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DRUM AND THE REVOLT OF THE BLACK WORKING CLASS

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Fifty years ago, a new organization of revolutionary Black workers was leading strikes and showing the electrifying potential for a movement that combined labor militancy and Black Power. **Khury Petersen-Smith** tells its story.

> *"We see that this whole society, man, exists and rests upon workers, and this whole motherfucking society controlled by this ruling clique, it's parasitic, it's vulturistic, it's cannibalistic, and it's sucking and destroying the life of motherfucking workers and we have to stop it because it's evil."*

YOU'RE UNLIKELY to hear those words during Black History Month celebrations — the ones sponsored by university administrations and featuring politicians, which minimize Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s radical vision to an innocuous "dream" and portray the whole civil rights movement as a few sanitized, quiet, non-disruptive protests.

But as we reclaim the volcanic — and honest — history of the Black freedom struggle, we should learn those words.

They were spoken by Ken Cockrel, a leader of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) in an interview for a documentary called *Finally Got the News* (if you haven't seen the film, it's worth putting down this article to go watch immediately).

The history it documents — of the struggle at Dodge Main and other auto plants along with the late 1960s Detroit that gave birth to DRUM — is one of the most powerful, and therefore hidden, histories of both workers' resistance *and* Black Power.

Black autoworkers show their power during the DRUM uprising in Detroit in 1968 (General Baker)

DRUM's leaders conducted an experiment: What if they — revolutionary Black autoworkers in Detroit — took the Black Power movement to the point of production?

The possibilities were incendiary. Could the organization combine the power of the 1930s labor upsurge with the explosiveness of the 1960s Black rebellion? If so, it would create a force that could shake U.S. capital to its core — and advance the radical wave sweeping the world.

That was the vision: organize the Black autoworkers of Detroit to use workers' power to fight for Black liberation.

DETROIT WAS the main hub of U.S. industrial production. The auto industry that began there in the early 20th century mushroomed in the 1920s and 1930s. During the Second World War, the city's factories and labor force were devoted to weapons manufacturing. Though the city only had 2 percent of the country's population, it produced 10 percent of the materiel for the war.

After the war's end, Detroit's Big Three auto manufacturers — General Motors, Ford and Chrysler (which produced the Dodge brand) — retooled production to make cars again. With the beginning of the interstate highway system in 1956 and the suburbanization of the country, demand skyrocketed. In just the two years between 1948 and 1950, the number of cars manufactured in the U.S. *doubled*: from 4 million to 8 million.

The postwar economic boom was centered in Detroit. Those few decades of industrial history led to a tremendous concentration of capital in the city. And auto manufacturing sat at the nexus of other industries, like steel, glass, rubber and petroleum — whose production processes stretched around the world.

A disruption in Detroit auto could ripple through the world economy. This was at the heart of DRUM's strategy. As a city of militant resistance, Detroit was ripe with potential. After all, the city wasn't just a center for capital, but for labor, too.

In 1920, the Detroit's population was 990,000. By 1950, it had nearly doubled, to 1.85 million. In the 1930s, Michigan had become the storied site of labor rebellion and union organization.

Car manufacturing and war production continued to add to the city's population in general, and the Black population in particular.

Detroit became one of the key destinations of the Great Migration — when the African American population transitioned from a largely Southern, agrarian one to one centered in the industrial cities of the Northeast, Midwest and West Coast. Just over 4 percent of Detroit's population was Black in 1920. By 1960, that share had swelled to a third.

THE TRANSITION to Detroit becoming more Black was not a smooth one. Redlining and other forms of housing discrimination made for a deeply segregated city. And even as auto plants hired more Black workers, work in the factories was organized along racial lines, with Black people restricted to the dirtiest and most dangerous positions.

Also, one historic tactic of auto manufacturers was to use Black strikebreakers during times of labor unrest, pitting them against the plants' overwhelmingly white workforces.

This institutional racism — structured by capital, the government and the real estate industry — fueled virulent bigotry within white population. This was particularly true among established, second-generation Polish communities — and less true among Appalachian whites who arrived in large numbers at the same time as Blacks.

As a result, the period of the Black population's growth was punctuated by incidents of mass, racist violence. On February 28, 1942, more than 1,000 white people gathered at the newly built Sojourner Truth Housing Project to confront a single Black family moving in.

In late June 1943, at the height of wartime production, white workers attacked Blacks in two days of rioting. Federal troops were deployed, and 34 people were killed — 25 Black and nine white. Police killed 17 of the 25 Black victims — if there was any question about the cops' role in the racist violence.

But Detroit wasn't just shaped by its industry and marked by structural and mob racism. It was also a center of revolt, African American culture and radical ferment.

Against the backdrop of the Black freedom struggle, which emerged on the streets of U.S. cities with the urban uprisings of the 1960s, Detroit erupted in the summer of 1967.

The Great Rebellion was the longest and most extensive of the era, capturing the attention of the nation. The state responded by occupying the city with the Michigan National Guard and soldiers from two divisions of the U.S. Army. When the dust settled, 43 people were killed and more than 7,200 arrested.

By the time the Black Power revolt arrived in Detroit, the city had been established as a wellspring of Black culture. Rich with gospel musicians, a thriving jazz scene and rock innovators, Detroit's biggest impact came with the establishment of Motown Records in 1959. With a blend of soul, R & B and pop, Motown changed the landscape of American music and was a source of great pride for Black Detroit.

Located at the heart of U.S. capitalism, radiating with Black music and culture, and flaring with resistance, Detroit was a site of radical study, action and creativity. Since the labor revolts of the 1930s, the left was cemented as part of the fabric of the city. Radical giants like CLR James and Grace Lee Boggs organized there. A range of Marxist and Black nationalist organizations and publications thrived.

