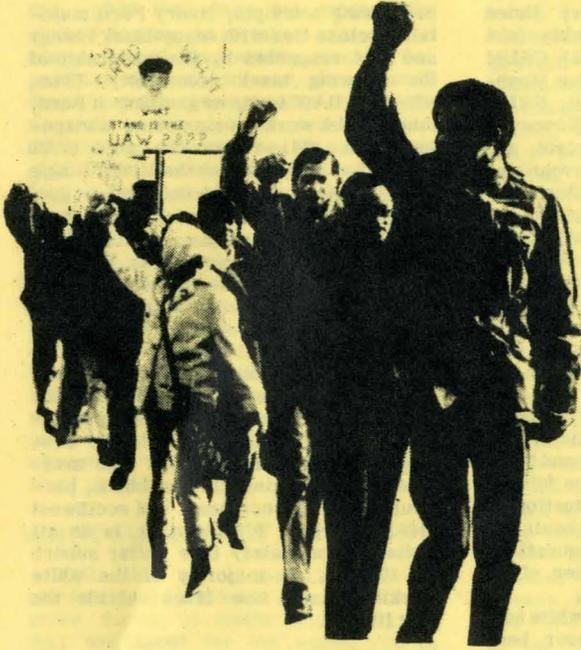


BLACK WORKERS SET THE PACE



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Almost every major factory in Detroit contains a groups of militant, sometimes, radical black workers discontented with the white supremacist policies of management and the unions. Over the last several months this unrest has found organizational expression in the formation of revolutionary black worker organizations.

DRUM--Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement at Hamtramck Assembly (see the MOVEMENT, January, 1969); CRUM --Chevrolet Revolutionary Union Movement at a GM plant in Detroit; FRUM --Ford Revolutionary Union Movement at the massive River Rouge plant; and now ELRUM--Eldon Avenue Revolutionary Union Movement at Chrysler's Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle plant are some of the examples. Recently these groups have come together to form the League of Black Revolutionary Workers.

Last month members of ELRUM called a wildcat against management and union racism, upsetting the efforts of both Chrysler and the UAW to impose industrial discipline.

Since these black worker struggles will be increasing it is critical, that we as white organizers, understand these actions and relate to them. The following is an analysis of the situation in Detroit, with particular emphasis on ELRUM and an attempt to raise questions about how these black struggles effect white working class organizing.

Relations between black and white auto workers in Detroit have never been close. In the early years of the auto industry blacks were excluded from the production lines by the companies. The labor force was made up of newly arrived ethnic groups, primarily Poles and Italians, as well as Southern whites who readily accepted the idea that although they were working ten hours a day, six days a week, they were better off than the "nigger janitor".

SPLIT THE WORKERS

One of the first companies to hire black workers was Ford. Recognizing the advantages of a cheap labor supply that might be mobilized against union

organizing attempts, Henry Ford maintained close ties with many black clergy and was respected by the leadership of the growing black community. Thus, when the UAW began organizing at Ford, many black workers supported management. In 1941, when the auto union called for a walkout at the River Rouge plant, blacks attacked the picket lines and attempted to break the union. As a result white antagonism to blacks increased. During World War II many work stoppages occurred in protest to the introduction of black workers on the assembly lines in Detroit.

Since the early 1950s the proportion of blacks in the urban unskilled and semi-skilled work force has increased as the result of two trends. The first is the movement of whiteworkers to the suburbs. Detroit is now ringed with massive white working class suburbs, particularly on the northeast and southwest sides. Warren, for example, is an all white predominately blue collar suburb of 179,000. A majority of the white working class now lives outside the city limits.

PLANTS FOLLOW WORKERS

In many cases their migration has been followed by the movement of new industrial plants into these areas. Since World War II only one major automobile plant has been constructed within Detroit, whereas many have been built in the new suburbs. An example is Chrysler's Sterling Stamping Plant, some twelve miles from the Detroit city line. It is one of the few Chrysler plants which does not have a majority of black workers. As this trend continues the older plants in the city will increasingly be manned by blacks.

The second important trend has been

the increasing automation in the auto industry. This has caused an over-all decrease in the number of unskilled and semi-skilled production jobs. Automation, coupled with moves by the management to decentralize the auto industry, has resulted in the loss of many jobs. In Michigan and Ohio alone more than 190,000 auto jobs have been lost since 1950.

