

Conversation

Dan Georgakas on the Successes and Failures of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM)

One of the most extraordinary protest groups to emerge in African-American history was the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

Although many histories of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements focus on groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party, the League was in many ways far more significant as an expression of black radical thought and politics.

In 1968, African-American workers at the Detroit Dodge main plant of Chrysler Corporation staged a wildcat strike, to protest the oppressive working conditions inside the auto factory. The most militant strikers established DRUM, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement. DRUM quickly inspired the establishment of other independent black workers' groups in Detroit, such as FRUM, at Ford Motor Company's massive River Rouge plants, and ELRUM, located at Chrysler's Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle plant.

Throughout the country, other black workers' groups were also forming. In 1967, black

militant workers at Ford Motor Company's automobile plant at Mahwah, New Jersey, started the United Black Brothers. In 1968, black steelworkers in Maryland established the Shipyard Workers for Job Equality to oppose the discriminatory practices of both their union and management. Within several years, many of these groups coalesced into the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, which espoused a Marxian analysis of corporate capitalism.

In 1975, Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin authored *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, which documents the rise and decline of the League, as well as the social conditions that produced this unprecedented form of black protest. In this interview, Georgakas evaluates the strengths and weaknesses within the League, which also reflect the larger contradictions and political characteristics of black protest movements in the United States.

Manning Marable

I am going to focus on seven issues which I think are the core of the legacy of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. I will concentrate on those elements that made them different and those elements that are useful for us today. I am not going to dwell on weaknesses, because all organizations have

weaknesses and usually those weaknesses are similar.

One: I think the League was extremely agile, clever, and direct in framing issues. I believe that one of the problems we face in our own times is we have let the other side frame the issues. In that regard, I'm very concerned

about recent discussions about what's happened to Detroit. We titled our book *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, but clearly there are still many good things in Detroit. On the other hand, Detroit is no longer the arsenal of democracy. Detroit is no longer the manufacturing hub of the United States. That Detroit and the whole culture and potential for change that it embodied are gone. Who killed Detroit? Who pulled the trigger?

For a long period, the pundits told us that black politicians were the culprits, particularly Coleman Young, the city's first black mayor. Young was said to be incompetent. He had been virtuous when he was not in power, but once elected, despite being an old-time radical, he was corrupt and abrasive. Young had scared away the white people and had run down the government. More recently, we have been told that no, it wasn't Coleman Young so much as it was white workers. From the 1950s through to the 1960s, these white workers supposedly had resisted black advances block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood, garden by garden. With the election of Young, the last of the diehards had left.

I think the League of Revolutionary Black Workers understood what happened to Detroit a lot better. What killed Motor City USA were decisions made in the executive offices of General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler and carried out by big city governments under their influence. In the 1950s, expressways were built so that auto executives could live in the suburbs and zip into the city without having to touch base anywhere. The public transportation system was functionally dismantled so that intra-city travel was difficult. Another key blow was struck by the J. L. Hudson Department Store, the Detroit equivalent of Macy's, when it created three mammoth shopping malls, all of them outside the city limits. Northland begins exactly where Detroit and tax liability to Detroit end. The

Detroit Public School System was excellent in the 1950s and included Cass Tech, a magnet school that was well integrated, and a number of other quality neighborhood high schools that were also integrated. That system was allowed to collapse with district lines redrawn to achieve as much segregation as possible. No additional magnet schools were constructed. In short, what we used to call "the establishment" created the nexus for decay with appropriate expressways to handle the outgoing traffic.

Just as important, the United Automobile Workers was defanged. As part of the McCarthy hysteria, the union purged its radicals. A recent book on the UAW is titled *Walter Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit*. Well, he certainly was dangerous to socialism for he purged his union of the entire left, performing a kind of intellectual lobotomy. It may be argued that he was a social democrat ridding himself of the Communist opposition. But Reuther's purge was so thorough that it virtually ceded city government to the corporations. The UAW was the only force in the city with sufficient might to fight the realtors and mount a worker-based opposition to the various changes carried out in the 1950s. Without its left wing, the UAW did not have the verve or personnel to win a contest with these forces.

