the workers, bettering working conditions, and, not only that, the workers in the hospital industry also fought around patient issues.

HRUM actually began as a result of the Think Lincoln Committee, which was a coalition of community people, members of the Young Lords and the Black Panther Party concerned with hospital conditions. At the time I was a community mental health worker at Lincoln Hospital, which was so bad that people would be left in the emergency room for 72 hours and not be seen.

If you didn’t speak English it was almost impossible for you — they didn’t have translators — it was almost impossible for you to speak to your doctor. A woman who came to the hospital for a saline abortion was killed on the surgery table. There were people who went in for surgery and had the wrong kidney extracted. The people felt in the community that they were being used as guinea pigs.

We set up a patient complaint table in the emergency room. This is how we really got to understand what the conditions were inside the hospital. Patients would come to us with their complaints, and we would document them and compile them until we had a stack of complaints that you would not believe. And it didn't take us a long time to acquire that many coming from the people in the community. It was really a horrible set of conditions inside that hospital for the patient.

Were you a union member at this time?

I was a member of 1199, but 1199 saw us as a bunch of troublemakers inside the union. We were young. We were arrogant. We knew that we were right. We knew that what we were fighting for was something that was going to be positive for the community. It was going to be positive for our class, for the young people coming up behind us, because we were fighting for better conditions.

We were fighting for a more equal distribution of the resources in society in general. We were fighting for an end to police brutality. We were fighting for the basics — for the right to be treated as a human being, the franchise, the equal ability to have access to all the things the society has to offer. We were kind of tough guys, in the sense that we demanded that they hear us. We wouldn't go into a union meeting and not be heard. If they refused to call on us we would just take over the microphone and make our case to the rank-and-file that was in attendance at the meeting.

In the process of building our organization, we had learned about DRUM and the League. We began doing political education, and we were beginning to recognize that the working class had a role in society that was greater than most people understood. I was the co-chair of HRUM, and during one of our meetings with Jim Forman and several of the League workers — at that time I believe they had developed into the Black Workers Congress — there was a vote that I should take my organizing skills that I developed here in New York City, with HRUM and with several of the other organizations, and go to Detroit and organize in the auto plants.

When I got to Detroit I got set up in the home of Mike Hamlin, who was the chairman of the League. I met and studied with the Central Committee, which included General Baker, John Watson, Ken Cockrel.

What sort of work was the League doing in Detroit?

One thing was the book clubs. The reason those book clubs were necessary was that there were lots and lots of white people who were activists who were interested in supporting the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the Black Workers Congress, but of course if you weren't black or a person of color you could not be in the organization.

The League got me a job. The companies would have these cattle calls for workers to come into different plants, based on what they needed. There happened to be, when I came into the city, a call for workers at Dodge Truck. I was taken over, and I got hired on at the Dodge Truck plant in Warren, Michigan, which is right outside Detroit.

The racial composition in the plant at that time was about 70 percent African-American. There were Arabs. A very strong Arab community in the Detroit metropolitan area. There were Latinos, but that was a very small group. So the struggle inside the plant took all kinds of turns. There was one struggle that was very interesting between the Arabs and the African-Americans.

The African-Americans used to call the Arabs “camel jockeys.” The activists, the Marxists, came together and began to encourage the black workers to recognize that if they don’t want to be called a nigger, then you don’t want to call those Arab workers, who are your comrades that are on this line working with us, camel jockeys. Slowly, we began to build very strong relationships, and when it came time to take a plant-wide action, all of the workers who we built relationships with were involved and supportive, and took action along with us.

What sorts of issues did people organize around?

There was the paint shop, where workers had very little to support their breathing. They didn’t have masks that were very good, and the masks were overused, and the workers were breathing in paint and of course dying as a result of breathing in this paint. Speedup was the other important thing.

I worked in two areas. It was a filthy job, where you put the frames onto the line, and then you have several bolts and nuts that you had to attach to the frame. My second job was installing brake fluid cups. Brake fluid is a corrosive, and it would corrode my hands and feet. They gave you one pair of vinyl gloves per week and one apron per week and one pair of boots, because the brake fluid was running onto the ground, and it would eat through that stuff.

And I had been harassed by foremen. You know, foremen’s thing with women, that’s another issue. There weren’t a lot of women in the plant, and those that were there were always being harassed, whether you were black or white or whatever. It was not unexpected for a foreman to come up to you and say, if you sleep with me I’ll give you a better job.

Were there any deaths at the plant?

Absolutely, yes. There were several. One worker was crushed by a huge motor. The motors are very, very big, and they are extremely heavy. The really big guys were responsible for moving the motor around and dropping it into the shell of the truck, and one guy got crushed by a motor.

There were people that lost hands and other limbs on the line because management would never stop the line when they were asked. Sometimes you could get stuck, and the thing is to stop the line. But managers would not stop the line. And you would be fired immediately if you were a worker on the line and you stopped the line.