These job losses have been partially compensated for by the growth of the service industries which have provided jobs for working class whites. The sons and daughters of white production workers, when they have not entered the skilled trades, have taken jobs as gas station attendants, vending machine repairmen, delivery drivers, etc. Although these service jobs usually do not pay as well as auto jobs the working conditions are often not nearly as oppressive. When young white workers do take jobs on the production lines, they usually choose to work in the newer plants in their suburbs.

Blacks are needed to fill the remaining production jobs in the city, especially because of the high turnover rate. One third of all new auto workers do not last a year. As a result the work force in the Detroit auto plants consists of a majority of black hourly production workers, a significant minority of older (over 45) white men and women, and an almost all white skilled trades department of all ages.

WHITE SUPREMACY ON THE JOB

While they are a majority in many plants black workers are faced with three forms of white supremacy: 1) they are hired for the worst jobs in the plant; 2) they often do not have access to the better jobs; and 3) they are oppressed by racist individuals in both union and management.

All the worst jobs--foundry work, body shop, engine assembly--are predominantly black. Blacks will be found wherever a job requires hard physical labor or subjection to tremendous noise or dirt. This is especially true for black women who are given many difficult jobs. At Eldon Avenue, for example, they are required to lift 40 pound axles. White women, on the other hand, are usually found in the tool crib (parts department) or receiving and shipping departments.

More significant in the eyes of the black workers is the difficult they face in gaining access to better jobs. In many auto plants upgrading (the ability to switch jobs for more desirable ones) is not determined in an objective fashion. The upgrading test is administered by a foreman and marked secretly. The applicant is only told whether he passed or failed. When new positions open in the plant, white workers, with their connections (friends and family) in the local union or lower management circles are the first to know and the first to apply. Lacking these connections blacks rarely receive such benefits. Often both management and union pass over seniority in order to place white workers in better positions. Finally, there is almost no movement of blacks into the skilled trades, which are better paying and far more secure from the threat of automation.

On their jobs black workers are also often faced with all white supervisor staffs both in management and union. Very few of the management personnel are black and many of the foremen are individual racist. At Eldon Avenue, for example, blacks claim that over 100 blacks have been fired because of their skin color by general foreman "Maddog" Larry. To make matters worse, the local union bureaucracy remains firmly in the hands of the older ethnic groups. While the UAW has promoted civil rights legislation and waged campaigns against racial discrimination in Detroit, on the shop floor many of its stewards and committee men are obviously anti-black. Typical of liberal institutions that are always fighting someone else's battle, the UAW has failed to deal with racism in the plants and within its own local structure. For all its public backing of moderate-militant blacks, to the black worker at Eldon Avenue, the failure to force the ouster of people like Maddog Larry is more significant than all the pious tributes to Martin Luther King.

ORGANIZING AGAINST RACISM

Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle is a key plant in the Chrysler empire. It produces the axles for every Chrysler car. It is an old plant with poor working conditions. 60% of the workers are black. Although Local 691 has black stewards and committee men the union is controlled by southern white and

Polish workers. (See Larry Laskowski's article).

ELRUM was organized in November, 1968, patterned very closely after DRUM. Its first public activity was the distribution of a four page newsletter--ELRUM--which emphasized various racial abuses by union and management personnel. Individual stewards, foremen and supervisors were singled out as racists, and the black union leadership was severely criticized for Toming. Production of the newspaper provided an organizational focus. Internal education seminars, led by Panther and ELRUM leaders were conducted. At these seminars a strong anti-capitalist ideology was put forth with the intent of building a cadre of revolutionary black workers. However, the drawing power of ELRUM in the shop was on the basis of exposing management and union racism.

STRATEGY

The black radicals in Detroit--League of Revolutionary Black Workers, Panthers, Black High School Association--hold a perspective that organizing black workers and making them aware of their central position in the major industry in the United States is the primary task. They have emphasized organizing in the factories as a means of generating motion in the community.

Typical of this thrust is the way in which blacks have utilized the Wayne State University paper, the SOUTH END. Controlled by black revolutionaries, its banner line reading, "One Class-Conscious Worker is Worth 100 Students", the editors fill the SOUTH END with articles on DRUM and ELRUM which are passed out at factory gates around Detroit.

ELRUM SUPPORT

by Larry Laskowski, Detroit NOC

(Note: Larry Laskowski was a white tool and die maker at the Eldon Avenue plant.)