We need to remember that Coleman Young, the very man who became mayor in the 1970s, was among those purged. It is not unreasonable to speculate that if Coleman Young and his associates had been allowed to stay and work within the UAW, their considerable skills operating through the political action committees might have given progressive forces a winning margin in local elections.

Other radicals provided clout in different areas. Carl Marzani, a well-known radical who was another of the purged, was working in the UAW film department, creating mar-



Workers Rally in 1970s. Courtesy of Smyrna Press.

velous films that analyzed the economic system in a fashion accessible to workers. The films were of professional quality and focused on corporate misbehavior in a way designed to arouse a reaction. The long-term plan had been to use those films at UAW locals throughout the nation. George Addes, a likely president of the UAW had the left faction won, was an Arab American who had come to leadership in strikes in Toledo and was a dynamic figure in the Michigan-Ohio region, which is home to the largest Arab-American community in the nation. Maurice Sugar, who later worked closely with Coleman Young, George Crockett, and other African Americans when they first ran for public office, was a force in the UAW legal department. He had also written union songs such as "Sit Down" and "The Soup Song" in the course of struggles in the 1930s.

Carl Marzani had left the Communist Party in 1942, and Young, Sugar, and Addes had never been in the party, but they and other militants fell in the Reuther purge, which was

made possible in large measure by the corporate-sponsored Taft-Hartley law. Shortly after the purging, conservative forces won the mayor's office election and dominated city government for twenty years.

The League founders understood that history. So they did not blame white workers for their problems. They did not blame black politicians. They understood that the forces to blame were the manufacturers who have subsequently gutted a lot of industrial America. Today, there are many Detroits, many cities stripped of their manufacturing base and downsized into a shadow of their former vibrancy. Establishment economists say that belts must be tightened, but it is always the workers' belt they are referring to.

These issues were addressed by the League in its film *Finally Got the News*. Various executives are shown arriving at the offices in Detroit. A high-pitched offscreen voice (Ken Cockrel) uses the language of the ghetto to ask what are these people doing? How is it that those who deal in intangibles are so

highly rewarded? What are they doing in Bolivia? What are they doing in Chile? These men are the real owners of America. They are Kennicott. They are Anaconda. They are United Fruit. Exasperated, the voice concludes, "He is in mining. He is in what? He ain't never produced anything in his whole life. Investment banker. Stockbroker. Insurance man. He don't do nothing. We see that this whole society exists and rests upon workers and the whole m—g society is controlled by this little clique which is parasitic, vulturistic, cannibalistic, and is sucking and destroying the life of workers everywhere and we must stop it because it is evil."

Now that's a pretty clear analysis, and the League was prepared to organize on that analysis. Of late, various pundits have informed us that America has gone beyond class politics. The League didn't think so and I think they were right. The League asked itself if you are a black worker in Detroit and you want to better your life, who do you organize first? In California, the Black Panthers had chosen to organize youth and street people. In the South, there had been a massive organization of the religious community, but by the late 1960s, that force had lost much of its momentum. There were groups who organized welfare mothers. There were student groups. The founders of the League, all of whom had been politically active for ten or fifteen years, decided that the force to organize was the black working class. This was not an abstract notion derived from reading Marx. This was not an attempt to relive the 1930s. The choice was based on the conclusion that by organizing this force, you could win.

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Much of the League thinking parallels that of the Industrial Workers of the World. Both groups concluded that workers hold power not because they are a voting block but because they labor at the point of production. In *Finally Got the News*, John Watson states, "You get a lot of arguments that black

people are not numerous enough in America to revolt, that they will be wiped out. This neglects our economic position. . . . There are groups that can make the whole system cease functioning. These are auto workers, bus drivers, postal workers, steel workers and others who play a crucial role in the money flow, the flow

of materials, the creation of production. By and large black people are overwhelmingly in those kinds of jobs."

