

League of Revolutionary Black Workers

An interview with John Watson, Part 1

Fifth Estate Collective
John Watson

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Editors' Note: John Watson, editor of the Wayne State University *South End*, has been involved in Detroit revolutionary politics for a number of years. Former editor of the black community newspaper, *The Inner City Voice*, Watson was one of the original founders of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. He is currently serving as a member of the Central Committee of the League.

Part 1

Fifth Estate: What is the history of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers? Why was it formed?

John Watson: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers is a federation of several revolutionary union movements that exist in Detroit. It was originally formed to provide a broader base for the organization of black workers into revolutionary organizations than was previously provided for when we were organizing on a plant to plant basis.

The beginning of the League goes back to the beginning of DRUM which was its first organization. The Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement was formed at the Hamtramck Assembly Plant of the Chrysler Corporation in the fall of 1967. It developed out of the caucuses of black workers which had formed in the automobile plants to fight increases in productivity and racism in the plant.

All the caucuses which had developed previous to DRUM had been co-opted, either by the company or by the union. In other words the company had either fired the leadership of these caucuses or bought them off by giving them jobs as foremen or supervisors, or the union had managed to buy off the leadership one way or another.

The organization of DRUM was in direct response to numerous attempts by black workers over the last several years in the Hamtramck Assembly Plant to organize a movement which could resist racism and oppression both on the part of the union and the company. We wanted to be a revolutionary organization which would not be co-opted by the moneyed forces.

Briefly, the history of DRUM began with a series of wild-cat strikes which we held around the issues of productivity, production standards and overt racism. The first strike was held when Chrysler Corporation speeded up the production line six cars an hour, during the UAW Convention last May.

After this strike in which both black and white workers participated, the company imposed disciplinary action on those who they considered to be leaders of the strike action. This disciplinary action was taken primarily upon black workers. A number of black workers were fired, and quite a few received suspensions from anywhere from three to thirty days. In response to the racist attack which the company laid upon black workers after the first strike, DRUM organized a number of other strikes at that particular plant.

With the development of DRUM and the successes which we had in terms of organizing and mobilizing the workers at the Hamtramck Assembly Plant, many other black workers throughout the city began to come to us and ask for aid in organizing some sort of group in their plants. As a result shortly after the formation of DRUM, the Eldon Axle Revolutionary Movement (ELRUM) was born at Eldon Gear and Axle Plant of the Chrysler Corporation. Also, the Ford Revolutionary Union Movement (FRUM) was formed at the Ford Rouge Complex, and we now have two plants organized within that complex.

Since that time the organizational activities have been expanding. We've moved into hospital industries with the HOWRUM, NEWRUM for the newspapers in Detroit, an UPRUM which stands for United Parcel Revolutionary Union Movement for black Teamsters who work at United Parcel. There's a JARUM which is Jefferson Assembly Revolutionary Union Movement and there's the development of a CRUM, which is Chevrolet Revolutionary Union Movement. Other automobile plants and other industries are in the process of being organized now.

Fifth Estate: What types of conditions exist in the plants that are being organized by the League?

John Watson: Working conditions are deplorable. What's been happening over the last fifteen or twenty years in industry in general, but especially in the auto industry is the increase in productivity. A lot of people describe the increase in productivity as meaning that there's automation or something like this going on. But in most of the automobile plants, what's been going on is "nigger-mation."

"Nigger-mation" is simply when you hire one black man to do the job which is previously done by two or three or four white men. There's a constant struggle which is going on inside the automobile plants in which the foreman and the general foreman and the supervisor are constantly attempting to work the men harder. They are constantly attempting to speed up the production line. They are constantly attempting to cut down the number of people who work on the lines.

In their insatiable drive to make greater profits for the company, they have negated all considerations of the welfare and safety of the workers in the plant, especially the black workers. As a result, in the foundries for instance almost 95% of the workers in those plants have some sort of industrial illness, usually silicosis or some sort of other lung disease. In the stamping plants all kinds of guys are walking around with two or three fingers missing from one of their hands because of the unsafe machinery.

People are regularly killed in the automobile plants in a wide variety of different kinds of industrial accidents which take place there. The air is foul, it's hot, the noise level is extremely high, the environment is almost intolerable and it gets worse every day because of the constantly increasing production standards of the company.

Besides the problems that black workers have with productivity and safety standards, they have the added problem of overt racism, which exists under these monopoly capitalist corporations. In the first place most of the supervisory personnel, white-collar personnel, skilled trades are all white. It's almost impossible for the average brother who gets a job in an automobile factory to be able to move into one of these positions.

Besides that those white foremen generally have very degrading attitudes towards black people. Every day there are instances in which there are clashes between black workers and white foremen because of racist remarks or racist actions on the part of company representatives.

The racism of the company presents itself not only in the form of verbal abuse and in the form of various kinds of disciplinary action which are laid on the heads of black workers, but also on the very basic level of the allocation of jobs. In almost all plants you find the black workers on the hardest jobs in which you have the heaviest work and in which you have to work the fastest and in which the conditions are most unsafe, whereas you find white people with less seniority are generally employed at lighter jobs which don't have the same sort of safety hazards which the black workers must face. Moreover, white workers are not subjected to the kind of racist insults and harassment that black workers constantly find themselves subjected to.

