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## The League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the Coming of Revolution

**ERIC PERKINS**

One finds it exceedingly difficult to introduce a new organization without seizing the opportunity to note that this is a black organization and, unlike all the others, offers a bright new strategy to the quiescent black movement. Black workers, with their important location in US industry and service, have demonstrated the need for a working-class movement within this advanced section of the American proletariat. Without recognizing the importance of black workers, any Leftist group or organization will be doomed to failure.

This introduction is designed to fill in some important gaps in our knowledge of the struggle. It is not a polemic, nor unfolding rhetoric proclaiming condemnations of America's futile attempt to deal with the race problem. Instead, the writer wishes the reader to know about this organization and its crucial importance in the development of a revolutionary movement in America. For far too long the plight of the black worker has been subjugated to the interests of the rulers and of their white working-class associates. What the League brings to the realm of analysis is surely nothing new (Need I remind our readers of Garveyism?), but is something which must be immediately realized — that the American labor movement is now a memory, and something must be done now about its inability to deal with the problems of black workers.

With the establishment of DRUM (the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement) in the Dodge plant at Hamtramck, Michigan in 1968, the white rulers and their infected proletarians got a taste of "a real black

thang"! Wildcat strikes and electoral turmoil have characterized the automobile industry since. The League of Revolutionary Black Workers is indeed a timely response to the growing stagnation and alienation many of us now feel — black radicals and their frustrated so-called compatriots. Black labor has seldom been understood, and as Abram Harris remarked nearly half a decade ago: "An estimation of the role the Negro will play in the class struggle is futile if the economic foundation and its psychological superstructure from which issue antipathy or apathy are ignored." (1) The League perfectly understands this — that racism is the result of a two-fold process which involves economic inferiority and its internalization.

What is the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and where did it come from? John Watson gives us the answer in an interview from the Fifth Estate:

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers is a federation of several revolutionary movements which exist in Detroit. It was originally formed to provide a broader base for 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 . . . . With the development of DRUM and the successes we had in terms of organizing and mobilizing the workers at the Hamtramck 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 the 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 within that complex organized. (2)

Centered in the extremely-important auto industry, the League has had an extremely wide and successful impact. It is now expanding its organizing activities to other areas — hospital workers and printers are now being organized, as well as the United Parcel Workers black caucus, which is one of the League's affiliates. Why this sudden turn from community organizing and the organizing of "street brothers and sisters", the black lumpen proletariat? The remarks of John Watson sum up the League's attitude toward this crucial and strategic shift in

## organizing policy :

Our analysis tells us that the basic power of black people lies at the point of production, that the basic power we have is our power as workers. As workers, as black workers, we have historically been, and are now, essential elements in the American economic sense. 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 that which the working class represents, this type of organization, that is, community based organization, is generally a pretty long, stretched-out, and futile development. (3)

Community-based organizations throughout Black America have been failures. Stung by that fatal disease known as opportunism, many of these organizations either have dissolved or have been the subject of in-fighting for the pay-off. The ruling class has again demonstrated how it can pick up on anything and subvert it for its own use. It has again demonstrated that integration is a forced tool, and that no black man has the power to join white society without the sanction of the ruling class. (4) This shift is crucial.

For the last fifteen years the black movement has ridden the back of its middle-class leadership, following the white lead while they got the pay-off. The benefits (or bones) resulting from the "Civil Rights Movement" were distributed to the black middle class. In the fields of education, employment, and business, the black nouveau riche have made a small mark. The expansion of the black middle class is the unwritten policy of the white rulers. The black masses, predominantly workers (5), have been totally left out of this progress, and expressed their dissatisfaction by conducting their own "unorganized general strike" in the summers of 1966 and 1967.

The concessions granted to the new black rulers are meager, but they are real enough to raise, for the first time in a long while, the question of class antagonism. The League is responding to developing antagonisms of class in black America. Growing slowly is the black petit bourgeoisie, which consists of two wings : an educated black elite composed of technicians, managers, professionals, and others, and a small "ghetto bourgeoisie" composed of the owners of small ghetto shops and services. The ideology of this class is bourgeois nationalism which can be roughly summed up in the memorable words of Booker T.

