

League of Revolutionary Black Workers

An interview with John Watson, Part 2

Fifth Estate Collective
John Watson

1969

This interview was conducted and transcribed by Dena Clamage.

[Part 1 of the interview appeared in FE #78, May 1-14, 1969.]

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.

Fifth Estate: Speaking about the white radical organizations, recently there has been criticism from the Progressive Labor Party on the basis that there should not be separate unions for black and white workers, as this splits the working class. The accusation is that separate black unions are a form of nationalism, which has to be considered reactionary in all its forms. What is the League's outlook on the question of nationalism? Does it recognize a distinction between revolutionary and reactionary nationalism and if so, what is that distinction?

John Watson: On this question of the Progressive Labor Party, and the criticism which it has leveled at us, in the first place our activities are based upon reality. They are based on an analysis of the real world, not some sort of subjective wishes about how we would like the world to be.

The real facts of the matter are that this is a racist society, it is a monopoly capitalist society, the entire society is divided up according to class and according to caste. This is a fact. Black people don't unite with the white working class simply because Progressive Labor says that that might be a good thing. White workers don't eliminate their racism simply because Progressive Labor says that this might be a good thing.

If you look at the history of the black liberation movement over the last 200 years, you'll find that there have been numerous coalitions, alliances, mergers, between black and white workers. Almost every time that this type of organization has developed and moved to the point where it was actually threatening the system, the system resorted by attacking the movement through racist campaigns.

I think the Populist Movement is one of the clearest examples of this where you had millions of black and white farmers united in a movement against the monopolies and trusts which were oppressing them in this country. In the 1880s and '90s and the early 1900s all the segregation codes were passed, the mass media in this country invented most of the Amos 'n' Andy and Sambo type stereotypes which you have towards black people.

This type of massive propaganda campaign had a telling effect upon the mentality of the white farmers who were aligned with the black workers. Essentially what happened was that the whites who were originally directing their hostility towards the ruling class were convinced that the ruling class wasn't really their enemy, that black people were really their enemy. And you had the formation out of movements like the Populist Movement of organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan which instead of moving towards the liberation of all people directed its efforts toward the further subjugation of black people.

Therefore, we have learned time and time again that when we are involved organizationally with white people who are susceptible to racist overtures from the ruling class, we can get messed with. What this lesson tells us is that we have to have independent organizations which can act on the behalf of black people and in the interests of black people regardless of the kinds of positions which white organizations or white people are going to take.

If white people decide they are going to take a counter-revolutionary position because of the *Detroit News* and the *Detroit Free Press* and TV-2 and WWJ and NBC and the mass media goes onto a racist harangue, then it is still going to be necessary for us to fight for our freedom. If we are involved in an organization which is composed of a majority of white people, a majority of whom are white racists, it will just be a simple vote for the white racists in the movement to say, we no longer need to struggle for black liberation. What we're going to do is fight against crime in the streets or something like this. We will not allow ourselves to be put in a position where our future depends upon the good faith of the white community.

The Progressive Labor Party which hasn't organized a worker, has no right at all to attack the League of Revolutionary Black Workers or DRUM or any other component part of the League. They are another one of these little groups which have a conception of themselves, a very egotistical and ethnocentric conception of themselves, as the vanguard party.

If you're the vanguard party, it means that if anybody else is moving in a revolutionary direction and mobilizing masses of people into revolutionary organizations, there must be something wrong with the program they're following because the only correct program is the program of that particular party. As a result of this particular kind of outlook they find it necessary to attack anybody who is trying to do anything for whatever dogmatic reasons they can find. Either you're a nationalist which is counter-revolutionary or you're backwards or you're just developing or something else.

From their point of view, you reach the pinnacle of revolutionary development when you decide to become a member of Progressive Labor. We're not members of the Progressive Labor Party and we're not about to become members of the Progressive Labor Party or any other existing white organization because none of them are doing anything which shows us that they're capable of organizing a mass revolutionary struggle in this country, among blacks or whites.

