

Radical Motown, Radical Heritage: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers

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Abstract

The essay proposes a short history of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, a radical left-wing organization founded in Detroit in 1969. Even though the League disappeared in 1971, its role was significant, and it allows us to write a more complex history of the Black Power Movement by linking the Old Left with the New Left. Its internal quarrels were not only due to clashes of ego but, instead, reflected actual political differences.

Keywords: African American History; Black Power; Black Working Class; New Left; Detroit.

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1 Introduction

A long-standing analysis of the Black Power movement opposes the limited political successes of its organizations with their cultural impact.¹ This alleged political failure was explained by a set of three factors: factionalism, personal conflicts and also state repression, often evoked as the main factor in this narrative of decline.² Furthermore, the impact of Black Power is assessed in the sociocultural sphere for the social and educational services it provided to impoverished communities and for its participation in the construction of a positive African American identity, as well as for the increase in successful black businesses and the conception of Black Studies.³ Broadly speaking, the political and organizational aspects of the Black Power era were long downplayed or they were part of a narrative about the “evil twin that wrecked the civil rights movement.”⁴

For over twenty years, however, historians have cast a light on new subjects, forgotten figures and facts. They have participated in the renewal of the historiography of Black Power, widening their interest to take into account new periods, before the 1960s or after Black Power’s classical era (1966–1975), and new spaces.⁵ New approaches have also been used, including cultural history, a gendered vision, and transnational studies inspired by a turn to global history as well as a new interest in political radical margins, to name a few.⁶

Moreover, for a long time, the history of the Black Power era was captured almost exclusively through the images of the Black Panther Party (BPP), wiping out a vast array of organizations and tendencies that were less visible or not as flamboyant as the Panthers. Peniel Joseph recently stressed the diversity of the forms that the Black Power movement took, separating its organizations from the iconic memory of their images.⁷ In this article, I propose to stress the effectiveness of the political action of one of these Black Power organizations, which is less well-known than the BPP, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW) or more simply, the League, which was the subject of the 1975 classic *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying* by Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin. In 1977 another study, by sociologist James A. Geschwender, *Class, Race and Worker Insurgency*, traced out the League’s history from its evolution to its various splits.⁸ Since then, few authors have dealt with this subject, as if the withdrawal of the Black Power movement occurred at the same time as a decrease of interest in this

1. Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
2. Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI’s Secret Wars against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1990); Robert J. Goldstein, *Political Repression in Modern America: From 1870 to 1976* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Akinyele O. Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).
3. Fabio Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Laura W. Hill and Julia Rabig, *The Business of Black Power: Community Development, Capitalism, and Corporate Responsibility in Postwar America* (Rochester, NY: University Rochester Press, 2012); James E. Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism In The 1960s And 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
4. Peniel E. Joseph, “Black Liberation Without Apology: Reconceptualizing the Black Power Movement,” *Black Scholar*, 3/4(2001): 2.
5. “The years between 1966 and 1975 represent the black power era’s classical period,” in Peniel E. Joseph, “The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field,” *The Journal of American History*, 3(2009): 772. See also Peniel E. Joseph, *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Thomas J. Sugrue proposed a northern history of the civil rights movement: *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2009).
6. Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002); Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011); Deborah G. White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894–1994* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
7. Joseph, *The Black Power Movement*.
8. James A. Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

kind of radical organization. Nonetheless, in 2001 Heather Ann Thompson, a native from Detroit like Sugrue, published *Whose Detroit*, a far reaching study of the relationship between the liberal labor leaders of the UAW, the black nationalist radicals, liberal politicians and the rank-and-file workers through a micro-history of James Johnson Jr.'s life, who was a black worker who moved to Detroit in the 1960s to work at Chrysler's Eldon Avenue plant, and ending up killing two foremen and a job-setter on the shop-floor.⁹ Heather Thompson demonstrated that the simplistic dichotomy between black and white Detroit had to be complexified, and that "the U.S. labor movement always had more power over its destiny than its leaders imagined."¹⁰

Even though the League's existence was short—founded in 1969 in Detroit, then it split in 1970—I will demonstrate that it had a real political impact in Detroit and on the United Automobile Workers Union (UAW).¹¹ This short-lived organization, whose geographical development was limited to Detroit, remained marginal. Still, it was influential in the creation of various organizations in the following years, and it drove the UAW leadership to change its policy regarding black workers.

I will first describe how the history of the League has been partially eclipsed by more visible groups. Then I propose to connect class and race, as they were linked within this organization, as inherited from radical political traditions. The LRBW is also representative of the debates that divided the black activists at the time. Furthermore, studying smaller and marginalized tendencies and organizations is a useful way to understand the whole picture. These political margins shed a different light on the Black Power Movement, and inform us in an effective manner.