What was the union’s role at the plant?

The UAW actually had a low profile at Dodge Truck. They had their votes, they had their meetings. We attended a few meetings. But the work that we were doing, with so many workers,

you start to build relationships with so many workers. We didn't really have time to fool with the UAW. Some of them were like, "yeah the UAW, they're not shit, they ain't doin' this or that."

But the point was that the UAW only fought for you if you were in the plant and your hand got cut off, then they would come and stop the line, you know, negotiate with management, that kind of thing. Or the workers in the paint shop decided, this is too much today. We're breathing in too much of the fumes from the paint, we're not going to do this anymore. Then the union would come down and try to negotiate with the workers to go back to work.

Did you witness a lot of shop floor activism disciplined by the union?

Absolutely, yes.

How did that go?

They would be like, you know, "you guys are fuckin' up!" And really that's what they'd tell you. And we'd say, "you're fucking up by not demanding quality conditions, decent conditions, for us, for the workers. So don't come over here tellin' us we're fuckin' up. That's not us, that's you." So there was back and forth all the time between us.

Were you aware of the work the union had done to support the Civil Rights Movement?

That's before the period in which the League of Revolutionary Black Workers took place. So yes they did progressive things, but that was way back in the Civil Rights Movement. You see, the development of the League came on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, as a result of workers not wanting to be nonviolent, and recognizing that it was important to organize on a class basis. The Civil Rights Movement was done on a racial basis. The struggle for equality and justice inside a town like Detroit was fully based on working class awareness.

What sorts of actions did the workers take against poor conditions?

There were heat walkouts, several every year. In the summer inside the plant it would get up to 120 degrees, and our position was that once the temperature was over 120 degrees that is not a place for human beings to be working in.

Management would not shut the plant down. They would expect us to continue to work. But even workers who didn't agree with us did not want to be working in [a] 120 degree auto plant. It wasn't that difficult. We would go all around the plant and say, "It's very hot today, once it hits 120 degrees we're all leaving." Everybody would leave. Who wants to be there? It was led by us, the young members of the League, the young black workers, and supported very heavily by the Arab workers, and some of the white workers too.

That's the other thing that was going on. When you are working in a place like an auto plant, it is very difficult to maintain prejudice, because we're all in the same boat, we're all doing the same thing, and you get to discuss. "Here I'm standing next to you on the line." "Well I don't

like you!” “Why you don’t like me? We have to care about each other!” And you have to watch each other’s back.

So that’s one of the most important things. You want to see prejudice and racism obliterate itself? Give a group of people a job to do where they have to share the responsibility and the labor. I think that’s one of the great things I learned inside the auto plant.

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the coming of revolution

from Radical America Vol 5, #2 (1971)

One finds it exceedingly difficult to introduce a new organization without seizing the opportunity to note that this is a black organization and, unlike all the others, offers a bright new strategy to the quiescent black movement. Black workers, with their important location in US industry and service, have demonstrated the need for a working-class movement within this advanced section of the American proletariat. Without recognizing the importance of black workers, any Leftist group or organization will be doomed to failure.

This introduction is designed to fill in some important gaps in our knowledge of the struggle. It is not a polemic, nor unfolding rhetoric proclaiming condemnations of America's futile attempt to deal with the race problem. Instead, the writer wishes the reader to know about this organization and its crucial importance in the development of a revolutionary movement in America. For far too long the plight of the black worker has been subjugated to the interests of the rulers and of their white working-class associates. What the League brings to the realm of analysis is surely nothing new (Need I remind our readers of Garveyism?), but is something which must be immediately realized- that the American labor movement is now a memory, and something must be done now about its inability to deal with the problems of black workers.

With the establishment of DRUM (the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement) in the Dodge plant at Hamtramck, Michigan in 1968, the white rulers and their infected proletarians got a taste of "a real black thang"! Wildcat strikes and electoral turmoil have characterized the automobile industry since. The League of Revolutionary Black Workers is indeed a timely response to the growing stagnation and alienation many of us now feel- black radicals and their frustrated so-called compatriots. Black labor has seldom been understood, and as Abram Harris remarked nearly half a decade ago: "An estimation of the role the Negro will play in the class struggle is futile if the economic foundation and its psychological superstructure from which issue antipathy or apathy are ignored." (1) The League perfectly understands this - that racism is the result of a two-fold process which involves economic inferiority and its internalization. What is the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and where did it come from? John Watson gives us the answer in an interview from the Fifth Estate:

"The League of Revolutionary Black Workers is a federation of several revolutionary movements which exist in Detroit. It was originally formed to provide a broader base for organization of black workers into revolutionary organizations than was previously provided for when we were organizing on a plant to plant basis. The beginning of the League goes back to the beginning of DRUM, which was its first organization. The Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement was formed at the Hamtramck assembly plant of the Chrysler Corporation in the fall

of 1967. It developed out of the caucuses of black workers which had formed in the automobile plants to fight increases in productivity and racism in the plant ... With the development of DRUM and the successes we had in terms of organizing and mobilizing the workers at the Hamtramck plant many other black workers throughout the city began to come to us and ask for aid in organizing some sort of group in their plants. As a result, shortly after the formation of DRUM, the Eldon Axle Revolutionary Movement (ELRUM) was born at the Eldon gear and axle plant of the Chrysler Corporation. Also, the Ford Revolutionary Union Movement (FRUM) was formed at the Ford Rouge complex, and we now have two plants within that complex organized.” (2)

Centered in the extremely-important auto industry, the League has had an extremely wide and successful impact. It is now expanding its organizing activities to other areas - hospital workers and printers are now being organized, as well as the United Parcel Workers black caucus, which is one of the League's affiliates. Why this sudden turn from community organizing and the organizing of "street brothers and sisters", the black lumpen proletariat? The remarks of John Watson sum up the League's attitude toward this crucial and strategic shift in organizing policy:

“Our analysis tells us that the basic power of black people lies at the point of production, that the basic power we have is our power as workers. As workers, as black workers, we have historically been, and are now, essential elements in the American economic sense. Therefore, we have an overall analysis which sees the point of production as the major and primary sector of the society which has to be organized, and that the community should be organized in conjunction with that development. This is probably different from these kinds of analysis which say where it's at is to go out and organize the community and to organize the so-called "brother on the street". It's not that we're opposed to this type of organization but without a more-solid base such as that which the working class represents, this type of organization, that is, community based organization, is generally a pretty long, stretched-out, and futile development.” (3)

Community-based organizations throughout Black America have been failures. Stung by that fatal disease known as opportunism, many of these organizations either have dissolved or have been the subject of in-fighting for the pay-off. The ruling class has again demonstrated how it can pick up on anything and subvert it for its own use. It has again demonstrated that integration is a forced tool, and that no black man has the power to join white society without the sanction of the ruling class. (4) This shift is crucial.

For the last fifteen years the black movement has ridden the back of its middle-class leadership, following the white lead while they got the pay-off. The benefits (or bones) resulting from the "Civil Rights Movement" were distributed to the black middle class. In the fields of education, employment, and business, the black nouveau riche have made a small mark. The expansion of the black middle class is the unwritten policy of the white rulers. The black masses, predominantly workers (5), have been totally left out of this progress, and expressed their dissatisfaction by conducting their own "unorganized general strike" in the summers of 1966 and 1967.

The concessions granted to the new black rulers are meager, but they are real enough to raise, for the first time in a long while, the question of class antagonism. The League is

responding to developing antagonisms of class in black America. Growing slowly is the black petit bourgeoisie, which consists of two wings: an educated black elite composed of technicians, managers, professionals, and others, and a small "ghetto bourgeoisie" composed of the owners of small ghetto shops and services. The ideology of this class is bourgeois nationalism which can be roughly summed up in the memorable words of Booker T. Washington in his speech before the Atlanta Exposition in 1895: "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." (6)

Although this was said almost eighty years ago, it still characterizes the positions of most black nationalists. They see social revolution coming about in the disguise of white philanthropy and concern. To them the question of class struggle is an outmoded European idea which does not conform to their conception of black reality. The struggle lies in the institutional set-ups they can extract from the white paternalists, without ever stopping to think about the interest involved - that of the bourgeois nationalist or the white paternalist. Confusion and chaos have now replaced the moral glue which once held this class together, and there is no doubt that there is a huge gap in black leadership. (7)

With these facts to guide, the League has undertaken a very-difficult task - the organizing and leading of a national movement of black workers. Their local work clearly testifies to their national thrust. By organizing workers in strategic industries, the League plans to create the foundation for a black revolutionary party. Undoubtedly the perils of building a widespread national movement while laying the basis for a revolutionary party are difficult both to envision and to comprehend. But this is certainly one of their ultimate political tasks. The triumph of the downtrodden is inevitable.

The central theoretical concern of the League is the inevitable recognition of the black working class as the vanguard of the social revolution. As Ernie Mkalimoto suggests, the socialist revolutionary movement in the US must consider the black working class as leader.

Thus owing to the national oppression (principally through institutionalized racism as the dominant form of production relations) of black people in the United States, the black proletariat is forced to take on the most dangerous, the most difficult - yet absolutely necessary - productive work in the plants, the most undesirable and strenuous jobs which exist inside the United States today. The demands which it poses - the elimination of economic exploitation (hence of capitalism) and of institutionalized racism (which thoroughly pervades the plant, not to mention North American society in general), and which allows capitalism to maintain itself, are more basic to the dismantling of US capitalist society than those of the white productive worker, who up to now has been able to defend his "white-skin privilege". That is why we say that any socialist revolution which is to be successful must take the class stand of the vanguard class of this revolution: the black proletariat.

