

Conversation

Wilbur Haddock on the United Black Brothers

I had been at Mahwah and started working at Mahwah around 1958. And originally we just wanted to try to make conditions better at Mahwah. Black workers were given the hardest jobs, dirtiest jobs, we were not allowed to work in putting cushions in, putting glass in, paint at the jobs, nothing of that caliber were given to black workers. We were thrown in the body shop. Which was called 125th Street, by the way. So whenever you were hired, that's where you went. And so we just among ourselves felt we need to change this, you know. And so we just started back in the early '60s talking together and trying to figure out ways in which we could put pressure on Ford to make conditions better. We also tried to work with the UAW. We had wrote up tons and tons of grievances about discrimination and about, you know, foreman calling workers out of their name, harassment, and also with no air conditioning Mahwah had about 5,000 workers. And there were like three shifts. So when it was summertime it was like 90 degrees outside and in the body shop where we worked it was like 100 and something inside. So there was no air conditioning so, you know, it was going to be a lot of tensions. Most of the white workers were from upstate New York. Mahwah is about maybe about forty-five minutes from New York on Route 17. It's not there anymore. Some people say that we caused its demise. But just before you get to the thruway, it was there.

So most of the white workers came from upstate New York and most of the supervisors, there were no black supervisors, no there was one, one black supervisor at that time. But most of the black workers came from the urban areas—New York, Jersey City, a few were from upstate Newburg, places like that. But most of them were from this area.

And so we said, well, we are going to try to organize these folks. We saw our problem as our own at Mahwah. We didn't see any connection to any other plant. We didn't know that brothers were working and coming together in Detroit and Chicago. So we began to organize, had meetings. And some of us were working with community organizations also at that time. So we were trying to do some things. The movement was beginning to really come together in around 1960, '62, '63. And so working with C.O.R.E., you know, Bronx C.O.R.E. here in New York and some other organizations, we were getting involved and getting our feet wet. We were still a kind of novice and kind of naive about what we would be doing, what we would be getting into. We were just concerned about better working conditions. It was one evening a white foreman called a black worker a nigger and fired him on the spot. And this was a young brother that had been working very hard, hadn't caused any problems, and so we said, that's it. You know, we are not going to take

it anymore. So we said, let's get everybody off the line. You know, we told everybody to be walking out. The union hall is like maybe a mile away from the Ford plant. We said, we are going to take over the union hall and that's going to be our base of operation and then we are going to start now in terms of making our demands on the company. So that was 1969. And so we walked again, we were naive, we didn't really understand what you have to do with something like this, we were just angry and emotional. And so we had about, I think that night about 800 workers that had walked out and followed us out and over at the union hall. Now, we got them over there, and we were saying, okay, what are we going to do? But the anger was there and the frustration was there and determination was there. And so we had formed the group originally called United Black Brothers. And that time when everything was brother this and brother that. And so we just took that name as our own. Later, we changed it to United Black Workers and became—we had a little bit more awareness and consciousness. But it was an important beginning for us. And it forced us to begin to look at what we are dealing with, because first of all it was the first time there was this type of walkout at Mahwah. And it had been around for about twenty-some years. And it took the Ford Motor Company, caught them off guard, the UAW was

definitely off guard, because they didn't expect something like that. And so we took, by the end of that evening we molded into our organization, we grew a lot at that time.

Another interesting thing that happened during this period was that a lot of help came. Students came up and said, listen, we are here to help you. Students from Columbia came over and said, anything we can do, you know, we are here to help you. Some of the people in the community, because we had picket lines, set up picket lines on the highway and around the plant to dramatize, you know, our walkout. And so they came and said, we'll join the picket lines with you. Black Panther party. They sent people, sent information, they sent money for us to get some food and stuff, which we hadn't thought about. People in the community, there were many blacks that lived in Mahwah, they came out and they brought us sandwiches, they brought us food, they brought us something to drink, you know, coffee, milk, and juice. So with that kind of coming together, really surprised us.