2 The League: An Underrated History

In 1971, when one issue of *Radical America*, the New Left magazine launched by members of the SDS covered the story of urban protest in Detroit, the League was still barely known outside Detroit.¹² Even nowadays the League is not as well-known as the BPP and as Nicola Pizzolato writes it "does not fit into classical iconography."¹³ Perhaps it is due to its place of birth, Detroit, which may be perceived as a significant Black metropolis, but it is still far less mentioned in the historical narrative than other black cities, including the intellectual and political leading Black Mecca, Harlem in New York City. Also, Detroit had neither the political significance of San Francisco/Oakland, where the Black Panther Party emerged and established relations with the New Left, nor the vibrant cultural and economic dynamism of Chicago's South Side. From a political point of view, Detroit has been examined mainly through the 1967 riots, which are associated with sheer violence, as if this eruptive moment had no profound and local roots, moreover, as if the riots were only a nervous response to a national situation. Since the 1970s, Detroit has also become synonymous with decay, social problems and urban crisis, a city where the 'white flight' to the suburbs, which turned downtown Detroit into a ghetto, was followed by the black middle-class flight.¹⁴ With the closure of auto plants from the 1980s

9. Heather A. Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996). Heather Thompson analyzed in her book what has been overlooked by Thomas Sugrue in his urban crisis history.

10. Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 10.

11. The official name of the UAW is: The International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America. It was founded in 1935 in the wave of radical militancy that gave birth to industrial unionism. For more information about the UAW and Walther Reuther, the fourth leader from 1946 to 1970, see: Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945–1968* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Nelson Lichtenstein, *Walther Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

12. Eric Perkins, "The League of Revolutionary Black Workers Introduction," *Radical America*, 2(1971): 51–62; Harold M. Baron, "The Demand for Black Labor," *Radical America*, 2(1971): 1–46.

13. Nicola Pizzolato, "Scioperi al ritmo dei tamburi: Black Power nel '1968' americano," *Scienza & Politica. Per una storia delle dottrine*, 59(2018): 62.

14. For an account on this question see: Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Paul Kersey, *Escape from Detroit: The Collapse of America's Black Metropolis* (Lexington, KY: Stuff Black People Don't Like, 2012).

on, it became a symbol of deindustrialization.¹⁵ The historian Thomas Sugrue has greatly contributed to stimulating new interest in Detroit history, by mirroring both the urban and racial crisis.¹⁶

In the same vein, the Rust Belt in general is too often perceived as mostly white and working class, and labor historians have ignored African Americans for a long time, excluding the race question from their studies, just like the African Americans were excluded from major industries and from the best jobs. The historian Herbert Hill, who blames his colleagues for having a serious “race problem” due to a romantic vision of the white working class, which was influenced by Marxism, always downplayed racism among the white workers: “either to ignore the racism of the white working class or to rationalize it by attributing it to manipulation by employers.”¹⁷ For his part, historian Bruce Nelson describes how the worker is most often associated with white male representations.¹⁸ In the same manner, the history of the radical left has largely been reduced to white radicals, with black leaders being viewed in terms of moderation and compromise, through a distorted picture of Martin Luther King.¹⁹ Jacquelyn Dowd-Hall actually describes this narrow vision as “whitening the memory and historiography of the Left.”²⁰

In 1988, Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein took a major step in assessing the inseparable links between class and race through a study of what they called Civil Rights Unionism and its “lost opportunities” in the 1930s and 1940s, this early civil rights movement being wrecked by McCarthyism.²¹ If working-class history has often ignored race, black history has frequently forgotten class, and also gender. In *Building Bridges*, Robin D. G. Kelley correctly writes that one “of the most important and still understudied urban labor movements is the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, which spawned the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.”²² Another factor for the relative oblivion of the League was its own choice to remain inconspicuous, in contrast to the spectacular and provocative demonstrations of the Panthers. DRUM, FRUM and “revolutionary union movements,” RUM, were formed by black workers at odds with the traditional UAW.

The League grew out of several organizations in various automotive plants, such as the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), founded in May 1968, and other Revolutionary Union Movements in other plants.

3 Detroit in the 1950s and 1960s: Black Workers and the Unions

In the 1940s to 1950s, Detroit was a booming city which attracted more than 400,000 Southern African Americans trying to escape a region defined by segregation, black poverty and white violence. The black population swelled from 150,000 in 1940 to more than 660,000 in 1970, during the second wave

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15. Andrew Brooks, *The End of Development: A Global History of Poverty and Prosperity* (London: Zedbooks, 2017), 321. See also Quentin R. Skrabec, *The Fall of an American Rome: De-Industrialization of the American Dream* (United States: Algora Publishing, 2014).
 16. Thomas Sugrue and other historians like Boyle, and Pizzolato have made with Detroit’s case the study of a microcosm that mirrors the whole urban and racial crisis. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*; Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945–1968*; Joel Stone and Thomas J. Sugrue, *Detroit 1967: Origins, Impacts, Legacies* (Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University Press, 2017); Nicola Pizzolato, *Challenging Global Capitalism: Labor Migration, Radical Struggle, and Urban Change in Detroit and Turin* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Michael Hamlin and Michele Gibbs, *A Black Revolutionary’s Life in Labor: Black Workers Power in Detroit* (Detroit, Mich.: Against the Tide Books, 2013); Kersey, *Escape from Detroit*.
 17. Herbert Hill, *The Problem of Race in American Labor History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 190.
 18. Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), xxii–xxiii.
 19. Sylvie Laurent, *Martin Luther King: une biographie intellectuelle et politique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2015).
 20. Jacquelyn D. Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History*, 4(2005): 1253.
 21. Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *The Journal of American History*, 3(1988): 786–811.
 22. Robin D.G. Kelley, “Building Bridges: The Challenge of Organized Labor in Communities of Color,” *New Labor Forum*, 5(1999): 50. One notable exception is a chapter about the LRBW in Ursula McTaggart, *Guerrillas in the Industrial Jungle: Radicalism’s Primitive and Industrial Rhetoric* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).