Many white radicals and labor leaders will be unable to accept this position expressed by Mkalimoto (8). Why? Because the subtleties of racism have invaded their hearts and minds and prevent them from understanding the obvious. But it is this fundamental question which must be recognized before one begins to overthrow capitalism. Many so-called revolutionaries and others will say: This is a threat to the unity of the working class! This violates Marxism's first principle of international solidarity and all the rest. But with a basic understanding of the history of the black race, they will see how their arguments fail.

The League's basic position is revolutionary nationalism. One cannot forget that there are conservative and Leftist elements among the black nationalist spectrum. The League represents a Left-wing position. For those who are unfamiliar with the developing ideological debate within small black circles, revolutionary nationalism is an important and very complicated position to hold. Ernie Mkalimoto outlines revolutionary nationalism as follows:

A fusion of the most progressive aspects of the contradiction:

“Bourgeois Reformism / Bourgeois Nationalism, Revolutionary Black Nationalism snatches the African-American from the puerile stage of Elizabethan drama, restores his sense of balance and direction in the universe, and sends crashing down to earth the clay idol of (Negro/ American) emotional duality which has plagued the broad trend of black ideology from slavery to the present. From the activist wing of Bourgeois Reformism it takes the tactic of mass confrontation, struggles on all fronts, and integrates it into the existing order; from Bourgeois Nationalism comes the idea of the necessity for the development of national (revolutionary) culture and of both self-determination and self-reliance, as well as of the black world view which sees the struggle of African-Americans as inseparable from the struggles of all other peoples of color around the globe. The Revolutionary Nationalist views the concept of black nationhood not as any "sacred" unquestionable end in itself, but as a concrete guarantee to insure the dignity and full flowering of every individual of African descent.” (9)

Revolutionary nationalism will indeed be difficult for the majority of whites to accept. It begins by taking into account the unusual degree of subjugation black people are forced to accept. It understands the unique feature of psychology and the internalization of economic phenomena. This indeed is timely. For one who does not admit the primacy of race compounded by class oppression refuses to recognize the most-central problem in American society.

The League dispenses with revolutionary rhetoric and commercial suicide, because that allows America to survive. The brother appearing on television and the revolutionary orator do not really contribute to capitalism's downfall; if anything they contribute to its maintenance.

By seizing on these images of blacks finally entering the mainstream, America controls the latent explosiveness present in most black men and black women. This is the current picture - black television, black business, black economic development, black executives - a swallowing of the "Negro revolution" by the imperialist giant.

America has created a grand illusion for most people - and black people are now subject to that illusion. The petit-bourgeois will not be able to succeed as long as it remains dependent on government and private help. The myth of the Negro capitalist is just that; but many of the brothers will not even acknowledge that. The myth of the "black capitalist and Negro market" must be dealt with. (10) There are few really-suggestive works on the problem of the class struggle in Black America. It is hoped that this issue will truly be a starting point for the emergence of a dialogue on this crucial question. The revolutionary nationalists have already begun.

The League is solidly committed to international struggle, but not without modifications. The international capital-versus-labor struggle is long ceased. It is now more the struggle of the rich nations versus the poor nations. It is no accident that the former are Europe and the US (with

its Eastern satellite, Japan) and the latter are predominantly non - white countries. This is the major contradiction - of the West versus the non-West, and it is this contradiction which assumes the primary significance within the black workers' movement. This chief contradiction was aptly summed up in DuBois's often-quoted dictum:

“The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line. Their international commitment rests on the success or failure of the development of the national movement. This is how internationalism is introduced - by fully realizing the international importance of one's movement. Cuba, China, and Vietnam all testify to that fact, and so will the League.”

Undoubtedly the above will confuse many. Yet the common knowledge of black workers is that white labor has left them in the cold. What characterizes the race relations of the American working class is a long history of betrayal and neglect. The fact is simple: Organized labor and the labor movement were instrumental in crushing black labor, A few remembrances would be in order.

The plight of the black slave and his super-exploitation has been skillfully handled in Robert Starobin's *Industrial Slavery in the Old South*, and I suggest that the interested reader come by a copy of this book. Following Emancipation, the black slave with his newly-acquired freedman's status entered the labor market. He was powerfully met by his poor-white counterpart. The black wretch possessed innumerable skills, and, as one writer noted, the black artisan held "a practical monopoly of the trades" throughout the South. (11) This represents an important chapter in radical history that deserves our full attention. For much of the Nineteenth Century, the black artisan controlled much of Southern labor, DuBois notes with his usual clarity the effects of this development:

“After Emancipation came suddenly, in the midst of war and social upheaval, the first real economic question was that of the self-protection of freed working men. There were three chief classes of them: the agricultural laborers in the country districts, the house - servants in town and country, and the artisans who were rapidly migrating to town. The Freedmen's Bureau undertook the temporary guardianship of the first class, the second class easily passed from half-free service to half-servile freedom. But the third class, the artisans, met peculiar conditions. They had always been used to working under the guardianship of a master, and even that guardianship of artisans in some cases was but nominal, yet it was of the greatest value for protection. This soon became clear as the Negro freed artisan set up business for himself: If there was a creditor to be sued, he could no longer be sued in the name of an influential white master; if there was a contract to be had, there was no responsible white patron to answer for the good performance of the work. Nevertheless, these differences were not strongly felt at first - the friendly patronage of the former master was often voluntarily given the freedman, and for some years following the war the Negro mechanic still held undisputed sway.” (12)

This progress was not lasting. As Northern industry invaded the South, it brought with it the strength of organized labor, The triumph of this organized labor in the South did not match its more-egalitarian works up North. The black artisan was crushed without the usual oratorical hesitation about such things as rights and equality. The labor movement crushed this small class of black artisans, subordinating them to the greedy desires of white labor and to the advantage of

the capitalist. This is indeed a sad chapter in the American labor movement's history and one that still needs to be written in full.

By driving the black laborer from the skilled trades, organized labor forced him to become a scab in strikebreaking activities. The resulting friction was ominous of Detroit and Newark in 1967. (13) The black laborer was forced to accept the dual-wage system, menial jobs, and continual confinement within industry. There was little or no chance for upgrading or betterment. He was denied apprenticeships and was forced into separate local unions while his brother stole his livelihood lock and stock. Capitalism brought with it white labor which drove black labor to extinction in the skilled trades. And as black labor was driven from its work, it was also forced to leave home and migrate to the shining North - the land of golden opportunity.

The effects of black urbanization have yet to be understood. But one thing is sure. The coming of blacks to large industrial cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Pittsburgh had important aspects. With the great war of 1914 came the great demand for black labor, Black labor came in herds to wartime industry. This was a timely break for black people. With work came money and the satisfaction of basic needs. Although blacks came in on the bottom and remained there, they did manage to implant themselves in industry and lay the groundwork for the future entrance of more black workers.

The tensions which developed out of the great migrations to the North are a part of a large transition made by Afro-Americans during the Twentieth Century. The shift was mainly from a rural proletariat to an urban industrial work force. This shift was dramatic, racial, intense. Rebellions were found everywhere from Arkansas to Illinois, And the results are not without strategic importance. The industrial shift had paved the way for a wide black revolutionary movement. The Garvey movement was a movement of the black masses - the black industrial, service, and domestic workers, as well as "the brother on the street". Garvey was totally rejected by the black intelligentsia and middle class and depended wholly on the masses for support and sustenance. This was the most-threatening movement the American Republic had ever had to face. (14)

Garveyism was a response to the racial fuel boiling in black people. This rage was in part the result of organized labor's unwillingness to deal with "the Negro problem" and of Jim Crow in the "golden North". Moreover Garveyism elevated black consciousness into realizing itself as independent. Garvey grounded with black people and told them of the imminent dangers of life in America - cultural rape, psychological instability, moral destruction. Garvey shouted "Up You Mighty Race!" because he foresaw the oppression strengthening its hand over black people. He was crushed: hounded, attacked, abused, accused of fraud. The US Government was instrumental in "ridding America of Garvey" while putting out the flames of revolution in Black America. During this period organized labor was no-less oppressive. Craft unionism and its rise spread the gospel of the black workers' downfall. The AFL's unwritten exclusion policy was commented on by two black writers in 1931:

“By refusing to accept apprentices from a class of workers that social tradition has stamped as inferior, or by withholding membership from reputable craftsmen of this class, the union accomplishes two things: It protects its "good" name, and it eliminates a whole class of future competitors. While race prejudice is a very-fundamental fact in the exclusion of the

Negro, the desire to restrict competition so as to safeguard job monopoly and control wages is inextricably interwoven with it.” (15)

The AFL refused to investigate and prohibit discrimination in its own internationals because it "would" create prejudice instead of breaking it down. (16) The CIO also was guilty of racism, but managed to escape this guilt because of the war-time expansion during its emergence and growth. (17) Following World War n, the black movement turned from institutional gains to "civil rights". It took Malcolm X and a host of other well-known black leaders to point out what so many black people had largely forgotten -that they are still oppressed, and that the only acceptable solution would be black-created and black-led.

The League responds to this oppression with a new and vital vigor, Black workers "entered industry on the lowest rung of the industrial ladder" (18), and that is where they remain. Organized labor has not contributed much to black labor, and the few exceptions like the IWW and the UMW have not been enough to offset the systematic exclusion and assault of black labor. The League knows this. It recognizes this fact of betrayal as a fossil. What follows is that something must be done, and the League is doing it. Sense the tone of the following, and remind yourself of history.