ELRUM's demand that the platform in Department 71 be replaced is a minimal one when the other conditions in this department are considered. Department 71 is the second noisiest and dirtiest at Eldon Avenue. It also requires a great deal of physical labor, since a never ending flow of rear-end housings that start out weighing approximately twelve pounds and end up weighing over thirty pounds have to be lifted, carried and stacked. The amount of dirt and grease in Department 71 is so bad that a toolmaker who does repairs on the machine that forms the rear-end housing usually has to change his overalls when he's finished. This dirt and grease is on the floor as well as the machine and produces an obvious safety hazard.

Department 72, where the rear-end housing are machined requires an amount of physical labor equal to that in 71 and is the noisiest department in Eldon. The noise is so bad you have to yell at the top of your lungs to be heard by a person standing next to you. The filth in this department takes the

form of a shiny solution of lubricant and water that bathes the machine operators for eight hours. It is so bad they must wear rubber boots and aprons. Of course, a safety hazard exists here also, since the lubricating solution can cause a person to slip and fall as easily as the oil in department 71.

Nobody expects to get a production job and not have to put up with some form of physical labor, but goddamit at least the worker deserves some protection from noise that could ruin his hearing and obvious slipping hazards that could split his skull.

These hazards could be done away with but Chrysler corporation might have to spend a few bucks and this might cause a decrease in profits. And besides why spend money on two departments that are 80% (actually more like 95%) black. If one of those "niggers" falls and breaks his skull there will be another in the employment office willing to take his place. Apparently this is their attitude since they aren't concerned with doing away with the hazards. As a matter of fact they seem more concerned with doing away with the people who have brought the hazards to their attention--ELRUM.

As an organizational form, ELRUM is not a traditional radical caucus within a local union. The strategy has been to organize independently of the union, promoting tactical flexibility and minimizing the formation of parochial attitudes so prevalent in trade union organizing attempts. Black workers at Eldon Avenue are not simply organized to change conditions in the plant; they are in solidarity with other black workers around the nation, with groups moving in the community, and with all blacks struggling to overturn the system.

This organizational form allows ELRUM to consider running candidates for local union offices while at the same time supporting demonstrations against Chrysler recruiters at Wayne State, or organizing black high school groups in support of Malcolm X day. The tight coordination between the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the Panthers, and the black high school movement is a significant step forward in organizing a city-wide black movement, with power at the point of production.

ACTION IN THE SHOP

After distributing their newsletter for two months ELRUM began to move on the question of grievances. The cumbersome grievance procedure of the UAW, which settles everything as far from the shop floor as possible, has created a huge backlog of unresolved disputes. This past fall the problem of unresolved grievances led to a number of wildcat strikes in the Detroit auto plants.

ELRUM decided to bring a number of grievances, many concerning the company's racist policies directly to Local 961. On January 22, some 300 black workers, some taking off from work, stormed into the union hall to demand all grievances resolved. The local union leadership failed to give assurances that grievances would be settled shortly, and stood by while Chrysler fired two workers and penalized others for missing work while attending the meeting.

ELRUM called for a strike on January 27th around nineteen demands. Most deal with racism--the hiring of more black workers and the appointment of more blacks to management positions. ELRUM demanded 75 workers in the skilled division, three black nurses in the hospital and six black General Foremen. They demanded amnesty for

the workers fired and removal of other penalties imposed on those workers who participated in the union meeting. Other demands centered around working conditions in the plant: removal of all safety hazards--grease and dirt on the floor, repair of the ragged metal platform in Department 71--and a resolution of all pending grievances. Finally, ELRUM demanded that a committee of black workers be appointed to review applications for skilled workers.

The walkout was partially successful with about two-thirds of the first and second shifts refusing to enter the plant. Many key departments were closed. About 40% of the workers did not report for the three shifts that Monday. People from the black community, many members of the Black Panther Party, stood on the picket lines while cop cars drove by and union photographers snapped pictures.

Chrysler took immediate action against the wildcat. The next day 25 workers were fired and 86 disciplined. All were fired and disciplined on general charges of "misconduct". In addition management resurrected an injunction, first used against DRUM last July, which prevents DRUM-ELRUM from picketing any Chrysler plant anywhere in the world! The Chrysler Corporation, after its experience with DRUM, was determined to crush ELRUM immediately. A long work stoppage at Eldon Avenue would expose the soft underbelly of one of the ten largest corporations in the world, and both ELRUM and management knew it.

