

BLACK BROTHERS HAVE A BETTER IDEA

by KATHY MCAFEE

The insurgencies of young and black workers in basic industry are among the most important political developments the movement has seen. They are beginning to break through the carefully constructed barrier between bread and butter issues and questions of politics and control which has prevented workers from understanding and challenging the basis of their exploitation. Militant black caucuses are attacking the white supremacist practices that have kept workers divided and powerless. At the same time, through the example of their determination to strike a blow at the companies, they are beginning to build the basis of unity. The actions of these workers have shown that even while it is reproduced in the institutions of the superstructure, the class struggle is still very much alive around the point of production.

Increasingly, especially among blacks, these insurgencies are seen by the workers themselves as part of a broader political movement. During the recent black wildcat at Ford's Mahwah, N.J. assembly plant, the strikers were aware of the actions taken by black workers at other plants throughout the country. They also saw in the militancy of the struggles of black students in the high schools and colleges an example they should follow, and they asked both SDS and the Black Panthers to come and give them support.

The importance of building strong ties between these workers and the movement--or rather, of making these struggles part of the same movement, can hardly be overstated. But because of our lack of experience, and often because of political confusion, most movement people are not very clear about what our specific role in relation to workers' movements should be. This was very apparent at Mahwah.

Ford Mahwah is a huge complex employing 4,200 workers. Since it is an assembly plant, few skilled workers are needed, and about a third of the workers are black. Most of the whites live in the surrounding suburbs, but the blacks commute from the cities, including Newark and New York, about 50 miles away.

As is true everywhere, black workers have the least seniority rights, and are systematically prevented from getting them. (They are most often fired, harassed into quitting, or let go before the end of the 90-day probationary period, after which they are supposed to get their rights as union members.) As at most places, blacks have the worst jobs, like in the body shop, and are concentrated on the night shift, which is worse in terms of both hours and work load. This way most of the black workers are separated from the whites. Needless to say, the white controlled union does nothing to right the imbalance.

SPEED-UP

But conditions are bad and growing worse for all the workers, black and white. The already exhausting pace of the assembly line is speeded up whenever the company can get away with it. Fork lifts and other machines are made to carry loads well beyond their safe operating limit. The stifling heat of the plant during summer has often caused workers to collapse on the line. Meanwhile, air-conditioning equipment sits on the roof of the plant--uninstalled. Instead, there are bottles of salt pellets. Breakdowns in equipment and floors covered with water and grease make jobs dangerous, but an injured man has to wait for permission from a foreman to leave the line. Speed-up pressure forces workers to ignore safety standards not only for themselves but also for the cars they produce. Mahwah's production policy was summed up by one worker: "When a part doesn't fit, get a hammer. If it still doesn't fit, get a bigger hammer."

Blacks are hurt worse, but everybody is harassed, and all new workers are threatened with probationary firings. The union lets Ford get away with all this, and fails to fight over individual grievances as well; 2,000 unprocessed grievances were left standing at the end of last year.

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In January, 1968, racial harassment provoked a spontaneous walkout of black workers. The walkout lasted four days until union officials talked the men into returning with promises they never kept, and several men were suspended. Then last fall, a group of black workers formed a caucus called the United Black Brothers (UBB). "UBB" buttons began to appear in the plant, especially on the night shift.

This spring, on the April 23 night shift, a black worker from the body shop went to the office of supervisor Ray Eskew, well-known as a racist, to ask about a work assignment. When Eskew ordered the man back on the line, the worker told Eskew to stop treating him "like an animal". Eskew's response: "You're fired, you black motherfucker".

The worker went back to the line and told the other men what had happened, and a meeting was held over dinner break in the locker room. Some of the workers were ready to walk off right away, but it was agreed to go to the union committeeman and the company labor relations department first. When the union man and the labor relations rep said they could do nothing but write out another grievance, the men were ready for action, and this time the action would be organized.