Also at that time you could get welfare. If you needed money or food or milk for your children, you go to the welfare office and they would give you x number of dollars. If you needed to pay your rent, this was in the '60s now, welfare would give you money to help pay your rent. And so workers came from welfare to us. Because we were out really totally about ten days. But after about

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three days, then it dawned on us we got these people out here, they are going to have no paycheck this Friday. And they got bills. They got children. What are they going to do? And so people came and said, well, listen. Have the workers go down to the welfare office and sign up and they can get money for food, they can get this, they can get the other. Others showed us how to deal with the system. And so it was on-the-job training kind of thing, learning how, you know, learn from our mistakes. Learning how you take care of and you prepare for your membership once you have them out there. And we should have known it before we went out there, but we didn't, but luckily during this time, because this movement was there and people were more supportive of each other, they came and probably saw how we was doing and began to bring us all kinds of help, assistance and information.

We got a telegram from the League congratulating us on the walkout, offering any kind of support and assistance that we might need. We had not heard about the League before then. And so we were saying to each other, who is this League represent[ing] black workers and what are they about? So we figured we needed to check them out. And to see what was going on, because it sounded interesting, and it was even more interesting to find out that somebody out there was doing the exact same thing that we were doing and organizing and had the same problems that we were going through. So we were not alone. And so we said, yes, we got to go and check these brothers out and find out that we can learn more about what's going on. And they are right in Detroit, in the belly, you know. So we definitely could learn a lot from them.

And so after, well, so we had the workers out there about ten days. We were able to shut the plant down for about six of those days. And the company fired myself and about four

others as the ringleaders. We also had organized ourselves not in terms of president and vice president but as general staff. And so at the league we would not have any one person in leadership. But even though Ford tried to say that I was a leader and some others were leaders, that there was no way they could prove, because nothing that we had written, nothing that we had done had anybody's name on it. It was always signed by staff of United Black Workers.

But we were fired and all of the workers that were out with us, which totaled about maybe almost 1,000. Some were fired, some were given a couple of days off. And so then they were putting pressure on us to, like, you can turn this around and we can solve everything if you just stop this day and come back to work.

One of the things that really struck me as interesting during this period was that—again not understanding at that time the role the automobile industry played in this country. We thought we were just dealing with Mahwah. We thought that it was just a local issue. But when we began to talk and meet with the League and other people who were more aware of the economy in this country, and then it dawned on us that when you start talking about this industry, you are talking about the economy of this country. You are talking about glass. You are talking about steel. You are talking about rubber. You know, everything that goes into a car. You know, oil, and all that. And again, we hadn't thought of it that way. But as we began understanding then on top of that not only with the pressure coming from Ford Motor Company and UAW, but then the FBI was getting involved, the local police, the state police, and some agencies that we didn't even know existed in the federal government was harassing us, you know. So we said we must be doing something here. We'd better check this out to see what we are doing here. And really decide if this is what

we really want to do. Because it was getting much larger than we had originally anticipated. But because I think our commitment was there and we were concerned about workers and had belief and strength in what we were doing, it helped us to stay the course and then with the assistance that we received from the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, we went out there and we sat down with them and just listened about their struggles, listened why they were formed and what they were doing. And read much of the literature that they had. We developed a bond between them and at the same time we talked to workers in Chicago. We talked to the steelworkers in Pittsburgh. We talked to people in California. And the idea that we were thinking about was that one point, coming up with a kind of national organization of black workers that could from our experiences address the concerns and hopefully work with some of the other groups out there—student groups, community organizations, whatever.

We also saw our struggle was not only at the factory, what we call point of production. But it was also in the community. Because most of the people when they left the factory went back home and there were problems in the home. There were problems in our communities—housing, you know, police brutality, health care, education. All these things, the same stuff we are dealing with now workers went home to. And so we decided that we were going to have to broaden our work. We just cannot be concerned about the line speed, the number of jobs, cars they are making an hour, the fact that there is no heat, that you are being treated in a dehumanizing way. You know, the fact that if you get hurt on the job, you cannot go to the nurse, you had to raise your hand and say, Mr. Boss, can I go to first aid? If you were sick or you had a broken arm, you still had to come to work, you can't stay home. And they had you picking up trash or something. So all these kind of things

to dehumanize you, to break your spirit so that they could control you. And so these are the kind of things that after a period of time, you know, you began to develop a resistance and gained your strength to fight back.