of the great migration.²³ Most of them had to settle into two districts, Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, because of restrictive covenants.²⁴ Urban renewal was the focus of local political debates, but the underlying problem was segregation. Detroit was slowly becoming an entirely black city. The authorities did nothing to oppose the white flight to the suburbs. On the contrary, Black Bottom was bulldozed and urban renewal meant black removal and even more segregation.²⁵ Competition for decent housing was a major cause of two riots, in 1942 and 1943: Polish-Americans were opposed to the building of a housing project called Sojourner Truth next to their neighborhood. The clashes between white Appalachians, Polish-Americans, and Blacks were common.²⁶ At state and federal levels, the Whites supported the CIO-backed candidates of the Democratic Party, even though the unions demanded desegregation. For them a union was acceptable in the shop, but in local elections most of them voted against anyone proposing any kind of integration in their neighborhood.

In fact, before 1940 Ford was the only company to employ black workers, regularly hiring 10% African American workers as a systematic tool to divide the workforce in order to weaken the union and sometimes break strikes. Chrysler and General Motors had virtually no black workers in their plants. During World War II, however, the car industry became a main actor in the war effort and it required a huge workforce; so it started hiring more African Americans. In 1945, for example, Chrysler had 5,000 black workers.²⁷ The UAW was struggling against job discrimination and, during the war, it had become the strongest support of Black Detroit, as historians Meier and Rudwick have shown.

But the McCarthy era changed this relationship: the liberal consensus, accepted by the unions, implied not only that any leftist or progressive organization or policy be banned, but also that there should be severe repression of any civil rights claim that was not moderate enough. Meier and Rudwick thus conclude that the balance sheet of the UAW is ambiguous.²⁸ The union helped the blacks to enter this industry, to have access to better jobs than the ones in the foundry where they were usually concentrated and where they were exposed to the most dangerous and exhausting positions in the plants. Still, from the beginning, black workers protested the union's failure to eliminate the job bias. For example, after the war, and especially in the 1950s, massive layoffs hit black workers first. As the phrase goes, they were "last hired and first fired." In Dodge's main plant in the 1960s, 95% of the foremen and 100% of the superintendents were white. Racism was still institutional in this industry, against blacks and also against Arab workers, mostly immigrants from the Middle East who, having arrived last, were treated even worse than the blacks.²⁹

In 1957, a group of black unionists formed the TULC, an internal caucus that raised the question of racism in the union.³⁰ In the plants, black workers could only fill grievance papers and give them to their union representatives. Most of the time, the answers they were given were disappointing. It was as if the job was divided: the company looked after the production, and the union looked after "its" workers, without questioning racism. In Dodge Main the union rank-and-file was mostly Polish-American, who were at times prejudiced against blacks. By the late 1960s, 30% of the UAW membership was black, but very few were salaried members, and amongst the 26 executives, only two were

23. United States Census Bureau. June 8, 2006, <https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html>

24. Steve Babson, *Working Detroit: The Making of a Union Town*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 156.

25. Krysta Ryzewski, "No Home for the 'Ordinary Gamut': A Historical Archaeology of Community Displacement and the Creation of Detroit, City Beautiful," *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 3(2015): 408–31.

26. Dominic J. Capeci, *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); Stephen Grant Meyer, *As Long as They Don't Move next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

27. Marvin Surkin and Dan Georgakas, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 35.

28. Meier, Rudwick, and Rudwick, *Black Detroit And the Rise of the UAW*.

29. Surkin and Georgakas, *Detroit*, 37.

30. The TULC had a membership of around 9,000 in 1960. But soon the TULC's main objective was to secure a few positions for a few members in the union bureaucracy. It had no concrete action on the ground since it was mostly an internal opposition to Walter Reuther.

black.³¹

At the federal level, the liberal alliance between the UAW, on one hand, and the NAACP and the civil rights activists, on the other, was highly publicized. In 1963, the Detroit *Walk to Freedom*, a huge demonstration against segregation in the North to raise funds for the SCLC, gathered a crowd of an estimated 125,000 on Woodward Avenue on the twentieth anniversary of the June 23, 1943 riot. It saw the top executives of the UAW, with Walter Reuther leading them, walking side by side with King but also with Detroit Mayor, Jerome P. Cavanagh.