As far as the question of black nationalism is concerned, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers recognizes that black nationalism in and of itself represents a broad political spectrum from left to right. There are black nationalists who are essentially black fascists, and you have other black nationalists who are essentially black Marxist-Leninist Communist revolutionaries.

We understand that there are black nationalists who simply feel that they as individuals have not been getting a big enough piece of the pie of black exploitation and who are not moving in the interests of black people. We oppose the idea that the solution to our problem is the establishment of a new economy in which you have black capitalists, black factory owners, exploiting black workers the way the white people have. We see the solution to the problem not simply as one of establishing a nationalist organization or a nationalist community, but one in which all forms of exploitation and oppression are eliminated within that community.

Fifth Estate: How do you feel that white radicals should relate to revolutionary black union movements and also how do you feel they should relate to white workers?

John Watson: As far as relating to our movement there are a number of things which are needed to continue to carry out a program of organizing the entire black working class. There are all sorts of inputs into the movement, of which of course the first and primary one is money. We are constantly in need of funds to fight the legal struggles which we have, to put out the publications, to hire organizers, to run our offices, etc.

Second, there are a number of specific types of projects which white radicals can work on which so far most of them have been quite hesitant to do. There's a great need for an expansion of—and this is just one particular project—printing facilities within the black community.

We've heard that over 50 SDS kids will be coming to Detroit this summer who want to become involved in the organization and the development of a revolutionary union movement. It seems to me that these students could put their time to better use by attempting to set up print shops which had multilith and mimeograph machines, letterpress presses and other types of equipment throughout the city, than if all of them simply went into the automobile factories and worked next to the workers for a few months.

There are other kinds of inputs which the movement needs. For instance, we need some permanent fund-raising apparatuses around here. Some of the more progressive white radicals in the city have already moved in this direction of setting up legal self-defense, which provides a regular fund for people who are in need of legal assistance and bail money.

We are in bad need of photographic equipment. The League would like to begin to move into the production of films so we can have more vehicles for the reeducation of black people to the true nature of the system. However, at the moment we don't have the resources, and the administrative staff doesn't have the time to put into that kind of project. White radicals who are really interested in doing something could get together and figure out how to beg, borrow or steal these kinds of photographic equipment.

We could go on and on and on and talk about all the kinds of inputs which we need on that level.

Second, of course, I think that white radicals who want to support DRUM and the League should politically support us every chance they get. For instance, they should not tolerate organizations like the Progressive Labor Party or anybody else denigrating the kinds of political positions we take. There has been an awful lot of talk not only among PL but within organizations like SDS which have distorted both the history and the positions of DRUM. I think that some of the things which SDS said were said in a paternal light.

They misconstrued the political sophistication of our movement, in terms of us having a clear understanding of racism, monopoly capitalism and imperialism and also having an understanding of how to move to attack these evils. I think that white radicals who want to do something for us should do all they can, for instance, to let people who they have connections with know about the existence of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, what our program is, what we're doing in practice and the kinds of needs we have.

Of course, the major role of white radicals should be to organize the white workers. A lot of the same sorts of inputs which are needed in terms of organizing black workers are needed in terms of organizing white workers, i.e., print shops, photographic equipment, other types of communication networks, funds, etc.

There is a developing need for organizers to actually go into the plants to mobilize people. The reason that I sort of shy away from emphasizing that particular point, however, is that no workers need simply missionary people to come into the plants who think they got to do missionary work. If you've got five students who want to work in the plant it would probably be best if two of them went inside and three of them stayed outside to support those two who are in there.

If students consider themselves sufficiently sophisticated and aware of the problems and conditions in the plants and decide to move into the factory, they should push to educate the white workers along a certain political line. That line, and this is very important, is the position that black workers are the vanguard of the revolutionary movement.

Now I know that many white radicals have espoused this position as a slogan, but it is more than a slogan—it's true. Therefore, white workers should prepare to accept leadership from the most advanced section of the proletariat.