Washington in his speech before the Atlanta Exposition in 1895: "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress." (6)

Although this was said almost eighty years ago, it still characterizes the positions of most black nationalists. They see social revolution coming about in the disguise of white philanthropy and concern. To them the question of class struggle is an outmoded European idea which does not conform to their conception of black reality. The struggle lies in the institutional set-ups they can extract from the white paternalists, without ever stopping to think about the interest involved — that of the bourgeois nationalist or the white paternalist. Confusion and chaos have now replaced the moral glue which once held this class together, and there is no doubt that there is a huge gap in black leadership. (7)

With these facts to guide, the League has undertaken a very-difficult task — the organizing and leading of a national movement of black workers. Their local work clearly testifies to their national thrust. By organizing workers in strategic industries, the League plans to create the foundation for a black revolutionary party. Undoubtedly the perils of building a widespread national movement while laying the basis for a revolutionary party are difficult both to envision and to comprehend. But this is certainly one of their ultimate political tasks. The triumph of the downtrodden is inevitable.

The central theoretical concern of the League is the inevitable recognition of the black working class as the vanguard of the social revolution. As Ernie Mkalimoto suggests, the socialist revolutionary movement in the US must consider the black working class as leader.

Thus owing to the national oppression (principally through institutionalized racism as the dominant form of production relations) of black people in the United States, the black proletariat is forced to take on the most dangerous, the most difficult — yet absolutely necessary — productive work in the plants, the most undesirable and strenuous jobs which exist inside the United States today. The demands which it poses — the elimination of economic exploitation (hence of capitalism) and of institutionalized racism (which thoroughly pervades the plant, not to mention North American society in general), and which allows capitalism to maintain itself, are more basic to the dismantling of US capitalist society than those of the white productive worker, who up to now has been able to defend his "white-skin privilege". That is why we say that any socialist revolution which is to be successful must take the class stand of the vanguard class of this revolution: the black proletariat.

Many white radicals and labor leaders will be unable to accept this position expressed by Mkalimoto (8). Why? Because the subtleties of

racism have invaded their hearts and minds and prevent them from understanding the obvious. But it is this fundamental question which must be recognized before one begins to overthrow capitalism. Many so-called revolutionaries and others will say: This is a threat to the unity of the working class! This violates Marxism's first principle of international solidarity and all the rest. But with a basic understanding of the history of the black race, they will see how their arguments fail.

The League's basic position is revolutionary nationalism. One cannot forget that there are conservative and Leftist elements among the black nationalist spectrum. The League represents a Left-wing position. For those who are unfamiliar with the developing ideological debate within small black circles, revolutionary nationalism is an important and very complicated position to hold. Ernie Mkalimoto outlines revolutionary nationalism as follows:

A fusion of the most progressive aspects of the contradiction: Bourgeois Reformism/Bourgeois Nationalism, Revolutionary Black Nationalism snatches the African-American from the puerile stage of Elizabethan drama, restores his sense of balance and direction in the universe, and sends crashing down to earth the clay idol of (Negro/American) emotional duality which has plagued the broad trend of black ideology from slavery to the present. From the activist wing of Bourgeois Reformism it takes the tactic of mass confrontation, struggles on all fronts, and integrates it into the existing order; from Bourgeois Nationalism comes the idea of the necessity for the development of national (revolutionary) culture and of both self-determination and self-reliance, as well as of the black world view which sees the struggle of African-Americans as inseparable from the struggles of all other peoples of color around the globe. The Revolutionary Nationalist views the concept of black nationhood not as any "sacred" unquestionable end in itself, but as a concrete guarantee to insure the dignity and full flowering of every individual of African descent. (9)

Revolutionary nationalism will indeed be difficult for the majority of whites to accept. It begins by taking into account the unusual degree of subjugation black people are forced to accept. It understands the unique feature of psychology and the internalization of economic phenomena. This indeed is timely. For one who does not admit the primacy of race compounded by class oppression refuses to recognize the most-central problem in American society.

The League dispenses with revolutionary rhetoric and commercial suicide, because that allows America to survive. The brother appearing on television and the revolutionary orator do not really contribute to capitalism's downfall; if anything they contribute to its maintenance.

By seizing on these images of blacks finally entering the mainstream, America controls the latent explosiveness present in most black men and black women. This is the current picture — black television, black business, black economic development, black executives — a swallowing of the “Negro revolution” by the imperialist giant.