ACTION AGAINST THE LAW

To force the UAW to fight against the firing and suspensions, ELRUM picketed the international headquarters of the union. Standing in front of UAW "Solidarity House", the protestors shouted, "Black for our People, Red for our Blood, Green for our Land". As usual, UAW photographers and cops were on the scene. After meeting with Shelton Tappas, an Uncle Tom from the Fair Practices Department, ELRUM received this message: "The union has been processing the grievances and if there is any need to intensify our efforts, that will be done." But in reality the UAW demonstrated little interest in making a fight for the jobs of ELRUM workers.

The disdain which the international leadership of the UAW demonstrated for

black worker organizations is not surprising. The present union leadership has sought to eliminate radical black workers' groups altogether on the ground that they threaten industrial discipline. Concerning DRUM, Douglas Fraser, Director of the UAW Chrysler Division, and a leading candidate to succeed Walter Reuther, said:

Not every picket line is a Union picket line...It is important for you to know and understand that these picket lines are not UAW picket lines. Legal picket lines of the UAW can be established only after strikeable grievances have gone through the grievance procedure. A DEMOCRATIC VOTE MUST BE TAKEN IN WHICH ALL MEMBERS OF THE LOCAL ARE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE. To put it mildly, DRUM leaflets are extremist hate sheets. The object is to pit white workers against black workers and even black against black. (emphasis in the original)

The UAW is concerned with performing its role in modern capitalism: to enforce its end of the contract so that production continues. Demands to eliminate racism in the shops have never been issues on which the union has negotiated. Nor does the NLRB consider them negotiable. It is thus extremely unlikely that the Big Three auto makers will permit them to become part of the bargaining process.

In its attempts to undercut radical black groups, the UAW stands exposed as a corporate liberal institution. Although it fights for major wage concessions (starting salary in the auto plants is \$3.50) with pension and fringe benefits, the UAW has accepted and enforced the capitalist prerogative to set rules in the work place.

Working conditions have become more oppressive since 1945. The speed-up has increased, and management and union join in practicing white supremacist policies. This has led to widespread rank and file dissatisfaction with working conditions. Groups like ELRUM are successful because they are primarily concerned with the working conditions of rank and file black workers. The black workers' groups demand precisely what the union has never dared fight for. That is why a black workers' revolt has developed into a full-scale movement inside one of capitalism's best unions, the UAW.

RELATING TO WHITE WORKERS

The critical problem for the black working class liberation movement now is not to devise better tactics for attacking the UAW bureaucracy and the corporations, but rather in relating to white workers strategically.

White workers have been--at best--distrustful of black organizing attempts. This has been the case especially when, as Noel Ignatin puts it, their "white skin privileges" are challenged. These privileges are the real material basis for the pervasive racist ideology characteristic of all of American society, including students and workers. Racist ideology clearly benefits the capitalist class. But it is not merely the product of crude ruling class propaganda directed at workers. More basically, racism as ideology grows directly out of the social and economic functioning of American capitalism. Consequently the radical movement in the working class faces not only the set of ideas and attitudes characteristic of the racist personality and psychology, but also more fundamentally, a deeply entrenched structure of WHITE SUPREMACY. Both the ideology and its material base are a powerful constraint against the possibility that any egalitarian, socialist consciousness will emerge spontaneously from day-to-day struggles.

Working as inspectors, fork lift drivers, or in the tool crib, white workers are typically found in the least oppressive production jobs in the plant. Benefiting from the seniority rules, they have the first choice of new job openings. Through their friends and family, and through control of the local union, they have the inside track on job openings and thus advance more quickly. If layoffs occur, as they do frequently in the auto industry, whites are able to stay on longer and get back sooner than blacks. And the UAW's skilled trades division, which is nearly all white, has the right to veto all contract proposals unilaterally, even though it represents only a minority of auto workers. These are some examples of the highly developed and extensive system of privileges which divide white workers in every plant and industry from each other, and whites as a whole from blacks.

To point out this privileged position

of white workers is not to say that it is in their "short term" but not their "long range" interest to fight for egalitarian socialism. The interests of all working people lie with a socialist revolution, nothing less. Yet, since this radical consciousness is not presently widespread among white workers, it is obviously inadequate to demand that white workers give up their present hard-won racist gains in favor of a future socialist society. As radical working class organizers we cannot allow a distinction between short and long range benefits from racism. Our task is to seize every opportunity to fight against white supremacy in every way. Only in this way will we have a chance of undercutting racism.