We fully understand, after five centuries under this fiendish system and the heinous savages that it serves, namely the white racist owners and operators of the means of destruction. We further understand that there have been previous attempts by our people in this country to throw off this degrading yoke of oppression, which have ended in failure. Throughout our history, black workers, first as slaves and later as pseudo freedmen, have been in the vanguard of potentially-successful revolutionary struggles in all black movements as well as in integrated efforts. As examples of these we cite: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the beautiful Haitian Revolution; the slave revolts led by Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser; the Populist movement and the labor movement of the Thirties in the US. Common to all these movements were two things: their failure and the reason why they failed. These movements failed because they were betrayed from within, or, in the case of the integrated movements, by white leadership exploiting the racist nature of the white workers they led. We, of course, must avoid that pitfall and purge our ranks of any traitors and lackeys that may succeed in penetrating this organization. At this point we loudly proclaim that we have learned our lesson from history and we shall not fail. So it is that we who are the hope of black people and all oppressed people everywhere dedicate ourselves to the cause of black liberation to build the world anew realizing that only a struggle led by black workers can triumph over our powerful reactionary enemy. (19)

The League's purpose is two-fold: to dissolve the bonds of white racist control, and thus, in turn, to relieve oppressed people the world over. It is fitting that the League's motto embodies the challenge: DARE TO STRUGGLE, DARE TO WIN!

As the reader goes through this issue and the important documents and analyses of black workers, I suggest that he remember the incisive comments of Karl Marx:

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” (20)

Certainly there is no more-fitting way to begin our own self-criticism.

New York Times on the UAW's corporatism: a rewriting of history

by Tom Eley (2009)

On June 2, the New York Times published a column by writer Steven Greenhouse describing the United Auto Workers Union (UAW) as a long-time antagonist of the Big Three US automakers, only temporarily reined in by a tenuous harmony of interests among union, business, and government.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Far from defending the interests of auto workers, the UAW has conspired with the Obama administration and its Auto Task Force to shift the crisis onto the backs of the workers it falsely claims to represent through plant closures, layoffs, wage and benefits cuts, and the gutting of workplace rules.

Greenhouse admits that the UAW will now be a corporate owner—he refers to this delicately as “a novel dual role.” He acknowledges that the “union” will “help management increase profitability—with the goal of pushing up the automakers’ stock prices”; that it has outlawed strikes against Chrysler and GM; and that in recent years “the union has worked with management to assure labor peace, raise productivity and...push down labor costs.”

Yet at the same time Greenhouse depicts the UAW as an unpredictable fighting force for workers, struggling to balance the interests of its membership with the survival of the auto industry. The columnist wonders whether the new contracts can end the “antagonistic relationship between union and management” or if instead the UAW “will stick to its traditional truculence.” The UAW has been, he claims, “by turns, hard-charging adversary and strategic partner.”

Summing up his false presentation of the UAW, Greenhouse declares, “For decades the United Automobile Workers had a simple strategy for getting what it wanted from carmakers—it would go out on strike.”

This presentation of the UAW begs the question: On what planet has Greenhouse resided for the past four decades? In fact, the UAW has long cultivated a corporatist policy of close collaboration with the auto companies.

The Times labor columnist’s interpretation of the UAW and its methods might have made a modicum of sense in 1970, the last time a major strike gripped the US auto industry. The 1970 GM strike, involving nearly 400,000 workers, shocked the bureaucracy. Though it ended in limited gains for rank-and-file auto workers, the two-month-long struggle nearly exhausted the UAW strike fund. From that moment on, top UAW officials sought to prevent, at all costs, long industry-wide strikes.

Since 1979, the UAW’s history is an unbroken chain of concessions and betrayals. That year, the UAW agreed to give up major concessions from Chrysler workers in order to secure government money for Chrysler’s bailout. In the midst of the negotiations, orchestrated by the Carter administration, Chrysler closed down its massive Dodge Main plant in Hamtramck, near

Detroit. The UAW stifled worker opposition to Dodge Main's destruction, and then forced through the concession demands of the government.

The Chrysler bankruptcy and the shutdown of Dodge Main set the pattern for the next thirty years. Beginning in the 1980s, the UAW sought to isolate and smother strikes of union locals, including at auto parts makers. At the same time, it moved to strip locals of their ability to authorize their own work actions. The bureaucracy oversaw the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs, even as its own income and privileges continued to grow, all the while veiling its complicity by scapegoating auto workers in Japan, Germany, and elsewhere.

The UAW's two-day strike "against" GM in 2007 was in fact a public relations stunt, orchestrated by union executives with the aim of preparing the rank-and-file for a massive concessions contract that included the establishment of a multi-billion dollar retiree health fund (the voluntary employees' beneficiary association or VEBA) which the bureaucracy would control, giving it a direct monetary interest in the impoverishment of auto workers.

During a three-month long strike in 2008 by workers at American Axle, a major parts supplier with factories in Michigan and New York, the UAW forestalled solidarity action from other auto workers. It offered striking workers a measly \$200 per week from its misnamed strike fund, which is currently estimated at nearly \$900 million.