The conclusion reached from such thinking was that if you organized black workers as workers, you could have a force that could effectively check abuses and then change society. After building a base in one city, units of black workers throughout the United States could be organized into a Black Workers' Congress. To say that you are going to focus on workers does not mean that you are not going to deal with students, welfare mothers, church groups, and the like. But your core will be black workers. That's where your organizational emphasis will be. When the League achieved control of the *South End*, the student newspaper of Wayne State University, the subheadline they chose was "One class-conscious worker is worth 100 students." That was pretty far-sighted in the late 1960s, when it seemed that the students were the most dy-

dynamic force everywhere in the world. And it is important to note that the slogan was conceived as honoring the value of workers, not as an antistudent proclamation.

If setting the frame of reference and identifying the prime role of workers are two major legacies of the League, a third is its handling of culture. After having studied all the classic revolutionary texts, the eventual founders of the League felt the first step was not to create a political party but to publish a newspaper. This was to be a popular rather than an esoteric paper. It would communicate with various publics and serve as a rallying point for action.

As the League got bigger, in concert with its allies, it made a dazzling array of cultural initiatives. Way, way before Oprah, the power of a book club was understood. When the book club began, the book club leaders thought it would be wonderful to have a few dozen people willing to read and discuss books. Their first announcement attracted over a hundred people, and in due course a couple of hundred people were involved. The author would speak and then people would break into groups at separate tables and discuss what they had read and heard. All the books had some radical nuance or another. Most of the participants were white and many came from the suburbs. That had not been the original target audience, but it was more than acceptable. The book club became a way of talking with an activist element in the white population. People who attended were not asked to join a party or even sign a petition. They were to discuss books. But in due course, after many sessions and getting to know one another, political action could and did flow from this resource.

Mainly at the instigation of John Watson, the League decided to make movies. This evolved partly from the League's contacts with Italian workers, another aspect of their cultural sophistication. The Detroiters under-

stood that the Italian auto workers in cities such as Torino shared many of their experiences. They came to understand that these workers were also creating organizations struggling with their companies and their unions. The Detroiters became acquainted with the Italian workers' clubs where rank-and-file workers met to play cards, look at movies, hear speakers, and participate in various cultural activities off the job. The League reasoned that it would make much more practical and economic sense to send movies around the United States than to send speakers. There was never any thought of using Hollywood movies for this purpose, as they understood that Hollywood serves Hollywood.

The thinking about the role of film interacted with a project by New York Newsreel to make a film about the League. After agreeing to cooperate with the all-white film crew, the League had second thoughts. They wanted to control the message, to be the subject of the discourse, not simply the object. At the same time, they realized that they didn't know how to make movies. Their solution was to become the producer of the film that eventually became *Finally Got the News*. Once they established they would be the producers, it did not matter who was running the camera or who edited the film. For example, John Watson insisted that the film contain a history of slavery. Peter Gessner and Stewart Bird, the Newsreel filmmakers, explained that there were limitations to what could be done in sixty minutes. The League insisted on its premise. Eventually, Gessner and Bird came up with a very creative montage which in a few minutes conveys the history of American slavery. Those filmmakers have told me that they would not likely have had such a montage without the pressure put on them. As creative and engaged filmmakers, they were pleased with the outcome. The attitude had not been an adamant do-it-this-way eliciting a

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what-do-you-know-about-film, but here's-a-problem-how-do-we-solve-it. The League had played the producer's role and, like a Hollywood producer, got a film expressing its view.

The League created Black Star Publishing, which was to publish books, pamphlets, posters, and all other needed print materials. They understood then what Chomsky has been telling us these many years: Don't be surprised if the capitalist media produces capitalist books and books that serve capitalism. If you want to have books, films, and newspapers that do not serve that end, you are going to have to do it yourself. To that end, they purchased their own printing equipment and trained their own personnel how to use it. They also opened a bookstore.

On such issues as homophobia and sexism, the League was not distinguished. General Baker has described its practice regarding women as "raggedy." I don't think they were any worse than other groups at that time, but they were not significantly better. In speaking to veterans of that movement, many have speculated how much stronger they might have been had all the talents of the black women around them been utilized.