THE DEMANDS

The next day the UBB called a meeting of black workers only and adopted a list of demands including (1) removal of Ray Eskew as foreman, (2) transfer of all racist foremen from Ford Mahwah, (3) re-hiring of all workers fired by these racists, and (4) an end to the kangaroo court grievance procedures used by the company, with the union's cooperation, whenever a man is fired.

As the word spread, production was slowed on the April 24 night shift, and many black workers failed to report. UBB demands were not met, and the Brothers began to organize workers to stay off the job. They took over the union hall, about a mile from the plant, and they called on SDS and the Panthers for support.

On the morning of Friday, April 25, about 50 SDS people showed up at the plant. We milled around the gates with the black workers, helped pass out leaflets, and shook our heads in sympathy when black workers' cars conveniently "stalled" right where they blocked the plant entrances. Not enough workers stayed out that day to shut down production, but the night shift, which is about 70% black, was shut down completely.

As soon as it was clear that no cars would be produced at Mahwah that night, we all gathered for an open meeting in the union hall. Close to 300 workers were there, mostly black, some Puerto Rican, and a very few white. One by one, black workers got up and described conditions in the plant and their treatment there. The main theme which emerged was the denial to blacks of "human dignity", and their determination to fight back. Many workers, in talking about the strike, used analogies with the struggles on the campuses. They clearly felt that their strike and the students' fights were in some way part of the same struggle. One black worker from the paint shop day shift said, "For years I've put up with this shit. Now my son's in high school and he's not taking it any more. If I don't do something, I'm not really a man."

The SDS people who were invited to speak talked mainly about the common fight against racism on the campuses and in the factories. They explained that we were not there to organize the workers or to lead them, but to learn from them and to give them every kind of support we could. The SDS speakers received long and loud applause, and there was a strong feeling of unity and determination. The next time the Brothers came to open the hall, they found that the lock had been changed by the Union.

As pig harassment made the blocking of entrances

more difficult, the tactic changed on Monday to students and some workers standing out on the roads leading to the plant and waving workers on to the reopened union hall instead of to work. This pattern continued through the week, with the UBB holding meetings during each shift to discuss grievances and strategy. (After a couple of days, the union hall was reopened) Anywhere from 50 to 150 workers usually attended. New demands were added, including recognition of the UBB as spokesman for the black workers, more representation of blacks in grievance procedures, and protection of all striking workers from firing and other reprisals.

SDS ON PICKET LINE

Through most of the week, from 25 to 50 SDS people from different chapters left New York and north Jersey each day at 4 AM and 1 PM to join the picket lines at shift change. Most of the time we drove to the union hall where we met briefly with a few of the Brothers to discuss tactics. Then we went out onto the roads leading to the plant. Some of us talked with the black workers who were with us, but very few of us made any attempts to approach white workers. And, except for a few small caucuses, we held no general meetings among ourselves to discuss strategy.

We were tremendously elated by the initial success of the strike, and by the feeling that we were finally involved in something "real". Our presence did seem to have some effect in boosting the moral of the strikers and in encouraging other workers not to go in. Especially in the beginning, not all of the striking workers were enthusiastic about us. A few of the older workers in particular resented the presence of students, and especially students from SDS, but the majority seemed to feel that they needed and wanted our support.

But because for most of us, this was our first experience with an industrial strike, we weren't sure of how to evaluate the strike and our role in it, and we made a number of mistakes which will be discussed later.

That week production was slowed on all shifts and shut down on the night shift on three occasions. Especially in the beginning, a large proportion of the black workers, and many whites as well, stayed off the job. For a wildcat, and especially one led by workers who are in the minority in the plant, this was extremely successful.

But it became apparent by the middle of the week that the strike was no longer gaining momentum. The number of workers on the lines and at the meetings was not increasing--if anything, there were fewer. The company was making no concessions. In a wildcat, this kind of stalemate can be fatal. Especially for older workers with debts to pay and families to feed, every day's loss of pay causes a hardship, and every day off the job makes firing more likely. As soon as it appears as if substantial concessions cannot be won, the pressure on a man to return to work is tremendous.