During this period of time, it was like considered the militancy. So most people had an impression about blacks from the Panthers, what they saw on TV. And many of us were wearing dungarees, we weren't wearing leather and berets and things, but we were all wearing dungarees before it became a fad. And boots and stuff and back in the days we had hair and we had Afros out to here. And so [an] interesting thing about this, we were just doing our militant thing. But it was having a mixed effect on black workers. Those that were more militant and those that were more involved would ride on with the situation. But some of those who lived up in Newburg, some who hadn't been in contact with many of the urban militancy were scared to death of us. And we didn't realize that at first. You know, we figured you are black, you got to be down. So we are going around talking to the rebels on the line, we were talking to people and giving them our flyers and stuff. And they would sit there and say yes, hmm-hmm, yes. And we would say, we have a meeting. I'll be there, I'll be there. And they would never come. So we were saying something is wrong here, something is wrong here. And it was the older worker, when the older brother, the janitor, he pulled me aside one day and he said, son, let me tell you something. He said, I know what you are doing, he said, I believe in you, I think you young fellows have the right idea. He said, but you are going about it the wrong way. He said, a lot of these brothers here are scared to death of you all. And it's the way you dress, it's the way you are acting. You are being too militant—and you are scaring away the people that you want to organize, so you need to tone it down a little bit. And I said, oh, this

old man, what you are talking about? But then I thought about it. And he said, go look in the mirror. And then, you know, we wore buttons all over our jackets, you know, for those of you that go back that far, we had our own image, our own look. And so it's always power to the people and right on. And meanwhile we marched around, we had our little swagger. And some—we had a stick we carried around. Because that's what everybody we knew did. And so we just assumed that everybody, you know, was down with us. But it was having a reverse effect on those folks that were not that militant.

And so the old man really woke me up and made me think, and so I had to go back and talk to the other brothers, and I said, listen, you know, we need to rethink the way we are doing this, that we came out of the dungarees. You know, some of us cut down our Afros a little bit. Some folks didn't want to go completely, they still wanted to keep them. But we had a sense we had to really get with the people. And if you really wanted to get the brothers and the workers to follow you and to stand and to be there, then you got to consider their feelings, not that you had all the answers [and] you knew what to do.

So this we learned. We felt that we were able to accomplish quite a bit. We won the grievance against Ford. If you can think about that. Ford was so afraid of the organization that they had the grievance proceedings and so they would not tell us when they were going to be, or where it was going to be. And you could have some when the umpire comes in and selects some hotel or something. And so they told us first it was going to be at the Howard Johnson on Route 17 at ten. And then they called back maybe ten minutes later and said, no, it's been moved to, you know, the something on Route 22 at eleven. And they changed it about three or four times.

We also saw our struggle was not only at the factory, what we call point of production. But it was also in the community. . . . There were problems in our communities—housing, you know, police brutality, health care, education.

Well, we had decided now that we had that new consciousness that, you know, we were not going to go dressed as militants. So we put on suits and ties. And had attaché cases. And so we, and now UAW will bring a lawyer in for you to handle your case the day before the trial, the hearing. And Ford had four of his top lawyers representing Ford. People were being paid \$100,000 you know. So these people came in. So finally they told us the right place and they had police all out there, they had all this protection out there. And they thought we were coming in I guess to blow up the place. When we walked in there in our suits and ties and attaché cases, it just blew them all away. You know, they didn't think that we would do something like that. They were expecting the worst again.

So we went in there and then the umpire and something told me, I was reading a book about black workers, and so I said, I'll just take this book with me in case we have to sit around, I could read my book and learn more about black workers' history. So I was sitting there waiting for the umpire to come in and the umpire happened to be, he was a law professor. I'm not sure whether he was from Columbia or some school around here. But he looked at the book and he says, oh, I'm reading that. And I said, hey. And we pretty much

handled our own case. We didn't give the UAW lawyer a chance to say anything because he didn't know anything about what it was about. And the company had taken pictures. They had come out to the highway and just taken pictures of us, the demonstration and we were marching out and putting people on the highway and stuff. And they would take pictures and then they would stop them during the hearing and say now this is where Haddock is leaving and he is distributing the workers out there, this is proof that he was a leader. We did a lot of interviews and a lot of radio shows at that time. They got a lot of tapes from many of the shows and they cut out all the questions and just played the answers. So it sounded like I was talking about overthrowing the government, it sounded like I was talking about blowing up Ford Motor Company. If you just play it straight with no questions, you can make it read the way you wanted it to read. So this is what they were doing. And they had doctored up pictures and stuff and they were using it into evidence. Well, they shot all that down and we won the case and we all got our jobs back. But because of how the system was, the umpire said, well, you got your jobs back, you got your seniority. But because you didn't do enough to get the workers back to work and you caused damage to Ford Motor Company in terms of monetary damages, that you cannot get any back pay. So I was out eighteen months. And you know, I could not get a job and I'm blacklisted. But the fact that we were able to come back into the plant and continue our work.