White students who intend to enter organizing work in the plants should think that position through very rationally and carefully. If they expect to do any serious political work in the plants they must explain the concept of the black vanguard. We believe that it is extremely important that they push that position when they begin to organize white workers. I think that once these kinds of conceptions are understood that we'll begin to make great progress both in the further organization of black workers and stimulating the organization of white workers.

Fifth Estate: How have the UAW and other unions generally reacted to the formation of black revolutionary union movements in places under their jurisdiction?

John Watson: They have reacted with total hostility, and vicious attacks upon our movement. The UAW, for instance, is going around selling an awful lot of wolf tickets about what they are going to do to black militants within a plant. For instance, there has been a lot of talk within circles of the UAW that they are going to form goon squads which are going to physically expel us from the various automobile plants. Emil Mazey, the Secretary-Treasurer of the UAW called us a greater threat to unionism than the Communists were in the '30s and '40s. I guess this means that he wants all the right-wing liberals in the UAW to mobilize themselves to go for a concerted attack against us, perhaps even on a physical level.

The UAW sent out 350,000 letters to their membership in the Detroit area branding us as segregationist people who are trying to divide the working class and are working against the interests of workers as a whole. They have also publicly stated that they will refuse to support any black workers who are fired when we are carrying out DRUM activities, which is, of course, a violation of their own constitution. They have a responsibility to their membership, to anybody who is fired or disciplined by the company, but they have stated publicly that they won't do this any longer.

On a local level within the unions there are a lot of contradictions between the kinds of positions union leadership takes toward us because of the fact that we have such a mass base of support in the plants which we have organized. Many of the union leaders find it impossible to openly oppose us because their membership would go against them. Most of these union leaders are just existing by a thin thread anyway since they don't represent the interests of the workers, but generally they represent the interests of the company. They are very afraid of further development of a revolutionary organization among black workers.

I think that it can be reasonably assumed that there will be a great struggle over the next six months to a year between the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the union bureaucracy that exists within the UAW, the AFL-CIO, and the Teamsters, especially the UAW and the AFL-CIO. Exactly how these struggles will come out is difficult to say right now since in a legalistic sense the UAW always has the upper hand.

You'll notice that even though the overwhelming majority of the rank and file at the Sterling Plant went on strike against the conditions that existed out there, the UAW was able to meet this particular rebellion by simply placing the union under trusteeship and sending down an administrator from the Solidarity House to run the union. Therefore, even if you take over the union on the local level, the International has such power according to the ruling class's law that they can move to administratively stop the workers from exerting their own power.

But the thing that we have which the UAW doesn't have is the support of the workers on the primary level, that is, the support of the workers at the point of production. The most important power that you have is the power to be able to close down the plant. The union can run down all the rules and regulations and laws, articles in the constitution and contracts that it wants to. But if you can pull a large enough number of workers out of the plant, that plant isn't going to run until we decide that we're going to run it again.

The AFL-CIO has also been selling us some tremendous wolf tickets in regards to the attempts of blacks to organize, especially among the skilled trades and construction workers. As you know, it's been a historical fact that the construction and building trade unions have been some of the most segregated and racist unions in the country. We're beginning to move to organize black workers into unions which can begin to take some of these high-paying jobs which we've been continually denied.

The AFL-CIO in this area has also stated that they will attempt to crush us. In the long run it will be impossible for the union bureaucracies to crush our movement. But we recognize that there's a long and bitter struggle ahead of us in dealing with these enemies of the revolution.

Fifth Estate: In terms of a long range perspective, has your experience with League organizing given you some insight or ideas into where the general revolutionary process is moving in this country and the kinds of things that it will ultimately culminate in?