America has created a grand illusion for most people, and black people are now subject to that illusion. The petit-bourgeois will not be able to succeed as long as it remains dependent on government and private help. The myth of the Negro capitalist is just that; but many of the brothers will not even acknowledge that. The myth of the “black capitalist and Negro market” must be dealt with. (10) There are few really-suggestive works on the problem of the class struggle in Black America. It is hoped that this issue will truly be a starting point for the emergence of a dialogue on this crucial question. The revolutionary nationalists have already begun.

The League is solidly committed to international struggle, but not without modifications. The international capital-versus-labor struggle is long ceased. It is now more the struggle of the rich nations versus the poor nations. It is no accident that the former are Europe and the US (with its Eastern satellite, Japan) and the latter are predominantly non-white countries. This is the major contradiction — of the West versus the non-West, and it is this contradiction which assumes the primary significance within the black workers’ movement. This chief contradiction was aptly summed up in Du Bois’s often-quoted dictum: The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line. Their international commitment rests on the success or failure of the development of the national movement. This is how internationalism is introduced — by fully realizing the international importance of one’s movement. Cuba, China, and Vietnam all testify to that fact, and so will the League.

Undoubtedly the above will confuse many. Yet the common knowledge of black workers is that white labor has left them in the cold. What characterizes the race relations of the American working class is a long history of betrayal and neglect. The fact is simple: Organized labor and the labor movement were instrumental in crushing black labor. A few remembrances would be in order.

The plight of the black slave and his super-exploitation has been skillfully handled in Robert Starobin’s Industrial Slavery in the Old South, and I suggest that the interested reader come by a copy of this book. Following Emancipation, the black slave with his newly-acquired freedman’s status entered the labor market. He was powerfully met by his poor-white counterpart. The black wretch possessed innumerable skills, and, as one writer noted, the black artisan held “a practical monopoly of the trades” throughout the South. (11) This represents an important chapter in radical history that deserves our full attention. For much of the Nineteenth Century, the black artisan controlled much

of Southern labor. DuBois notes with his usual clarity the effects of this development :

After Emancipation came suddenly, in the midst of war and social upheaval, the first real economic question was that of the self-protection of freed working men. There were three chief classes of them : the agricultural laborers in the country districts, the house-servants in town and country, and the artisans who were rapidly migrating to town. The Freedmen's Bureau undertook the temporary guardianship of the first class, the second class easily passed from half-free service to half-servile freedom. But the third class, the artisans, met peculiar conditions. They had always been used to working under the guardianship of a master, and even that guardianship of artisans in some cases was but nominal, yet it was of the greatest value for protection. This soon became clear as the Negro freed artisan set up business for himself : If there was a creditor to be sued, he could no longer be sued in the name of an influential white master; if there was a contract to be had, there was no responsible white patron to answer for the good performance of the work. Nevertheless, these differences were not strongly felt at first — the friendly patronage of the former master was often voluntarily given the freedman, and for some years following the war the Negro mechanic still held undisputed sway. (12)

This progress was not lasting. As Northern industry invaded the South, it brought with it the strength of organized labor. The triumph of this organized labor in the South did not match its more-egalitarian works up North. The black artisan was crushed without the usual oratorical hesitation about such things as rights and equality. The labor movement crushed this small class of black artisans, subordinating them to the greedy desires of white labor and to the advantage of the capitalist. This is indeed a sad chapter in the American labor movement's history and one that still needs to be written in full.

By driving the black laborer from the skilled trades, organized labor forced him to become a scab in strikebreaking activities. The resulting friction was ominous of Detroit and Newark in 1967. (13) The black laborer was forced to accept the dual-wage system, menial jobs, and continual confinement within industry. There was little or no chance for upgrading or betterment. He was denied apprenticeships and was forced into separate local unions while his brother stole his livelihood lock and stock. Capitalism brought with it white labor which drove black labor to extinction in the skilled trades. And as black labor was driven from its work, it was also forced to leave home and migrate to the shining North — the land of golden opportunity.

The effects of black urbanization have yet to be understood. But one thing is sure. The coming of blacks to large industrial cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Pittsburgh had important aspects. With the great war of 1914 came the great demand for black labor. Black labor came in herds to wartime industry. This was a timely break for black people. With work came money and the satisfaction of basic needs. Although blacks came in on the bottom and remained there, they did manage to implant themselves in industry and lay the groundwork for the future entrance of more black workers.

