

Blacks Confront UAW

J.R. Kennedy

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The League of Revolutionary Black Workers, founded in Detroit, is a militant union movement. It is fighting against the giant automotive corporations and against the United Auto Workers. It is fighting for black liberation and self-determination. The League of Revolutionary Black Workers is an historic phenomenon that is not only a response to the failures of capitalist-worker relationships, but more importantly it is a response to the failures of American unionism.

The UAW has not confronted racism, in fact they blatantly practice it. They have ceased to represent the real needs of workers, and have failed to deal effectively and directly with the corrupt nature of a capitalist society.

Walter Reuther and the UAW leadership claim to be sympathetic to "Negro Rights," but seldom appear to be concerned about black workers who have died in industrial accidents in Detroit's automotive plants or about the realities of the struggles of black people for self-determination.

The open racism and rejection of black workers in the early history of the UAW has been swept under the rug, yet it was this history that set the pattern for the racial inequality that exists within the UAW today.

"Token" integration of the UAW leadership cannot approach what is needed to insure black workers of the political power necessary to gain representation and equality as workers. Only two of the 26 international executive board members and only 75 of over 1,100 international representatives are black. Black workers, however, compose 45 to 50% of the international UAW membership. Even those handful of blacks who are involved in leadership positions are forced, due to their political impotence, to maintain a subservient role.

Within the plant itself the black worker has fared no better than he has in the union. Blacks are systematically excluded from skilled trades, white collar jobs and all but the lowest level of management. Racism has forced blacks into job assignments that carry the highest degree of health hazard and injury risks. They are placed in the foundries, the stamping plants, the paint shops and anywhere else where men suffer exhaustion, disease and injury.

Young white workers with no experience are hired in and given better jobs, while older black workers with long experience are passed over and forced to endure the heaviest pressure of the production lines.

The UAW not only stands idly by and watches these conditions, they endorse and use them. The black worker can make no progress as long as the union perpetuates these conditions. Black workers must unite in a struggle against racist practices within the union movement to enable an effective attack to be waged against the racism and exploitation of the company.

Aside from failing to confront racism, the UAW leadership has not moved on the issue of plant working conditions. White workers, although they enjoy a relative privilege over black workers, must also suffer the effects of speed ups, safety hazards and unhealthy working conditions.

In 1947, the auto industry produced 4,800,000 cars with a production labor force of 626,000. In 1966, the industry produced 10,560,000 cars with a labor force of 668,400. Partially through automation, but greatly through speed ups, workers are now required to work harder and produce 'twice as much.

On the labor of workers, especially black workers, the auto companies have expanded to two and three times their size. Since 1960, auto corporation profits have risen 90%, yet wages for auto workers have increased about 25%. Inequities and speed ups are what have given the white owned and white controlled corporations their huge profits.

To make matters worse, black workers and black revolutionaries are singled out for harassment and intimidation by the company. All black workers are forced to contribute to the white controlled United Foundation. If they attempt to refuse they are usually subjected to some petty punishment. In the conflicts that arise between progressive blacks and management, the UAW continually sides with the company.

All union dues, as well as the funds from the United Foundation mentioned earlier, are under white control. The UAW collects 10 million dollars a month in union dues. Most of that sum comes from black workers, yet the black community does not benefit from it. Projects or investments that are not sanctioned by the UAW leadership cannot have access to the funds. The millions of dollars that are spent on investments could be poured back into the black community. All funds, union dues and United Foundation collections that are taken from black workers and manipulated by the UAW should be returned back to the rank and file black workers and their community.

Because of the ways in which the black workers are shackled by the UAW, they are not allowed to freely exercise the political power that is available to them. Black workers compose 35% of the national work force at the point of production. It is their labor that accounts for most of the national wealth. Through a general strike, which is within their power to call, the black labor movement would have means for enacting the radical social changes that are needed for their people.

Black workers are simply over worked, under paid, over taxed, brutalized by police, manipulated by politicians, and abused by the rest of the population. These conditions must stop; the UAW and all unions must be confronted. These unions must recognize their responsibilities, or black workers will move outside of the established unions to represent the interest of black people.

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