John Watson: We have some definite conceptions of how the revolution is going to be accomplished in this country. In the first place we're organizing in automobile plants on the basis of the local struggles which black workers are faced with in the industries in which they are working. But we find that any time we carry out a strike at a particular plant the company doesn't simply rely on the resources which it has at that particular plant to suppress our strike but moves to bring in outside police, moves to bring in the courts, moves to use the mass media, moves to use a number of resources which are available to the ruling class to suppress the struggle. Therefore, at a particular plant sometimes we find that in the struggle against the company the workers are overwhelmed by the amount of strength which the company can bring to bear against us.

If you consider this in a theoretical sense it's no different from the kinds of struggles which are taking place on an international level where American imperialism is allowed to concentrate superior forces in a small area of the world in order to suppress a liberation movement. For instance, look at the struggle which went down in Santo Domingo. Che Guevara has told us that the response to this kind of tactic of the ruling class is to spread their forces

thin throughout the world by the opening up of “two, three, many Vietnams,” so that each local guerrilla movement can deal more effectively with their local situation.

You can relate this to the situation as it exists in this country. We have found that in the future when a particular plant goes down and the ruling class brings in the police and courts and all the rest of that stuff, we’re going to have to respond in some sort of fashion in which we can bring equal force against them. By and large this is one of the reasons for the organization of the League, so that workers in different industries and different plants could support one another in these struggles.

Given a protracted and intensive struggle, this kind of development would inevitably lead to a general strike in which it would be necessary for all the workers in a particular city or a particular geographic area to close down the industries in support of any particular struggle. A general strike on a local level, of course, can be met by the ruling class on a national level, that is, they can bring in the national guard, the state police, the FBI, the army and whatever else might be necessary to suppress this particular kind of struggle.

However, I think the development of a general strike here in a city like Detroit over the next two or three years would be a very positive development in terms of concretely demonstrating to masses of people their ability to mobilize themselves and bring immense power and pressure against the system.

In the long run because of the contradictions in capitalist society, capitalism can’t make any kinds of really significant reforms with American industry or within the society at large. The process of increasing productivity standards within the plant isn’t just a simple accident. It has to do with the necessity of the expansion of capitalism in an attempt to constantly increase profit in relation to overall capital investment. This simply goes to say that given the context of any kind of general strike or struggle on that level, the ruling class will be forced into a position of suppressing or attempting to suppress that type of activity.

Our response to such a repression on a local level will obviously have to be to escalate our attack on the national level. I think that we have to think in terms of being able to have a national general strike.

If a national general strike reaches the point of absolute confrontation between us and the system and if the ruling class refuses to capitulate to the demands which we lay on it, it would probably resort to the type of tactics which were used to suppress the unorganized general strike which was held in July of 1967 in Detroit. That is, it would probably try to garrison off the community and starve us out.

A revolutionary organization and revolutionary leaders simply cannot tolerate the starvation of our community and facing that kind of position we would have no choice but to call for the workers to go back into the factories and assume control of the means of production and distribution in order to feed ourselves and feed the community.

Assuming control of the means of production essentially means that you are at the first stage of assuming state power. It is from the escalation of this type of struggle and from the reaction of the ruling class to it that we see the development of an overall revolutionary movement which will forever overthrow capitalism and imperialism and racism.

Fifth Estate: In the context of this long-range perspective where is the League generally going in the short-run? Is it going to be confined to a local level or are plans now being made for national expansion?

John Watson: At the moment we are tightening up the organization on the local level and expanding to new plants and new memberships on a local level. Our interim medium-range plans are of course to begin to expand outside of this immediate geographic area to organize black workers wherever they might exist.

Our ultimate intention is to organize black workers as a whole, as a class throughout the country and proceeding from that basic mass organization to extend a revolutionary black organization throughout the black community.

Persons interested in supporting the work of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers may send contributions to the organization at 9049 Oakland, Detroit, Michigan.

fifth Estate

Fifth Estate Collective
John Watson
League of Revolutionary Black Workers
An interview with John Watson, Part 2
1969

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/79-may-15-28-1969/league-of-revolutionary-black-workers>
Fifth Estate #79, May 15-28, 1969

[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fifthestate.org)