The mid-1960s were a turning point for the black freedom movement and provided incentives for change in Detroit as well. After the passing of the major Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965), the large liberal coalition that brought together the civil rights organizations, the unions and the liberals, began to disintegrate. The failure of the Mississippi Freedom Party to be seated at the Democratic Party convention in 1964 was a major blow to the liberal alliance. In the eyes of many young blacks, Malcolm X was giving better answers than the moderate and more mainstream civil rights organizations.³² In Detroit, this new nationalist mood found fertile ground, especially because various activists had been trying for a long time to contest the moderate policy of the Civil Rights Movement. This was the case with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

4 Radical Roots

The League is linked with the local history of the black left in Detroit and its roots come from socialist and radical organizations, some of them specific to Detroit. The activist and theorist C. L. R. James is central to this political tradition.³³ Deported to London in 1953, he had time to inspire the foundation of a small organization, the group Correspondence, headed by Martin Glaberman (1918–2001), who had been employed in various auto plants until the 1960s.³⁴ The future leaders of the League, Luke Tripp, John Williams, Charles “Mao” Johnson and John Watson attended Marxist classes given by Mar-

31. Surkin and Georgakas, *Detroit*, 39.

32. Like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People founded in 1909 by white and black intellectuals, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), founded in February 1957 by Protestant pastors in the South, following the victory of the Montgomery Bus Boycott a year before.

33. Born in Trinidad, he went to England in 1932 where he lived in Lancashire. James had left the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in 1940 to join a split-up named the Workers Party. He returned to the SWP in 1947, where he was one of the 2 leaders of a small faction, called the Johnson-Forest tendency. James's pseudonym was J.R. Johnson; Raya Dunayevskaya (1910–1987) was called Freddie Forrest. She was born Raya Shpigel in Ukraine, but arrived as a child in the United States. In 1950, both left the SWP again to build, with Grace Lee Boggs (1915–2015), the Correspondence Publishing Committee. Paul Buhle, Mari Jo Buhle and Dan Georgakas, *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 205–6. In 1952, James was imprisoned on Ellis Island under the McCarran Act, otherwise known as the Internal Security Act; it was part of the legislative arsenal against subversion voted for during McCarthyism. There he provided inspiration for the creation of a “Third Layer School” where rank-and-file workers, women and youth did the talking while intellectuals did the listening. In 1953 he was deported to Britain. About James, see: Frank Rosengarten, *Urbane Revolutionary: C.L.R. James and the Struggle for a New Society* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007); Matthieu Renault, *C.L.R. James: la vie révolutionnaire d'un “Platon noir”* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016).

34. Several autoworkers, such as James Boggs (1919–1993) and Charles Denby (1907–1983), were active members in Correspondence. Charles Denby, the author of *Indignant Heart*, describes his experience of moving to Detroit to work in the factories. *Indignant Heart: Testimony of a Black American Worker* (London: Pluto Press, 1979). The word “correspondence” is an allusion to the American Revolution and to the Committees of Correspondence, shadow governments funded by the Patriots in the thirteen colonies. For a brief history of Correspondence see: Nicola Pizzolato, “Transnational Radicals: Labour Dissent and Political Activism in Detroit and Turin (1950–1970),” *International Review of Social History*, 1(2011): 7–10. After another split of the group Correspondence, the 25 or so remaining members started to call themselves Facing Reality, a group with a small impact at Wayne State University where Glaberman taught a class on Karl Marx's *Capital*. In 1953, Raya Dunayevskaya quit the group to form the News and Letter Committee and concurrently moved to Detroit. Grace Lee Boggs, a Chinese-American living in Detroit, was a life-long activist in the Trotskyist milieu. About her, see: Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Stephen M. Ward, *In Love and Struggle: The Revolutionary Lives of James and Grace Lee Boggs* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Boggs Center, <http://boggscenter.org>. In 1962, another split divided this small group. Boggs and James turned to some kind of Third-Worldism at a time when Maoism was in vogue. Martin Glaberman, “Remembering C.L.R. James,” *Against the Current*, 72(January-February 1998), <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/atc/1971.html>

tin Glaberman.³⁵ It should be noted that for a long time the history of the New Left had been reduced primarily to the white students in the Students for a Democratic Society, the SDS, and viewed as a “kind of ‘anomaly’ in the history of the American Left.”³⁶ However, in the past ten years, a new generation of historians has challenged this exceptionalist theory, in that the New Left was more typically ‘American,’ and stressed the links between the Old and the New Left as primarily an intellectual lineage, as Anne Ollivier-Mellios wrote.³⁷ We want to emphasize that these links were also direct, between the older and younger activists.

Most of the future activists of the League were enrolled at Wayne State University. There they formed an informal student group, UHURU, meaning *freedom* in Swahili. General Baker (General is his real first name), one of the two workers in the group, worked at the Dodge Main plant. Some of them had been active in the main black students’ organization, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).³⁸ In 1964, they visited Cuba along with 84 student activists, and met with Che Guevara.

In 1965, when General Baker received his draft card to go and fight in Vietnam, the group put out leaflets announcing that 50,000 people would show up at the Wayne County Induction Center. Only eight arrived, but the US Army, most likely not very pleased with this potential conscript, found Baker unsuitable for service. This small demonstration gives a better assessment of this still small and marginal group of friends. They were all formal members of various organizations, but their main activity took place in the small group around *Uhuru*. The 1967 riot changed the situation, giving them the opportunity to expand their activities, as well as imposing a sense of urgency.