Yet another area of culture where the League showed considerable insight was in having a multileadership. They were very careful that no one person should be per-

ceived of as the indispensable leader. Partly that was to prevent decapitation. They also had a philosophical sense, again like the IWW, that an organization with many leaders was far healthier than one driven by a single personality. Considerable effort was made to reach decisions in a collective manner and only when that process broke down did the League begin to disintegrate.

A fourth area of strength for the League was its view of the police. The League respected the power of the police. They so respected that power that they thought it foolish to needlessly antagonize the police. During this period, I was in Oakland and I saw a demonstration conducted by the Black Panther Party. About fifty young men were lined up in military formation wearing leather jackets and black berets. They chanted "Off the pig, off the pig." I hoped they were better organized than they looked, as all of the police standing around were taking the chant as a threat or ultimatum.

In contrast, the League thought armed struggle was the last fight you make, not the first. So rather than inflame trigger-happy police and aid right-wing politicians [to] mount a scare campaign, the rhetoric directed toward the police was low key. On the other hand, the League and its allies, while not having shoot-outs with the police, had a number

of political confrontations. The most important was the successful campaign to rid the city of the deadly STRESS unit of the police department. As an attorney, Ken Cockrel won a number of sensational cases involving police brutality or misconduct. So the League was not afraid to take on the police, but they saw no gain in rankling the rank-and-file cop. In the long run, they understood the most deadly triggers were on the economic guns controlled by the corporations.

A fifth legacy is that the League managed to take over and redefine state and community resources. The most brilliant example involved the already mentioned *South End* newspaper. Almost every large university in the country has such a paper. As of the late 1960s, the Wayne State newspaper had never had a black editor and was thought to be the province of the journalism department. The League activists mounted a campaign through normal channels that resulted in the election of John Watson as editor. He then hired League activists such as Mike Hamlin to work on the paper. Suddenly, the most radical black organization in Detroit had a daily newspaper being paid for by the taxpayers. Watson transformed the paper into a radical daily but was careful not to antagonize the nonpolitical students. There was no infatuation with carrying out a cultural revolution. The fraternities got the same amount of space as they always had, as did the athletic department. But with the news, the ideas that had heretofore been expressed in *The Inner-City Voice* had a new home. I believe the *South End* was the greatest paper of its time, and this was a time when the underground press was flourishing. Of course, the university officials went crazy, but everything had been done according to university rules.

Taking over the newspaper was only the first step. Next came redefining its function as well as its content. The paper began to be given away not only on campus but at facto-

ries and hospitals. One issue dealt with the horrendous conditions at Receiving Hospital. It was given out in the waiting room of the hospital where relatives were anxiously awaiting for news of loved ones being operated on. The university protested that a student newspaper must remain on campus. Watson replied that student teachers were required to teach in the public schools, social work students had to do community service, and student nurses were sent into hospitals. In a similar vein, a newspaper paid for by the public should be available to the public and deal with its issues.

The political positions were so soundly grounded that the *South End* felt confident not only to celebrate the life of Che Guevara but to laud the aims of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Every force in the state came down on them, charging anti-Semitism. Watson's opponents were sure they had him. But they did not. First of all, the paper was not anti-Semitic. It opposed positions of the Israeli government but did not attack Jews as a religious or cultural group. Moreover, a number of Jews wrote for the newspaper and some of them took issue in print with the dominant editorial view. The attack was survived without any editorial retreat in subject matter.

The League also operated effectively with church organizations such as the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizations. Using the device of the Black Economic Development Conference, the League was able to obtain nearly \$200,000 for efforts such as the purchase of its printing presses. Thus, we see that the League was able to access various resources in the community and use them for their own ends. I believe there are numerous resources of that kind that contemporary groups could use similarly.

One may ask if they were doing all these things correctly, why did they fail, and that's a long story indeed. But in the new edition of

our book, Mike Hamlin offers an insight we can all profit from. He writes that usually when an organization fails, we examine all of its weaknesses and the problems which overwhelmed it. He observes that one reason there were many problems for the League was its successes. Radicals are so accustomed to losing that once there are victories, they believe the tide has turned. That isn't being cocky. It's that you think things will work out. We have gone through all this other stuff and come out today, so we can get through the new challenge.