FORD POWER

Ford's power was greater than the power of the wildcat. In the first place, the experience of working for Ford robs workers of the ability to control their own lives. The physical plant itself and the authority structure within the plant separates workers and prevents them from working cooperatively and from using their own minds and wills.

The existence of the union does nothing to overcome this fragmentation; it does not give workers the experience of organizing themselves, or a sense of their own power. The problem with the union is not so much a lack of formal democracy--the UBB was able to influence the election of a sympathetic (white) president of the local, only to find

that after a few weeks in office, the new officer acted just like the old one. Rather, the problem with the union is its pro-capitalist ideology, the whole series of practical accommodations it has made with the company over the years, and most importantly, its systematic denial of information to the workers.

During the strike Ford didn't hesitate to use all the resources it had to attack the workers. For example, every 15 minutes the company sponsored an announcement on Newark's black radio station telling the lie that production was back to normal and that all workers were returning to their jobs. Ford sent telegrams to striking workers, urging them to return and threatened to fire anyone automatically who missed five days. It forced those who worked to stay overtime and report early so that the picket lines would be less effective. Finally, when the company saw that it was safe to do so, it began firing the strike leaders one by one.

Ford could never have succeeded in this if it were not for the collaboration of the UAW. First, when it became clear that the wildcat was serious and had a lot of support among black workers, the union tried to take credit for what the UBB had achieved. Early in the week, the racist supervisor who caused the original incident was "transferred", and the union claimed it was responsible for this. It told workers to stay on the job--"We're taking care of everything"--and boasted that a high "Negro" union official had come all the way from Detroit just to sit on a committee to discuss Mahwah grievances! The union lied to the workers about what was actually happening, and wasn't above playing on racism to keep the workers divided: "There's no meeting today, and anyway, they won't let whites into it." The union red-baited SDS and told workers that outside agitators were leading the UBB by the nose. Toward the end of the strike, it issued a press release stating that "Black militants using Hitler-like tactics and SDS hippies will not dictate to the UAW."

This baiting by the union did seem to have an effect on many of the workers, who became much less willing to admit publicly that they had invited us, and certainly it intimidated many of our own people.

The misleading radio announcements and union statements, the firings and threatened firings began to have their intended effect, and gradually people began returning to work. By the middle of the second week, the strike had ended without the remaining demands (after the transfer of Eskew) being met, and without the rehiring of the fired men.

UNITED BLACK BROTHERS

Although several of the leaders have been fired, the UBB still has a solid core of workers in the plant. Many members and supporters were gained during the strike, which indicated to workers that the UBB is serious. The brothers say they have gone back into the plant to organize, and will come out again, stronger than ever. A group of Puerto Rican workers has organized in coalition with the UBB, and there is a growing number of white contacts. (UBB membership is officially open to whites.)

Since the strike there have been several unexplained fires, a breakdown on the assembly line because someone jammed a metal block into the machinery, and a short, spontaneous walkout over the heat in the plant. A UBB member said the Brothers were not connected with these incidents: "They're doing on their own now, and that's revolutionary." Another brother said, "The seeds are definitely planted in the workers minds--from here you can develop class consciousness."

The Mahwah experience raised a lot of questions in the minds of SDS people about the relation of race to class demands--a problem that has divided the white movement and that is causing tensions within the revolutionary black movement as well.

It is clear that white supremacist practices and

attitudes are an extremely important factor in keeping industrial workers divided and preventing the development of class consciousness. The basis of unity is a strong black movement that attacks those privileges at the same time that it fights the boss and the oppression of all workers. In fact, the development of any strong workers' movement depends now on the momentum and the consciousness of the black workers in the vanguard.

In the case of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and other black workers' movements, it has been the identification of the workers with the black liberation movement--their "national consciousness"--that has given them the determination to stand up against the boss, even when this has meant defying the white workers. Once black workers have achieved this unity and strength, then black and white workers can unite without whites dominating.