5 Our Thing is DRUM

The 1967 riot was one of the most violent, and also one of the most violently repressed. Forty-three people were killed, most of them by the police, and 1,300 buildings were burned to ashes.³⁹ The black nationalists called this event the “Great Rebellion,” to stress its political character. James Geschwender underlines that this was not a race riot, in the sense that there was no fighting between blacks and whites. Instead, the blacks reacted to the massive arrest of 82 people in a “blind pig,” the local name for an illegal drinking place. Provocatively, John Watson called the riot “shopping for free” and, indeed, there was some looting, by blacks and whites, demonstrating the frustration of a large part of the poorest sector of the population. Geschwender demonstrates that, contrary to the Kerner Report commissioned by the government on “civil disorders” after the Detroit riot, most of the insurrection participants were less educated than nonparticipants.⁴⁰

This outburst of anger stimulated a sense of pride and confidence in the blacks’ capacity to unite their strengths. It gave a new impetus to the small radical groups already active in Detroit. UHURU decided to launch a newspaper, *Inner-City Voice*, with the first issue published in October 1967. Its masthead spelled “the Voice of Revolution” and its function was theorized as the vehicle for a new political agenda and the backbone of a new political organization yet to come, in the way Lenin had theorized that a newspaper is the building tool for an effective revolutionary party.

Inner City Voice was open to any progressive and radical tendencies, and published everything, from the Black Panther Party articles to contributions by white, progressive, Catholic priests’ articles.

35. They also went to SWP’s forums on Friday evenings.

36. Anne Ollivier-Mellios, “Intellectual Origins of the New Left: The Legacy of the ‘Lyrical Left,’” in *Generations of Social Movements: Remembering the Left in the US and France*, by Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry and Ambre Ivoll (New York: Routledge, 2015), 88–89.

37. Ollivier-Mellios, 88.

38. The SNCC was founded in April 1960 in Raleigh. Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

39. In the recent film, *Detroit*, Kathryn Bigelow, (Eagle Pictures, 2017), recalls the violence at the Algiers Motel. Also see a recent book: Stone and Sugrue, *Detroit 1967*.

40. United States et al., *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders: Special Introduction by Tom Wicker of The New York Times; Chairman, Otto Kerner* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968); Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency*, 72–3.

It had columns by Robert F. Williams, the ex-NAACP activist from Monroe who had to flee to Cuba in 1961, and also by James Boggs, who was Grace Lee Boggs' husband and an autoworker himself. It also reproduced speeches by Glaberman and James. Its publication was very irregular, but they succeeded in printing 10,000 copies for their third issue, without any support from the local left, even when their printing office was threatened by the FBI. The paper's key-person was John Watson, who did most of the practical work; but he was also assisted by Mike Hamlin, Ken Cockrel, a law student, and General Baker. Their activities expanded extraordinarily in 1968.

Through the publication of *Inner-City Voice*, the activists managed to recruit a small group of young workers at the Dodge plant. In early May 1968, Chrysler tried to speed up the assembly line at Dodge Main. The black activists' political activities in the direction of this plant paid off: on May 2, 1968, more than 4,000 workers went on a wildcat strike.⁴¹ A minority of 300 black and white workers organized the striking pickets, and most of the 4,000 workers respected them.⁴² Chrysler's reaction was to try to fire seven workers, five black and two whites. In general, the blacks received the harshest punishment. This discrimination triggered the formation of DRUM, a small group of eight members. They published their first leaflet called DRUM to denounce the firings, and DRUM became a weekly newsletter. It advocated hiring black foremen, superintendents and black doctors in the medical centers as well as the end of the double standard against African Americans. It denounced the way the UAW was working hand-in-glove with Chrysler. In July, DRUM organized a demonstration, first at the Local 3 headquarters of the union, then at the Chrysler headquarters. In September 1968, DRUM had developed into something much larger and ran in the election for a trustee position in their UAW Local 3. DRUM's candidate, Ron March, was finally defeated by a vote of 2,000 to 1,300.

In other plants similar revolutionary union movements were organized: ELRUM at the Eldon avenue plant at the main Chrysler site; FRUM, for Ford Revolutionary Union Movement at the Ford Rouge River Plant; MARUM at the Mack Avenue plant; MERUM etc.⁴³ They described their fight as being two-fold: "(1) With the union, because of its racist practices, and (2) with the corporation."⁴⁴ In January 1969, all these groups met with more than 100 activists and formed the League, which became legally incorporated in June 1969. In other cities the same wildcat strikes took place several months before in the Ford plant of Mahwah, New Jersey. Five hundred workers had shut down production for three days, after a foreman called a worker "a black bastard," and a group called the United Black Brothers of Mahwah had been formed.⁴⁵

In 1968, the *Inner-City Voice* was running out of funds. John Watson did not attend classes regularly at Wayne State University, but in September 1968 he ran for the position of editor of the student daily, the *South End Press*, and won with the support of the leftist student milieu. He turned the newspaper into a voice for the League. Most of the newspapers were distributed in front of the plant, where many students were also part-time workers.

The League spread to other workplaces, such as the main hospital and some newspapers. Membership was probably around 100 activists by 1970. In a document entitled "Central Staff Retreat," the names of 57 members were cited.⁴⁶ Contrary to the impression of rapid growth given by Georgakas

41. Martin Glaberman, "Survey: Detroit," *International Socialism*, 36(1969), 8–9, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/glaberman/1969/04/drum.htm>

42. Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, "DRUM: Wildcat Strike" (DRUM, 1968), 1–3, Box 1, Folder 97. American Left Ephemera Collection. University of Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh, <https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt:31735059397731>.