So I'm going to stop now, but I just want to say that for me the League was a source of inspiration, a strength. We worked together a lot. We struggled together a lot. In talking about which way we thought the struggle should go. And some of us came together to talk about developing what we called the Black Worker's Congress. We would bring

together black workers around the country to come into an organization to provide help and assistance. Because a lot of workers seeing what we had done on the East Coast and what the League had done in Detroit and other areas, we were getting calls. And postal workers wanted to organize and hospital workers wanted to organize and just calling and saying, how can you do this? And it really became something that we needed to have a vehicle to do this. Plus, we were working closely with the League, SNCC, and the C.O.R.E and we were involved in many many different other activities. And whenever there was a major demonstration, many of us were there and having all kinds of collaborative effort. So it was expanding, it was an exciting time, and we felt that from where we started as being naive and not really understanding the whole picture, we grew a lot. And so we had to tell workers, you know. And we were able to do some of the things that the League did, because many of the workers, some white workers and some black workers lived upstate New York on the farms, we had cooperatives at the union hall and bring down food, they bring down vegetables, they bring down potatoes and because, you know, the prices in urban districts was so high, we would have food cooperatives and we would sell to workers at a very reasonable price potatoes and vegetables and all kind of things that workers could get. We developed newspapers to print about stories and struggles from other factories, other places around the country. We began to hear and learn more about struggles in Africa. The first time I heard about what was going on in Africa. Who Nkrumah was and what was going on there and we made sure that we put that in our newsletters.

And one final thing. The more successful we became—and to show you how the system will always have an alternative, so they begin to stop hiring black workers. Then they started bringing in Hispanic workers. And so

in the beginning the black workers saw the Hispanic workers from Puerto Rico, Guatemala, Honduras as their enemy. And so we had to struggle to try to show black workers that they aren't the enemy. And so we began to print the history of Puerto Rico and the history of Cuba and the struggles of Haiti, you know, and things like that and make sure they knew that a lot of similarities existed with the African-American workers and these workers that were coming in, they were not the enemy. It wasn't easy, but after a while we began to, and they were, especially the Haitian workers, they were afraid to talk to us openly. And so we had to meet with them at night, you know. So that as the company saw that we were coming together, they stopped hiring men. And Ford would never, ever hire black women, they would never hire women in general at Mahwah. It was always you know men. But when they saw us coming together—African Americans, Caribbean, Haitian, and some white workers coming together—they started for the first time to bring women into the plant. So here we go all over again with the struggle with men versus women. So always a constant thing going on when you are dealing with the system and so it kept things going like brushfires all the time. So we had to learn how to deal with that.

So that was in a nutshell the type of situation we went through and it's hard to, if you had never been on an assembly line, if you have never been in a situation where that you can even visualize, understand what prompted workers like the League and ourselves to say that we have got to do something. Because we have seen people who got their hands cut off. Because when you are putting the steel, it's so sharp, it's razor sharp. And now a lot of stuff is done by robots. But back in that day you did it with your hands, so you picked up steel, you know. And even if you had gloves on, if you didn't handle it right, it would cut off your finger, it could slash. People would have all kinds of serious accidents and nobody cared. You know, just moved you aside, put somebody else there. The bottom line was keeping the job, keeping them cars coming out. Until you had to. I mean, if they said they wanted forty jobs an hour and you gave them forty, then they wanted fifty. If you give them fifty jobs an hour, then they wanted sixty. At one time, there was no such thing as day off. You had to work seven days a week, twelve hours a day. So it was that kind of a thing that people were up against. And because we were in the hardest jobs and the dirtiest jobs, that's why I think it forced us to come together and organize. And the movement being there, there was a lot of impetus to do that.