During the strike many of us were confused about how Mahwah fit into this analysis. The tactics of the UBB are different in many respects from those of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit, with which we were more familiar. This seemed to us to imply that their strategy was different, too. For example, except for the first meeting, all the UBB meetings were open to white workers as well as blacks. A special leaflet was handed out asking for support from white workers and the UBB emphasized in the leaflet and in speeches at the meetings that ALL workers were affected by the issues of the strike--lousy working conditions, harassment, probationary firings, the sell-out union, etc.

Some of us privately criticized the UBB for not putting their explicit emphasis on racism. We felt that they were not appealing to the consciousness of the black workers, and the fact that even on the night shifts quite a few black workers stayed on the job seemed to confirm this. We understood that conditions in Detroit and Mahwah are different--at Mahwah, black workers are in the minority, and the plant is surrounded by conservative, white, suburban Jersey--and we thought that the UBB had changed their line after the first day, when they saw that white support would be needed in order for the strike to succeed.

RACE AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

However, conversations which some of us have had with leaders of the UBB since the strike have revealed that the Brothers had a more subtle and probably a more realistic understanding of the relation of race to class consciousness than we did.

In the first place, the Brothers explained, nobody had to explain to workers that the basic issue was racism--"We were talking about racism even if we said 'oppression', and every black worker knew it. On the level of black consciousness, black workers are already together. The problem is to convince them you're not bullshitting, that you're really serious about going out. We've already got their minds; we just have to get their bodies to move, and this is a process that takes time." This is why the UBB felt it was essential to meet with the blacks alone FIRST and convince them to vote in favor of the strike before going on. "This way it was a black thing from the beginning."

The ultimate goal, the UBB says, is class consciousness. "But class consciousness has to develop in stages. We wanted to appeal to the white workers because eventually everybody is going to walk out of that plant together. White workers have their privileges--an easy job on the day shift, a house in the suburbs, and they go on vacations with their brownie cameras--but they also know they're oppressed. They bitch in the lunch room just like we do, and they know that if a white worker steps out of line, he can get

"The way we look at it," a UBB leader said, "is that the door is always open for the white workers--we're just not going to wait for them. I'm not going to spend my energies organizing white workers, but

eventually they're going to come along. We encourage this, and it's already beginning to happen at Mahwah. But white workers are going to have to accept justifiable black demands, and they're going to have to accept black leadership."

"The thing that scared the union most during the strike was that white workers would walk out, too. Some of them wanted to come out, but the union did everything possible to sabotage it. One thing we need now is some good white organizers in that plant."

SUPPORTERS CONFUSED

In retrospect, we can recognize a lot of mistakes that we movement people made in relating to the strike. In the first place, our lack of familiarity with wildcats or with strikes of any kind led to some strange attitudes. There were some people who, when it became clear that the UBB wasn't going to bring down Ford in a day, lost enthusiasm very quickly. There were others who, when we saw that the blacks didn't always know what to do made statements like, "If they can't even get themselves together, why should we be out here supporting them?", revealing the racist assumption that blacks are incapable of organizing without our advice.

On the whole, however, people were willing to come to the plant regularly, respect UBB leadership, and support the strike in any way they could. The trouble was that, outside of standing on the picket lines, we weren't sure what to do, and very few of us spent much time talking with the workers, black or white.

We didn't familiarize ourselves with the workers' grievances and conditions inside the plant. We stood on the sidelines speculating about the consciousness of the workers and the effect of the strike on them instead of finding out from the people involved. Despite all our rhetoric in the movement about the need to communicate our anti-racist and anti-imperialist politics, we did almost nothing to explain even to the strikers who we were, and why we as SDS supported the strike. Thus we not only failed to project our politics and to arm the workers with political ideas, but we did nothing to combat the baiting of us as outside agitators and hippies bent on disruption.