The tensions which developed out of the great migrations to the North are a part of a large transition made by Afro-Americans during the Twentieth Century. The shift was mainly from a rural proletariat to an urban industrial work force. This shift was dramatic, racial, intense. Rebellions were found everywhere from Arkansas to Illinois. And the results are not without strategic importance. The industrial shift had paved the way for a wide black revolutionary movement. The Garvey movement was a movement of the black masses — the black industrial, service, and domestic workers, as well as "the brother on the street". Garvey was totally rejected by the black intelligentsia and middle class and depended wholly on the masses for support and sustenance. This was the most-threatening movement the American Republic had ever had to face. (14)

Garveyism was a response to the racial fuel boiling in black people. This rage was in part the result of organized labor's unwillingness to deal with "the Negro problem" and of Jim Crow in the "golden North". Moreover Garveyism elevated black consciousness into realizing itself as independent. Garvey grounded with black people and told them of the imminent dangers of life in America — cultural rape, psychological instability, moral destruction. Garvey shouted "Up You Mighty Race!" because he foresaw the oppression strengthening its hand over black people. He was crushed: hounded, attacked, abused, accused of fraud. The US Government was instrumental in "ridding America of Garvey" while putting out the flames of revolution in Black America.

During this period organized labor was no-less oppressive. Craft unionism and its rise spread the gospel of the black workers' downfall. The AFL's unwritten exclusion policy was commented on by two black writers in 1931:

By refusing to accept apprentices from a class of workers that social tradition has stamped as inferior, or by withholding membership from reputable craftsmen of this class, the union accomplishes two things: It protects its "good" name, and it eliminates a whole class of future competitors. While race prejudice is a very-fundamental fact in the exclusion of the Negro, the desire to restrict competition so as to safeguard job monopoly and control wages is inextricably interwoven



with it. (15)

The AFL refused to investigate and prohibit discrimination in its own internationals because it "would" create prejudice instead of breaking it down. (16) The CIO also was guilty of racism, but managed to escape this guilt because of the war-time expansion during its emergence and growth. (17) Following World War II, the black movement turned from institutional gains to "civil rights". It took Malcolm X and a host of other well-known black leaders to point out what so many black people had largely forgotten — that they are still oppressed, and that the only acceptable solution would be black-created and black-led.

The League responds to this oppression with a new and vital vigor. Black workers "entered industry on the lowest rung of the industrial ladder" (18), and that is where they remain. Organized labor has not contributed much to black labor, and the few exceptions like the IWW and the UMW have not been enough to offset the systematic exclusion and assault of black labor. The League knows this. It recognizes this fact of betrayal as a fossil. What follows is that something must be done, and the League is doing it. Sense the tone of the following, and remind yourself of history.

We fully understand, after five centuries under this fiendish system and the heinous savages that it serves, namely the white racist owners and operators of the means of destruction. We further understand that there have been previous attempts by our people in this country to throw off this degrading yoke of oppression, which have ended in failure. Throughout our history, black workers, first as slaves and later as pseudo freedmen, have been in the vanguard of potentially-successful revolutionary struggles in all black movements as well as in integrated efforts. As examples of these we cite: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the beautiful Haitian Revolution; the slave revolts led by Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser; the Populist movement and the labor movement of the Thirties in the US. Common to all these movements were two things: their failure and the reason why they failed. These movements failed because they were betrayed from within, or, in the case of the integrated movements, by white leadership exploiting the racist nature of the white workers they led. We, of course, must avoid that pitfall and purge our ranks of any traitors and lackeys that may succeed in penetrating this organization. At this point we loudly proclaim that we have learned our lesson from history and we shall not fail. So it is that we who are the hope of black people and all oppressed people everywhere dedicate ourselves to the cause of black liberation to build the world anew realizing that only a struggle led by black workers

can triumph over our powerful reactionary enemy. (19)

The League's purpose is two-fold : to dissolve the bonds of white racist control, and thus, in turn, to relieve oppressed people the world over. It is fitting that the League's motto embodies the challenge : DARE TO STRUGGLE, DARE TO WIN!

As the reader goes through this issue and the important documents and analyses of black workers, I suggest that he remember the incisive comments of Karl Marx :

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. (20)

Certainly there is no more-fitting way to begin our own self-criticism.

## FOOTNOTES

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1. Abram L. Harris Junior : "The Negro and Economic Radicalism" in The Modern Quarterly, 2, 3 (1924), Page 199.