Through its enormous assets—\$1.2 billion according to a recent Wall Street Journal estimate—and other streams of revenue, the UAW has effectively insulated itself from the massive job losses it has overseen. In 1979, the UAW had 1.5 million members. By 2008, this had fallen to 431,000, with job losses accelerating in recent months. Even though membership in the UAW declined by 40 percent between 2000 and 2008, UAW officials increased their combined salaries by more than \$11 million.

The fate of the UAW is the outcome of long historical processes bound up with the fortunes of American capitalism. When it was built in the 1930s, the rank-and-file leadership of the union was dominated by socialists—including Trotskyists—and militants. Even Walter Reuther (UAW president, 1946-1970) in the 1930s presented himself as a socialist.

However, Reuther and the UAW—and the American trade unions as a whole—made a pact with American capitalism, agreeing not to challenge the profit system and eschewing all earlier demands for expanding democratic control of the production process. This was closely bound up with a political marriage to the Democratic Party.

During WWII, the UAW subordinated workers to the US war effort through the no strike pledge. Reuther promised that Detroit's auto factories would be the "arsenals of democracy." In the early post-war period Reuther and the UAW bureaucrats purged the socialists and militants from the unions, and in 1955 he led the industrial unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) back into the arms of the reactionary American Federation of Labor (AFL).

Reuther wagered that the UAW would maintain its power, and win some concessions for workers, based on the global dominance of the American Big Three. The union's fortunes, Reuther proclaimed, were not separate from the Big Three and American imperialism.

The failure of this perspective was demonstrated with the sharp decline of the Big Three's global market share beginning in the late 1960s. But the bureaucracy's nationalist perspective remained. Its role was to make "its workers" competitive in the global market by joining with the Big Three in wringing concessions and overseeing factory shutdowns.

The UAW's efforts have failed to stem the crisis of profitability in the US auto industry. Now that the UAW has become the major owner of Chrysler and the second largest owner of GM, it has a direct interest in driving down the wages of auto workers in order to drive up the stock value of the Big Three.

The UAW, Inc. rejects the notion, once an a-b-c of even the most tepid trade unionism, that workers have interests independent of their employers. Indeed, it is the UAW's interests that are now diametrically opposed to those of the workers from whom it continues to collect dues. Greenhouse's falsification of the UAW and its history is no accident. That is precisely his beat at the Times. He is paid to write tributes to the union bureaucracy in order to polish its credentials for the newspapers' upper middle class readership.

Though the trade unions can no longer claim to represent workers, these organizations have not exhausted their usefulness. In addition to wresting concessions from and policing workers on behalf of business, the ex-unions play a critical role in suppressing the political independence of the working class. It is for this reason that Greenhouse paints the UAW in false colors.

Black Workers Hurt by Detroit's Ills

by Mary Chapman (2008)

The car companies were hardly multiracial utopias, but they, especially [Ford](#), employed blacks when many industries would not. Through the decades, the automakers and their higher wage scales provided a route to the middle class for many blacks, especially those with limited education, and their children.

Now, with Detroit reeling, many blacks find their economic well-being threatened.

By last month, nearly 20,000 African-American auto workers had lost jobs, a 13.9 percent decline in employment, since the recession began last December, according to government jobs data analyzed by the [Economic Policy Institute](#), a liberal Washington research firm. That compares with a 4.4 percent decline for all workers in manufacturing.

“African-Americans earn much higher wages in the auto industry than in other parts of the economy, and the loss of these solid, middle-class jobs would be devastating,” said a report this month by the Economic Policy Institute.

“The motor vehicle and parts industry, a sector of the economy that has been particularly welcoming to African-Americans, is becoming a shrinking island of prosperity,” the report said. Claudia Perkins, 55, who has worked in the automobile industry for 33 years and is now at [G.M.](#)'s assembly plant at Lake Orion, Mich., put it more bluntly. “If it wasn't for the factory, the average black would not have been able to survive all these years, especially without an education,” she said.

African-Americans occupy most rungs of the car production ladder, from plant workers to white-collar employees to auto suppliers and car dealers. Nelson White III, an industrial materials analyst at [Ford Motor](#)'s transmission plant in Livonia, Mich., said he was concerned that other African-Americans would not receive the opportunities he has.

Mr. White started as an hourly worker in a Ford factory, attended college under a Ford program and made the leap to management in 1999. In May, he will graduate with a master's degree in organizational leadership.

“There's a saying that when America catches a cold, African-Americans catch the flu,” said Mr. White.

As in most recessions, African-Americans have been hit harder by this recession than other workers. The overall unemployment rate for blacks increased to 11.2 percent in November, an increase of 2.8 percentage points over last year. By comparison, national unemployment last month was 6.7 percent, up 2 percentage points from a year ago.