An example of success creating a problem involves the *South End*. The League could have retained strong control over the paper for years, but it had already secured funds for its own printing press. They were sure they could come out with a paper of their own and wouldn't need the *South End* in the way they had and could reassign their forces. Well, unexpected problems arose regarding the press, and they couldn't get out their newspaper and they already let the daily paper slip from their control.

Complicating the success problem were the phone calls coming in from black workers all over the country asking for help. Should they take time to deepen the organization in Detroit or should they send some of their leading people outside the city to build a national network? Each option had its strengths and weaknesses. They never came to a consensus on what should be the top priority. Nonetheless, they were sure the newspaper would work out, the movie would get made, the calls would be answered properly, and the literature would do its work, because the historic moment for the idea of a national black workers' organization had arrived.

I am reminded of the IWW again. In 1916, the IWW had reached its peak membership of 100,000 and was on an upsurge. The government came down on them in 1917 on the issue of opposition to World War I. They

were faced with the decision of whether or not to cooperate with the indictment process. Bill Haywood thought it was best to have a big trial with 101 defendants. He had been in other major trials that ended not only in victory, but in an upsurge in union membership. A victory at this new mammoth trial might skyrocket the union to half a million members. Rather than asking for separate trials, rather than sending half the indicted underground, rather than using every delaying and evasive tactic possible, the organization cooperated. The trial, however, was lost. The top leaders got ten- to twenty-year prison terms and fines of \$10,000 to \$20,000. The organization never recovered. But they had not lost because of their weaknesses. They were so confident from their upsurge and from past victories that they thought they would emerge from the trial with a great success. I think that is something for organizations to think about. Sometimes you fail or make mistakes because of your past successes.

The legacy I'd like to end with is the strategy of winning. The League believed one should not start a battle that could not be won. Now, when you call a strike, you cannot have the overthrow of the board of directors as your goal. The objective of any strike needs to be specific and achievable. You do not want a demonstration of weakness. I am constantly appalled by demonstrations that are so small that they reassure the opponent that you are quite harmless.

Tied into the principle of winnable fights was to win a string of small victories rather than prepare for a grandiose showdown. This strategy was different from conventional social action in that each fight was seen as a training exercise. Members would acquire the skills that were required to win bigger fights with larger stakes. They reasoned that if you have defeats, people will be discouraged and drop out. Therefore, it's important not to im-

pose impossible demands that simply expose the system, a prevalent strategic mode among some leftists. Obviously, if you pose a demand that the system cannot grant without totally changing itself, you are setting up a defeat. Rather than creating a frustrated body politic which will then strive even harder, people generally will just go home.

The League was not greatly enthusiastic about symbolic actions. Moral witnesses can be important, but it is largely a personal statement rather than an organizing strategy. Symbolic arrests, of course, can be effective. Recent actions against the New York Police Department were very effective in that regard, perhaps because they also had very specific demands. In that case, they were less symbolic than nonviolent pressure. But in the 1960s, very often at the end of a demonstration, the police would come along and say the demonstration was over. A group of demonstrators would then protest that the police weren't going to tell them what to do even though, in fact, the parade or rally had come to an end. They would sit down and get arrested and spend the following months raising money for bail and lawyers, turning their

organization into a de facto defense committee. The League felt that if you had accomplished the task set for yourself, you didn't lose face by complying with some police requests. You were not letting the police tell you what to do, you were making a decision. Most importantly, you were not getting engaged in a legal confrontation that you had not devised.

Finally, in regard to the strategy of winning, one of the organizations was ELRUM, the League unit at the Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle plant. Why was so much effort made at this plant? If you could stop production there, you closed down Chrysler. Now, the League leadership had read lots of working-class literature. They knew the UAW had organized against General Motors when its militants closed down key plants in Flint. So part of the strategy of winning was if you get three phone calls from three different factories and one of them is Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle, that's where you concentrate your energies. You don't scatter your forces haphazardly. And you must have done your homework beforehand to know the significance of the forces and locations involved.