It was in this fire that DRUM was forged.

DRUM FORMED in May 1968 in Chrysler's Dodge Main Plant in Hamtramck when workers carried out a wildcat strike in response to a speedup in the plant. Though most of the workers on the picket line were white, the ones who were disciplined by the company were Black — leading Black militants who'd had enough.

But the people who would become the core of DRUM had honed their radicalism well before the strike. Veterans of Black struggles and revolutionary organizations, some had participated in study groups of Marx's *Capital* organized by the Socialist Workers Party.

They were part of the Great Rebellion and in the same year, they coalesced around a radical newspaper called *Inner City Voice* (ICV), edited by John Watson. Mike Hamlin, Luke Tripp and General Baker joined Watson, using *ICV* to report on the conditions in the plant and other problems facing the Black community.

The speedup that set the stage for the May 1968 wildcat at Dodge Main was a common and hazardous feature of work in the auto plants. In 1970, when Detroit auto factories produced nearly 6.6 million cars, there were over 15,000 injuries on the job according to the United Auto Workers (UAW).

Black workers bore the brunt of this workplace violence. They had the most dangerous jobs in plants where the UAW rarely asserted the rights of its members.

The definitive history of DRUM, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying, a Study in Urban Revolution* by Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, takes its name from an autoworkers' blues song of the time. The lyrics went: "Lord I don't mind working, but I do mind dying."

Instead of carrying out job actions to defend autoworkers, the UAW encouraged workers to file grievances, which piled up unresolved.

Born out of the militancy of the 1930s, the postwar UAW had accepted the maxim that "What's good for General Motors is good for America." By the 1960s, the union was more concerned with disciplining its members than challenging the companies, with President Walter Reuther declaring, "We make bargaining agreements, not revolutions."

But the UAW wasn't just ineffectual — it failed to represent its Black workers in particular. Black members constituted a tiny fraction of union officials. And the union accepted the racist job placements in the plants that endangered Black workers and exploited them more than their white counterparts. Among Black radical workers, the joke was that UAW stood for "U Ain't White."

IN THIS setting — of ruthless corporations forcing employees into dangerous and exploitative conditions and a union that was part of the problem — DRUM's call for Black Power on the shop floor resonated with thousands of workers.

On July 8, 1968, DRUM shut down the Hamtramck Assembly plant, with some 4,000 Black workers rallying outside the plant gates in support of the strike. Over three days, DRUM led confrontations with the police and the union. Stopping the production of 3,000 cars, and with no workers fired in retaliation, the wildcat was counted as a victory and catapulted DRUM into the spotlight.

Inspired by the strike, other Revolutionary Union Movements, or RUMs, sprung up around Detroit and beyond. Ford workers created the Ford Revolutionary Union Movement (FRUM) and workers at the Eldon Avenue plant launched ELRUM. Plants as far away as Mahwah, New Jersey; Fremont, California; and Birmingham, Alabama, formed DRUM-inspired organizations. Each RUM had its own newsletter.

In 1969, in an effort to coordinate and consolidate this organizing launched by DRUM, its leaders created the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

In doing so, they faced growing repression. By the late 1960s, Detroit had the most police officers per capita of all U.S. cities. The cops defended Big Auto and the UAW, and targeted the Black militants. *Inner City Voice* was never produced by the same printer because the police intimidated shops that worked with the revolutionaries.

When *ICV* folded in the face of repression and lack of funds, the League took over the student paper at Wayne State University in downtown Detroit — the *South End* — and made it a tribune of the revolution.

Declaring on its masthead that "one class-conscious worker is worth 100 students," the *South End* not only took up the cause of Black workers in the auto plants and elsewhere, but it also was a vehicle for international solidarity.

The paper regularly published stories about guerilla struggles in Southern Africa and the National Liberation Front fighting the U.S. occupation of Vietnam. A special issue was devoted to the revolutionary struggle in Greece, and it championed the struggle of Palestinians.

After an editorial supporting a free Palestine, the president of Wayne State waged a campaign against the paper. The UAW, local politicians and the media joined in, resulting in an arson attack on the *South End* offices.

Despite the violence, DRUM and the League persisted. Like the Black Panthers, the League combined a global scope with efforts to improve the day-to-day lives of ordinary people where they lived. The *South End*, for example, published an exposé about practices at Detroit General Hospital that led to changes.

But it was the big picture that guided the League. DRUM's sweeping vision was summed up by this passage from an issue of the *South End*:

> DRUM's scope is not limited to the oppressive situation at Chrysler, nor all the plants for that matter. Although most organizing activity will be in the plants, DRUM sees its long-range goal as the complete and total social

> transformation of society. This will take the effort of the whole Black community as well as other progressive sectors of society.

LIKE THE Black Power movement it was part of, the League's wave ultimately crested and broke.

By 1970, the League was trying to organize nationwide, convening the Black Workers Congress. With 500 people participating, the Congress tried to develop a program to move the struggle forward.

But ideological and strategic differences were dividing the movement. The question of whether the League should put its efforts into a Detroit mayoral campaign, for example, was a point of contention. The collection and use of funds became a matter of dispute. Enormous and violent external pressures, combined with internal conflict, splintered the League.

But despite the fact that it only went so far, the history of DRUM is essential to revisit today for lessons on Black liberation and the struggle for socialism.

The hopeful pursuit of Black freedom and the liberation of all the oppressed is summed up by the following statement produced by the Black Workers Congress:

> Right now, the struggle of Black and Brown peoples against national oppression and discrimination is spearheading the revolutionary movement in the U.S. Gradually, this struggle, through many twists and turns, will merge with the revolutionary movement of the working class as a whole (of which it is also an important component part), and like a mighty torrent, will sweep capitalism and imperialism from the face of the earth.

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