Fifth Estate: How do you organize the plants you are working in? What kinds of things do you find necessary for organizing a plant?

John Watson: Black revolutionaries in Detroit have a Marxist-Leninist position and have recognized the necessity of organizing in the working class for a number of years now. We had made attempts a number of times to begin to move in the direction of mobilizing the black working class; but up until this point those attempts had been pretty futile, although they had given us a lot of experience into the things that are necessary to successfully organize.

One of the things that we find is that it is absolutely essential that the workers have some sort of support from outside of the factory. When we carry out strikes at any of the plants, we usually have a large number of people come down from the community to man the picket lines. They often bring drums, huge congo drums. This helps to raise the morale of the workers in those actions.

Anyone who works in a plant who participates in a wild-cat strike can be fired, if the company can prove that he actually participated in it. So by having people from the community man the picket lines we can begin to avoid the problem of having large numbers of members losing their jobs and livelihoods.

We find that the basic things that are necessary in terms of organizing a plant are, first of all, a clear understanding of the needs of the workers and the kinds of problems which they are facing in the plant; second, an ability to articulate those needs and to set forth demands which can begin to solve those problems and third, the establishing of a mechanism, an organizational structure which can effectively mobilize the workers to resist the pressures of the company and the union. This organizational mechanism generally requires that we produce a publication for the plant.

This publication is an organizing tool in and of itself in that workers themselves begin to write for the publication and distribute it in the plant. Through recruiting reporters and through distribution of the publication, we develop a network of communication throughout the plant, throughout the department.

The production of the publication is fundamentally different from producing a single leaflet which you pass out once or twice at a factory. It takes eight, ten, or twelve weeks, for instance of consistently producing a newsletter and having it passed out within the factory before the workers can really understand that the people who are behind this organization are dead serious about it. The workers have had a lot of experience with people who come into a plant for one-shot deals, people who come in and run down a whole lot of radical business. But they are really concerned with people who are going to be consistent and who are going to be persistent, who they can depend on. When they see that the DRUM publication is at the gates being passed out every Tuesday on the nose without deviation they begin to recognize that this is a very serious organization which they're dealing with.

The production of the publications, the publication of the various documents which are needed, for instance, the constitution for the group, demand organizational skills which don't exist among the workers. A wide variety of tasks which have to be done are generally done by people who are outside the factory.

It is also essential to understand that the cats working in an automobile plant killing themselves for ten hours a day, working six and sometimes seven days a week, are generally too tired to do all the work which is necessary to tie together membership meetings, produce publications, get in contact with community groups for support, raise funds and so on and so forth. Therefore, it is necessary to have some group of supporters outside the factory who can carry out all these services to the workers.

In terms of providing this support, providing the print shops, printing facilities, community support, raising money, the League is very important because through the League, workers in a number of plants throughout the city can combine their resources together so that they can be serviced by the same administrative staff. This prevents duplication of a lot of activities which would be necessary if we didn't have this kind of broad federation.

Fifth Estate: What are the differences between a community-oriented and a factory-oriented type of organizing?

John Watson: We have a certain program, a certain understanding of the dynamics of American capitalist society and we're acting on the results of our analysis. This doesn't mean that we're against those people who are involved in community organization. Our analysis tells us that the basic power of black people lies at the point of production, that the basic power we have is the power as workers.

As workers, as black workers, we have historically been and are now an essential element in the American economic sense. Without black slaves to pick the cotton on the Southern plantations, the primitive accumulation of capital which was necessary to develop industry in both Europe and America would never have been accomplished. Without black workers slaving on the assembly lines in automobile plants in the city of Detroit, the automobile companies would not be able to produce cars in the first place, and therefore, wouldn't be able to make the tremendous profits which they have been making.

Therefore, we feel that the best way to organize black people into a powerful unit is to organize them in the factories in which they are working. We feel that black workers, especially, have the power to completely close down the American economic system. In order to implement that power, we have to become organized.

In one factory you have 10,000 people who are faced with the same brutal conditions under the same system from the same bastards every day, eight hours a day, ten hours a day, six or seven days a week. When you go out into the community, the interests of the people, let's say in a particular neighborhood, more than likely are going to be much more greatly dispersed than the interests of the workers are. That is, people have different landlords, they are exploited by a number of different shop-keepers, they are faced with a number of different kinds of problems through out the community, and they don't represent the same sort of homologous mass as 10,000 people in a factory do. Therefore, just in terms of expediency there are greater possibilities in the organization of the plant.

And when you consider even farther than that, when you do organize significant sectors of the community, the kinds of actions which can be taken are not as effectively damaging to the ruling class as the kinds of actions which can be taken in the plant. For instance, when you close down Hamtramck Assembly Plant, you do a number of things automatically. If you close it down for a day you cost Chrysler Corporation 1,000 cars. That, considered in relationship to their investment, means the loss of a sizable sum of money.