2. To the Point of Production (Radical Education Project pamphlet, 1970), an interview with John Watson, Page 1.

3. Ibid., Page 3. The interested person might reflect on the import of this organizing shift. The League breaks with all black organization by emphasizing organizing at "the point of production". Community organizing represents a diversity of conflicting interests; for example the New York school conflict of 1968 centers on the antagonism of the black school board elite and conscious concerns of the black masses.

4. The ruling class had the power to integrate existing minorities. The existing minorities are powerless in decisions affecting such basic issues as housing, education, transportation, and employment. All the action by the integrationists takes place with the consent of the white ruling class. For a more-detailed discussion of this important ruling class tactic, the reader is urged to consult Robert L. Allen's important book Black Awakening in Capitalist America (Garden City, New York, 1969). The author was a Guardian correspondent during the birth of the Black Power age, and has some useful incisive analyses.

5. The myth of middle-class expansion has certainly taken its toll. More than 80% of Black America are engaged in some sort of service,

industrial, or domestic employment or in the everyday struggle for survival because they are unemployed or underemployed. The "brother on the street", when considered within this framework, becomes not a lumpen proletarian, but an unemployed worker. Although there is a black lumpen proletariat, it does not characterize the class reality of black people in America.

6. Booker T. Washington: "The Atlanta Exposition Address", quoted in Eric Perkins and John Higginson's "Black Students: Reformists or Revolutionaries?" in R. Aya and N. Miller: America: System and Revolution (New York, forthcoming). The reader should also consider the documents offered in Bracey, Meier, and Rudwick (editors): Black Nationalism in America (Indianapolis, 1970), relating to bourgeois nationalism and accommodation.

7. The Black Movement has been unable to regain much of the fuel it ignited during the lives of Martin Luther King Junior and Malcolm X. The leadership vacuum is widespread, resulting in a marked decline in struggle.

8. Ernie Mkalimoto: Revolutionary Nationalism and Class Struggle (Black Star Publishing pamphlet, 1970). This pamphlet will soon be available in revised form. It is an extremely-important statement on black ideology, and should be possessed by all persons who consider themselves revolutionary. For more information write to Black Star Publishing, 8824 Fenkell, Detroit, Michigan 48238.

9. Ibid. This is the most-important definition and refinement of the revolutionary-nationalist position to date.

10. Some fruitful analysis has already begun. Although the economics of racism is a sorely-neglected area, some people are beginning to realize its centrality. See the essay by Harold Baron in this issue and his forthcoming The Web of Urban Racism, and also the fresh analysis brought by economist William K. Tabb, The Political Economy of the Ghetto (New York, 1970).

11. Charles Kelsey: "The Evolution of Negro Labor", The Annals . . . 31 (1903), Page 57. This article is useful despite its Darwinist bias. The reader should also know of the two important studies conducted by W. E. B. DuBois: The Negro Artisan and The Negro American Artisan, published in 1902 and 1912 respectively.

12. W. E. B. DuBois and associates: The Negro Artisan (Atlanta University Press, 1902), Page 23.

13. The great race riots in East Saint Louis in 1917 and Chicago in 1919 underscored many other riots and rebellions. The causes of these events were the same as those of the great rebellions of July 1967 in Newark and Detroit — economic oppression coupled with the failure to meet rising expectations.

14. The work of a young Jamican brother, Robert Hill, indicates that the Government felt itself threatened by the widespread success of the Garvey movement among the urban poor and unemployed. An essay of

his on Garvey in America is soon due in an anthology on Garveyism edited by John H. Clarke. Any radical who refuses to acknowledge the stimulus of Garveyism will be forever learning about the Black Power movement.

15. Sterling D. Spero and Abraham L. Harris: The Black Worker (New York, Columbia University Press, 1931), Page 56.

16. Statement of John P. Frey, molders chief, as quoted in Marc Karson and Ronald Radosh: "The AFL and the Negro Worker, 1894 to 1949", in Julius Jacobson (editor): The Negro and the American Labor Movement (New York, 1968), Page 170.

17. Sumner Rosen: "The CIO Era, 1935-1955", in Jacobson, op. cit., Page 207. Also see Herbert R. Northrup: "Organized Labor and Negro Workers", Journal of Political Economy, Number 206 (June 1943), and Organized Labor and the Negro (New York, 1944).

18. Lorenzo J. Greene and Carter G. Woodson: The Negro Wage Earner (Washington DC, 1930), Page 322.

19. Constitution of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, 1968.

20. Karl Marx: The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon (New York, 1966), Page 15.