43. Eldon Ave. Revolutionary Union Movement, "Elrum" (League of Revolutionary Black Workers, 1969), Box 1, Folder 88. American Left Ephemera Collection. University of Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh; Mound Road Engine Revolutionary Union Movement, "Me Rum Pamphlet" (League of Revolutionary Black Workers, 1969), Box 1, Folder 90. American Left Ephemera Collection. University of Pittsburgh, <https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt%3A31735061656298/viewer#page/1/mode/2up>.

44. Eldon Ave. Revolutionary Union Movement, "ELRUM, Volume 2, Number 3" (LRBW, February 1969), 3, Box 1, folder 87, Eldon Ave. Revolutionary Union Movement Pamphlets, Eldon Ave. Revolutionary Union Movement Pamphlets.

45. Denby, *Indignant Heart*, 262.

46. LRBW, "Central Staff Retreat," December 1970, 7, Reel 1, series 2, LRBW Historical Analyses, Microfilms: The Black Power Movement: Part 4 the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, 1965–1976. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. New York.

and Surkin, the League's membership remained rather small.⁴⁷ And you have to take into account the fact that among these 57 members, and despite its buzzy title "Central Staff," some of those attending this meeting were only invited as observers. The League had a few people working full-time, using the South End's financial resources as a way to finance their activities. It owned a printing company, Black Star Printing, Inc., and a bookshop.

Like the Panthers, the activists in the League advocated self-defense and a socialist revolution but, whereas the BPP tried to organize the lumpenproletariat, the League aimed at attacking the system at its "weakest point," "the point of production" and targeted young black workers in the automobile industry.⁴⁸ Theirs was a more classical Marxist perspective. Their analysis of the role of racism, which they saw as coming from both the company and fellow workers, also influenced their organizational strategy. DRUM members knew that racism limited the workers' ability to unite, and that both white and black workers were hurt by this. At the same time, they also argued that white workers benefited from racism in the form of higher wages and better jobs. Unlike the Panthers, DRUM members also felt it was better to remain rather secretive, and when they chose to reply violently to some situations, they did not boast about it. The Panthers did exactly the opposite: they acted in a provocative way, displaying their rifles and calling policemen pigs. As Jean Genet said, they attacked first by sight.⁴⁹ Ken Cockrel stressed that not one of the Detroit activists was ever killed by policemen, thanks to this low-profile policy. In a speech delivered in January 1970, he declared that: "Your first responsibility is to do all that is in your power to avoid becoming a defense organization."⁵⁰ He was strongly critical of the Black Panther' style: "We can stand up and raise our hands and declaim mightily about the existence of Honkies, that Black is Beautiful, and we can hang bullets around our necks and wear all kinds of dashikies, but that's not going to bring about an ultimate end to oppression."⁵¹ This difference has to be linked with the way these activists were trying to organize workers "on the point of production," while the BPP defended the centrality of the lumpenproletariat.

But the strife that riddled the League led to its rapid explosion.

6 Divided We Fall

The in-plant activists, General Baker and Chuck Wooten, resented the little help they got from the students. Their priority was organizing other plants with new RUMs. These groups were losing ground. They were born out of the enthusiasm of wildcat strike action; however, they did not manage to function on a daily basis. This decline is evident in Ernie Allen's account, in which he gives three main reasons for it: the 1967 wave of discontent was remote in time, Chrysler had increased the number of black foremen and the activists were kept under constant surveillance.⁵² The creation of the League in 1969 was a partial answer to these difficulties, but it also raised new conflicts and debates about priorities. General Baker insisted on the in-plant work, whereas others, such as Marian Kramer, stressed the necessity to be active in the community.⁵³ This led to what Errol Henderson recently named a "dual strategy," but it also led to a split very quickly.⁵⁴

47. Surkin and Georgakas, *Detroit*.

48. Cockrel, "On Repression," January 30, 1970, 9, Box 1, Folder 92, American Left Ephemera Collection, 1894–2008, AIS.2007.11, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh. 9 (This speech was made at a repression conference under the sponsorship of Newsreel in Detroit. The speakers were Robert Williams, former President of the Republic of New Africa; Emory Douglas, Minister of Culture of the Black Panther Party; and Kenneth V. Cockrel, Central Staff member of the LRBW).

49. Jean Genet, *Un captif amoureux* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 291.

50. Cockrel, "On Repression," 3.

51. Cockrel, "On Repression," 15.

52. Ernie Allen and Dick Cluster, "Dying from the inside: The Decline of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers" (Boston: South End Press, 1979), 77–8.

53. Marian Kramer, "On the Split & Critical Thinking," General Baker Institute, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/149303341>.

54. Errol A. Henderson, *The Revolution Will Not Be Theorized: Cultural Revolution in the Black Power Era*, 2019, 346–49. I would like to thank Errol Henderson for his help in this article, and for sharing his new book.