Unfortunately few of the radicals in the Detroit shops have confronted the white supremacy question in their organizing. This is not because they deny its existence. Rather, most argue that black-white unity can only be achieved by focussing on issues which affect both races. They believe that by emphasizing issues that affect all workers, white workers will learn in the process of struggle to "deal with" their special privileges. This view holds that the de-

velopment of socialist, anti-privilegist consciousness will emerge out of a united struggle against a common enemy. Perhaps an example of this approach in the UAW is the United Caucus, a national opposition to Reuther growing out of revolt over wages in the skilled trades. The United Caucus concerns itself with wages, working conditions and democratic procedures. However, it has rarely emphasized the "particular" issues affecting certain minority groups within the UAW, such as women or blacks.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

An alternative to this approach assumes that workers will develop consciousness of themselves as a class only if organizing begins on the basis of sub-class issues. This approach holds that by appealing to the interests of particular class subgroups such as black workers, unskilled workers, young workers, women, etc., consciousness will grow from immediate particular issues to develop into consciousness of the class as a whole.

As yet little working class organizing has proceeded with this emphasis. In Detroit, the National Organizing Committee is attempting to develop this approach in its efforts.

photos: Detroit NOC



The failure of whites to recognize the need to fight white supremacy among workers and to support groups like ELRUM as being representative of the interests of all workers has in large measure been responsible for creating a dangerous "blind spot" in the outlook of revolutionary black workers' organizations in Detroit. White workers must be organized as well. The black leadership recognizes that, in theory. But little is done concretely to encourage the organizing of white workers. For one thing the movement is strapped for money and people to do the day to day organizing. For another, rank and file black workers move fast on race questions, even before these have developed into class issues.

Faced on the day to day level with white supremacy, black groups have made a tactical decision to attack white workers as racists. Yet, ideologically, as Bobby Seale puts it (see, the MOVEMENT, March, 1969), the thrust of the black movement is toward socialism. That means, "If we want to develop a socialist system within the black community we're saying it is also going to have to exist in the white community". This can only be achieved through a white working class movement. Black workers groups must recognize this need. Perhaps the model for this strategic dealing with white worker groups should be the Black Panther Party. However, Seale's thoughts on community organizing is less meaningful to workers in the shops.

In developing class consciousness among black workers, there is also a danger in emphasizing demands for black foremen. Clearly these demands are tactical, aimed against everyday manifestations of white supremacy, and serve to demonstrate the power of groups like ELRUM in their efforts to organize black workers. As John Watson, editor of the SOUTH END and one of the original organizers of black workers' groups in Detroit, wrote:

We are no more for integrated capitalism than segregated capitalism. Neither are we in favor of a separate state, based on the same class lines as in this society. We are against a separate state in which a black capitalist class exploits a black proletariat. (RADICAL AMERICA, 7-8/68)

The danger of demanding black foremen is that workers will be diverted from class consciousness by coming to believe that it is their task to reform management. A black foreman is still a foreman, and that should always be emphasized. Neglecting always to present a strong class-conscious perspective in every action hinders efforts to build a socialist movement.

The development of black workers' groups presents a number of important issues to white organizer. Most of them hinges around one central truth: radical consciousness is more developed among black workers than among white. In the shops this means that the white organizer must attempt to reach white workers, while black workers remain in the vanguard of the struggle. How will white workers react to black actions in the future? Can whites successfully organize around questions of, and against, white supremacy? How do organizers fight managements attempts to divide black workers from white workers? What is the potential for young black and white workers to struggle together over issues affecting them?

The second series of questions deals with organization. Black worker movements have generated tremendous enthusiasm and support from their communities. The efforts of DRUM in Hamtramck Assembly have mobilized a radical community consciousness. Among working class whites this has not happened. There is a need to create a white working class movement that will provide community support for the actions of workers in the shops. How will this relate to black groups? Can actions be co-ordinated among black and white community groups? Can whites accept the probability that they will not be in the vanguard of working class struggles, but followers of black workers?

These questions only scratch the surface, but as working class organizers we must begin to deal with them. The future of a working class movement rests upon our success in creating a working class solidarity that transcends race, age, skill and sex differences.

Black worker groups need bread. League of Revolutionary Black Workers, 9049 Oakland, Detroit, Michigan. TR 3-2550.