In all, blacks made up 14.2 percent of the total automotive work force in 2007, according to the policy institute report, compared with 11.2 percent of the overall American work force. Blacks in the manufacturing and parts sector earned \$17.08 an hour, compared with \$15.44 an hour for blacks in all industries, the report said.

“Because African-Americans continue to have less education than other groups, the loss of high-paying manufacturing jobs has long been magnified in the black community,” said

Robert E. Scott of the policy institute. “When benefits are considered, the auto industry is one of the best sources of jobs for workers without a college degree.”

For instance, 21.9 percent of black workers in the nation’s overall work force have four-year college degrees, compared with 33.7 percent of whites in the entire labor force, Mr. Scott said.

Almost from the beginning, blacks found opportunities in the car companies when they did not find them in other industries. In the early 1940s, while many industries in the United States were enforcing or even creating segregated workplaces — [United States Steel](#)’s factories and dormitories around Birmingham, Ala., were an example — [Henry Ford](#) employed blacks and whites in the same plants.

Ford and other auto company owners pioneered the hiring of black workers, though many of them were often given the dirtiest jobs. Ms. Perkins, the G.M. worker, was raised in Jemison, Ala., about 45 miles south of Birmingham. She moved north in the 1950s with her parents, who found work in the auto industry.

Her mother took a job in Flint, Mich., at AC Spark Plug, now owned by the [Delphi Corporation](#), while her father worked for 28 years at the Fisher Body plant of G.M., winding up as the operator of a power sweeper.

“There was always so much talk down South about the manufacturing jobs up here and how easy you could get a job,” said Ms. Perkins, whose siblings and other relatives work in the auto industry. “People were excited about the pay, and after they’d get a job they would help their families back in the South. They would all the time drive their new cars down and show them off.”

Ms. Perkins, however, resisted going to work in “some grungy factory.” But after an aunt, who was a plant manager, persuaded Ms. Perkins to apply at AC Spark Plug, she gave in. “I made one paycheck and told myself I’d quit after one more, but that day never came,” she said, chuckling. Her earnings helped her buy a home and pay college expenses for her daughter, an Army major who received a teaching degree. Thus far, Ms. Perkins has escaped the job cuts at G.M.

Some black auto dealers have not been as lucky. About 150 of the nation’s 2,000 minority dealers have closed this year, and 300 more could shut by the middle of January, said Damon Lester, president of the National Association of Minority Auto Dealers.

About 95 percent of all minority dealers are first-generation owners, as opposed to 30 percent of the nation’s non-minority dealers, who are more established and have more clout at banks, said Mr. Lester, which in these days of tight credit can make a big difference.

“Capitalization from a historical standpoint has always been an issue,” he said. “Then when a downturn occurs, black dealerships are less likely to weather economic storms.”

Detroit’s three automakers have minority dealer development programs, which have provided training, mentoring and loans to prospective dealers.

But as automakers eliminate some brands and models under the restructuring plans they have submitted to Congress, Mr. Lester said, those programs could suffer. Half of all minority dealerships sell Detroit vehicles.

“A lot of minorities got their first opportunities through these programs,” he said. “And that’s a good thing. But we want to make sure those programs don’t go away.”

G.M. said it planned to continue its minority dealer development program although the program would save money by using teleconferencing in place of some physical dealer meetings, said Susan Garontakos, dealer communications manager.

While G.M. told Congress it would cut its dealership network by 35 percent, black dealers would not be singled out, she said.

“Everyone is facing significant challenges in the U.S. market, given changes in the landscape and the economic downturns,” Ms. Garontakos said. “But our program is very important, and our diverse dealer network is a strategic advantage. It’s very important to the way we look at our business and market our cars and trucks.”

In Atlanta, Steve Harrell, who is black, said he hoped he would be one of the dealers left standing. Mr. Harrell, president of the Harrell Swatty Company, has 12 showrooms across the country, selling Ford, G.M., Kia, Lexus, and others. .

An auto dealer for 21 years, he said he expected his total showroom sales to drop to \$200 million by the end of this year, from \$320 million in 2007. He has cut his staff to 375 employees, from 600.

“All dealers are suffering,” Mr. Harrell said. “But we were the last ones to the table, so our staying power, our ability to hang in there, is not as great as nonminorities’.” If his showrooms are unable to get loans within the next 60 days, “we could be extinct,” he said.

So could some parts suppliers. There are roughly 60 black-owned parts suppliers in the United States, with about \$3.5 billion in sales. One is Leon Richardson, who owns a supply company, ChemicoMays, in Chesterfield, Mich., that does 65 percent of its business with the automobile industry. About 60 percent of its 200 employees are black, said Mr. Richardson, who is also chairman of the National Association of Black Automotive Suppliers.

“The credit market has always been extremely tight and difficult for black suppliers even before this meltdown. It was difficult for them to generate cash as it was, and it’s going to be more difficult,” Mr. Richardson said.