The student members, John Watson and Mike Hamlin, were thinking about new coalitions, even at a federal level, to bring together new white and black leftist groups. They also differed on the characterization of the system in that General Baker described African American conditions in the US as being the result of internal colonization, and stood for more nationalist ideas, whereas Watson saw it as simply a capitalist system.⁵⁵ These differences and the difficulty to “explicate a logically consistent model” were part of the problem that finally led to a split.⁵⁶

Watson had contact with a radical film-makers’ collective from New York, the Newsreel Collective, which made a documentary about the League in 1970, entitled, *Finally got the News*. But this led to new clashes due to the fact that most of the League members opposed this method of widely publicizing their activities, as the Panthers would.⁵⁷ The Newsreel collective members, all of whom were white, were more supportive of the Panther style, and Watson had to follow them everywhere since “Blacks would jump on them.”⁵⁸ Watson, Hamlin and James Forman, a former SNCC leader, were promoting the Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC) which met in April 1969, in a conference promoted by African-American clergymen and business people.⁵⁹ This corresponded to what Robin Kelley referred to as a “community-based strategy.”⁶⁰ The BEDC was also a way to get money from various white charities, and so money became another reason for discord with new spending: the proliferation of LRBW offices in the Detroit area, and the financing of the documentary.⁶¹ The efforts in the BEDC led John Watson, Mike Hamlin and others away from their local emphasis. The Black Workers Congress, founded in 1970, was an attempt to build a large coalition of black radical labor activists and their project was to expand the League nationally, which led to its eventual explosion.

Some League members seized the material for the film that they had paid for. The movie has often been described as a success and, as Henderson writes, it was “one of the most effective propaganda vehicles produced in the Black Power Movement.”⁶² But it obviously has two halves, the first half being more collective, whereas the second half consists mainly in Watson speaking alone, as if the movie was announcing the split. In June 1971, John Watson, Mike Hamlin, Ken Cockrell and others resigned from the League with a text in which they described what they called the three main tendencies: “the proletarian revolutionaries” (referring to themselves), the “Petty Bourgeois Opportunists” (referring to Luke Tripp), and the Backward Reactionary-Nationalist Lumpen-Proletarians” (referring to General Baker).⁶³ Even though the split was evoked in only political terms, there were also underlying social and cultural gaps among the members.⁶⁴ The League’s Code of Conduct was often evoked because of members getting drunk or being “unrespectful in relationships with women.”⁶⁵ The League faced the

55. Geschwender explained the failure by these differences. Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency*.

56. James A. Geschwender and Judson L. Jeffries, “The League of Revolutionary Black Workers,” in *Black Power in the Belly of the Beast* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 151.

57. Stewart Bird et al., *Finally Got the News*, Documentary (Cinema Guild, 1970), <http://docuseek2.com/if-fin>; Dan Georgakas, “Finally Got The News: The Making Of A Radical Film,” *Cinéaste*, 4(1973): 2; Chris Robé, “Detroit Rising: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers, Newsreel, and the Making of Finally Got the News,” *Film History: An International Journal*, 4(2017): 125–58.

58. Jack Taylor, “Revolution at the Point of Production: An Interview with Mike Hamlin of DRUM and The League of Revolutionary Black Workers,” *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men*, 1(2013): 110.

59. Black Economic Development, “Black Economic Development Conference,” 1969, Box 1, Folder 3. Dan Georgakas Collection. Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs. Wayne State University, Detroit. This conference adopted the famous “Black Manifesto” written by James Forman, calling for reparations for African Americans. Keith Dye, “The Black Manifesto for Reparations in Detroit: Challenge and Response, 1969,” *Michigan Historical Review*, 2(2009): 53–83.

60. Kelley, “Building Bridges: The Challenge of Organized Labor in Communities of Color.”

61. The BEDC provided considerably more money than most of the radical groups could get, through the support of the Inter-Religious Foundation for Community Organizations (ICFO). Allen and Cluster, “Dying from the Inside,” 78.

62. Henderson, *The Revolution Will Not Be Theorized*, 348; Robé, “Detroit Rising.” Regarding this movie see Chris Robé’s article.

63. John Watson, Mike Hamlin, and Kenneth V. Cockrel, “The Split in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers: Three Lines and Three Headquarters,” n.d., 7, Box 1, Folder 19., DRUM Collection. Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs. Wayne State University, Detroit.

64. Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 173.

65. LRBW, “LRBW Code of Conduct,” n.d., Box 4, Folder 11., Dan Georgakas Papers. Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and

same difficulties the BPP encountered with the “lumpen.” In various interviews, women in the League mentioned their fight in a “black women’s committee” fighting against what Marsha Music calls a “lack of proper respect and recognition given to them.” In particular, a sixteen-year-old girl was raped in the League’s headquarters.⁶⁶ Moreover, the women in the League were not represented in the seven-member executive committee. They denounced male activists whose behavior consisted in hitting their partner at home, or whose attitude towards women was merely “who’s gonna bring the food at the meeting.”⁶⁷ These aspects were almost absent from the oldest studies of the League.