Also, when you close down a large automobile plant, you automatically can mobilize the people in the streets, 5,000 or 10,000 people at a single blow. Whereas when you attempt to organize the community especially if you go from house to house or block to block, it is much more difficult to gather together that many of the people at the same time.

Finally, we feel that in conjunction with the organization of workers in plants you automatically have the development of community organization and community support. After all, workers are not people who live in factories 24 hours a day. They all go home and live somewhere in the community. We have found that it's almost an inevitable and simultaneous development that as factory workers begin to get organized, support elements within the community are also organized. We feel that it is necessary to have broad community support in order to be able to effectively organize within the plant and effectively close down significant sectors of the economy.

Therefore, we have an overall analysis which sees the point of production as the major and primary sector of the society which has to be organized and that the community should be organized in conjunction with that development. This is probably different from these kinds of analysis which say where it's at is to go out and organize the community and to organize the so-called "brother on the street." It's not that we're opposed to this type of organization; but without a more solid base such as the working class represents, this type of organization, that is, community-based organization, is generally a pretty long and stretched out and futile development.

Fifth Estate: What generally has been the relationship between the black union movement and white workers? For example, recently out at the Chrysler Sterling Stamping Plant there was a wild-cat strike, led mainly by white workers, who called on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers to come out and help them with their organizing. Is this kind of thing happening more frequently?

John Watson: This kind of support between black and white workers in militant actions is in its beginning stages of development now. Our position vis-a-vis white workers has been distorted by the ruling class, the UAW and by various white radical organizations which are opposed to us for some reason or other.

Basically, we have organized an all black revolutionary union movement, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, because of the fact of racism existing in American society, because of the fact that the working class is already divided between the races, and because it is necessary for black workers to be able to act independently of white workers. We have learned historically that in too many instances white workers have been willing to sell us out because of their own racist misunderstandings of the dynamics of struggle.

Since the beginning we've had relationships with white workers at the plants that we've organized. For instance, at the Hamtramck Assembly Plant there has been the formation of an organization among white workers which hopes to begin to organize them to struggle against the company and against the union in regards to their own interests, and to support the development of organizations like the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

We have found that among older white radicals and older union activists, even though we're carrying on positive struggle against capitalism, these people tend to be opposed to us because of purely academic arguments. They got all kinds of theoretical ideas about how we're splitting up the working class between black and white, when actu-

ally they know damn well that the working class has been split between black and white a hell of a long time because of conditions which I alluded to before. They have been doing very little to eliminate any of these conditions. Part of the problem is that white radicals tend to think that they have the sole solution to the problems involving all humanity. As a result of this they become extremely dogmatic and incapable of working out any kind of alliance or coalition with other organizations.

In recent history, however, there have been some positive developments along the lines of the League being able to move into coalitions with groups of white workers. For instance, at the Detroit News there has been the development of an organization known as the News Revolutionary Union Movement (NEWURUM) among black workers. And this organization has attempted since its very inception to encourage the development of militant revolutionary organizations among the white workers at the plant.

Unfortunately, we ran into some problems there in that we found that although a number of the white guys who were down there had risen above the levels of racism and understood the exploitative nature of the company and the exploitative nature of the system, they had very little experience in organizing to fight oppression and exploitation. As a result of their lack of experience, the white workers' organization has been moving at a very slow pace. It seems to be necessary that the leadership of the League begin to provide some sort of theoretical or practical guidance to those whites who are attempting to move to organize in this particular situation.

In other plants such as the Sterling Plant, for the first time militant whites have called for us to support their action. Our position on this is that we, of course, support any progressive action on the part of any workers, white or black, who are moving to resolutely confront this racist capitalist system.

I think that there's going to have to be an awful lot of discussion over the next few months over the relationship between the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the various white organizations which are beginning to organize among white workers. The National Organizing Committee (NOC) has begun to implement a very positive program in this city among the white working class, and all indications are that it is going to be a fairly successful effort. Our relationship with that organization at this time, although unofficial, is very good in that both of us understand the positions which we're coming from and we both understand who the enemy is and what the nature of the enemy is. Therefore, we're not attempting to dominate one another; we're attempting to begin to coordinate our activity for a more solid attack.

I think the black people who are involved in the organization of the black working class should recognize that the theoretical conception of black people being the vanguard of revolutionary struggle is not just a conception which is meant to be laid in the clouds somewhere above everyone's head. It can be applied in a very practical and programmatic fashion. What it simply means is that as political beings we have to understand that the development of the white movement has been retarded, that it has not developed as rapidly as the black movement has had to develop, that it doesn't have the kind of experience of struggle that we have had.

Therefore, even though many of these white radical organizations have resources in terms of money and manpower which far exceed ours, because of their lack of experience most of them are unable to put these resources to work in a positive fashion at this particular time. As political animals, we have to realize that it is necessary for us to provide them with the kind of leadership which they lack at this moment and to begin to do all that we can to help them to develop that leadership to the point where it can be self sufficient.

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