It became clear after a while that the reason we were not talking to workers was that we ourselves were not really sure why we were supporting the strike and what our relation was to black and white workers. In fairness it should be said that a couple of our LEADERS explained very well at the early strike meetings that we were there because we and the workers were fighting a common enemy--racism, and we were there to learn. But ALL of us should have been much more clear, at least to the black workers, that (1) we were there to support the strikers and learn from them, and not to organize or lead them, as the media were claiming; (2) we saw the anti-racist aspect of the strike as part of the same struggle we are engaged in around the schools; (3) we believe that we and the strikers are fighting a common enemy in the system run by and for the owners of Ford and other corporations, that divides and channels us in the schools so that it can better divide and exploit us in the factories; and (4) we were there not as a student power interest group, but as part of a revolutionary POLITICAL MOVEMENT organized to fight that system.

Some SDS people were disturbed about our presence on the line because they felt we were "alienating white workers." No doubt we did cause resentment among many white workers, especially since we never explained to them why we were there, at the same time that we helped encourage the strikers and persuaded other workers to stay out. Sometimes a white worker would respond angrily to a student with a leaflet, saying or implying, "Who are YOU to tell ME to strike?"

Other times workers were friendly, took the leaflets, and sometimes decided not to go to work.

WHITE WORKER RESPONSE

Very few white workers ever came to UBB meetings and it is difficult to evaluate their response to the strike. Many stayed off the job for at least a day, and there was reportedly a great deal of sentiment in support of the demands among those who did go to work. But with the union actively working to undermine the strike, and without organizers in the plant to mobilize sympathetic white workers, it is hard to judge the potential for white support of a black-led movement at Mahwah at the present time.

But we allowed our political doubts and confusions to serve as an excuse for not finding out what the attitudes of the white workers were or for trying to develop contacts among them. One reason was that we tended to think of ourselves as white students who had no direct stake in the struggle, rather than as a revolutionary movement whose job it is to work for the unity of oppressed people against the system. Or, we had the vague idea that our mere presence would in some symbolic way transmit to white workers the message that fighting white supremacy and fighting alongside blacks was in their interests.

All this is not to imply that we should have approached white workers thoughtlessly. 500 long-haired kids stopping workers at the gate to demand that they hand over their privileges definitely would not have helped. The question is not whether we should have approached the white workers, but HOW. In any strike like this, the questions of whether or not we should stand on the picket lines with workers or in place of workers, whether we should write our own leaflets or not, whether we should speak to white workers as SDS or develop contacts individually etc., are all important tactical questions that can't always be answered in advance, and that we will be better able to answer as we gain more experience. But at Mahwah we learned little about this because we tried almost nothing.

If even one white movement person had been working in the Mahwah plant before the strike began, it could have made a crucial difference in our relationship to the strike--we should learn a lesson from this.

There was one white radical in the plant who considered himself an organizer. Unfortunately, his allegiance to the Progressive Labor Party resulted in his having the opposite effect. According to the black workers, he condemned the organization of the UBB from the beginning because "it would divide the workers". Because of his attitude toward the workers--eg, he criticized them for listening to the "counter-revolutionary" Beatles--nobody wanted to sit with him at lunch. When the strike broke out, he took the position that "the time wasn't right", and except for one afternoon when Jeff Gordon dropped in, none of his PL brothers showed up to support the strike. This was just as well, since when the UBB invited SDS to come to Mahwah, one of the conditions was that we wouldn't bring any PL people with us.

But under the circumstances, there was a definite limit to the political affect we could have hoped to have, whatever we did. We were outsiders, we took no real risks ourselves, and gave little concrete material support to the strike. (The picket lines were not set up in such a way that they absolutely depended on outside help, as is sometimes true in wildcats.) In short, without any political base or contacts among the workers, without ties built up through the experience of common struggle, the political work we could have done would have been of a preliminary sort.

The point is, we should have begun to develop that base and build those ties.