The first meeting of the Black Workers Congress in September, 1971, brought 500 people to Gary, Indiana, a large black community. It was also their last meeting. However, a few members stayed in the League with General Baker and joined a group based in California called the Communist League (later known as the Communist Labor Party), a small Maoist group. General Baker ran for election to the House of Representatives in 1976. The League’s local activities were almost reduced to nothing, especially after General Baker and Chuck Wotten had been fired from their jobs. Under Forman the Black Worker Congress became a small Marxist-Leninist organization, the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist).⁶⁸ The failure of the Black Power organizations, and their near collapse after 1975, is often explained by the alleged factionalism of the radical activists. In contrast to this negative perception, we want to stress that the split in the League opposed both community-based and plant-based conceptions, which mirrored the political differences and the difficulty of weaving together claims of race and class. It was also linked to the educational gap that divided the leadership in two, as well as to the question of money, how to raise it and how to use it.

7 Conclusion

The special social situation in Detroit, with a strong black workforce in the auto plants, gave birth to a specific form of organization. The 1967 riots sparked its formation, as young black workers were recently hired in the car industry. Local radical political traditions were essential to this development. The League’s story gives a different picture of Detroit as both a Union city, vital to the Union movement, and a place where original leftist political tendencies were born. Elizabeth Kai Hinton attributes the League’s rapid disbanding to the inability of its leaders to build a strong base for the LRBW, due to their “educational privileges” and their embrace of socialism.⁶⁹ The League did not hold member meetings until 1971, at the time when it was disbanding, and according to Ernie Allen, many RUM members did not know that they were also members of the League.⁷⁰ But Elisabeth Kai Hinton does not take into account the UAW’s attacks on RUM organizations. Even though it was short lived, the League had a profound impact, especially on the unions. As a response to the threat this group represented, they ended segregation in their ranks and chose several Blacks to participate in the union leadership. The actions of DRUM and later of the League forced the UAW leadership to finally fight for “full equity” for African Americans in the union. The UAW stopped mobilizing opposition to Black candidates running in local elections. Within a few months of the League’s formation, Black workers were being elected as president of several local groups, including those with a white majority

Urban Affairs. Wayne State University, Detroit.

66. Taylor, “Revolution at the Point of Production,” 111.

67. Music Marsha, Marian Kramer, and Ilene Baker, “The Role of Women,” General Baker Institute, 2016, <https://vimeo.com/203718111>.

68. Kelley, “Building Bridges: The Challenge of Organized Labor in Communities of Color,” 51–52.

69. “But by asking potential members to jeopardize coveted production jobs and to embrace socialist politics, the type of political education and revolutionary action DRUM founders championed isolated them from the workers they sought to organize.” Elizabeth K. Hinton, “The Black Bolsheviks: Detroit Revolutionary Union Movements and Shop-Floor Organizing,” in Elisabeth K. Hinton, *The New Black History: Revisiting the Second Reconstruction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 211–12.

70. Allen and Cluster, “Dying from the Inside,” 79, 100.

workforce.⁷¹ But at the same time, the UAW was fighting hard any radical challenges in the plants and finally suppressed them, weakening the union and the combativeness in the plants. Heather Thompson, who dismissed ideas of the inevitability of labor's decline, insisted that labor depleted its strength through its leaders' own choices.⁷² Finally, by choosing to quash the black radicals in its own ranks, the leadership of the UAW left the union far weaker in the face of the anti-labor offensive of the 1980s.

The historian Cedric Johnson has argued that "the hegemony of identitarianism" has prevented Black Lives Matter from offering an efficient answer to contemporary racism.⁷³ Analogies with the past 50 years of black mobilizations are sometimes misguiding researchers and activists into anachronism and oversimplification. The history of the Black Freedom Movement is complicated and the Black Power era and organizations should be studied for themselves. The legacy of the Old Left has to be taken into account, while various generations of activists from the 1930s to the 1960s were linked to this, whether personally or intellectually.⁷⁴ This history could be part of a larger history of the Black Left. Bringing back this history is part of what the historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall describes as "making the movement harder." In other words, it is "harder to celebrate as a natural progression of American values, harder to cast as a satisfying morality tale. Most of all, harder to simplify, appropriate and contain."⁷⁵ For his part, and in a somewhat symmetrical manner, Peniel Joseph calls for a new Black Power history that is not restricted to a limited period from 1966 to 1974.⁷⁶ The LRBW is a part of this New Black Power history.

71. Larry R. Salomon, "Movement History: DRUM and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers," *Third Force Magazine*, 2(1994): 33.

72. Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 110–19.

73. Cedric Johnson G., "The Panthers Can't Save Us Now," *Catalyst*, 1(2017), <https://catalyst-journal.com/voll/nol/panthers-cant-save-us-cedric-johnson>.

74. The Old Left refers to the workers' organizations inspired primarily by Marxism. The New Left is defined by Paul Buhle as "the polyglot radicalism that centered its influence on the major private or state campus and in communities heavily influenced by campus radicalism." Buhle, Buhle, and Georgakas, *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, 516. See also Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

75. Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement," 1235. In her seminal 2005 article Jacquelyn D. Hall described how: "by confining the civil rights struggle to the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives, the master narrative simultaneously elevates and diminishes the movement [preventing it] from speaking effectively to the challenges of our time." Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement," 1234.

76. Joseph, "The Black Power Movement."

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