

Black Caucuses in the Unions

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THE WHOLE NEW STAGE OF BLACK REVOLT that has now moved directly into the factories has to be seen as part of the long, long history of black caucuses. To understand both today and tomorrow, you first have to know what the black caucuses were yesterday, when they sprang up spontaneously at the end of World War II.

I remember the first strike I ever led. It was over the discrimination against black women workers in our shop. It was during World War II, when I was at Briggs and I was so new in the shop that I didn't even know what a strike was. I was working in the dope room, where you put glue on the airplane wing. You had to paint on so many coats of glue and then it was baked and painted again. The room was sealed and ventilated through some kind of fans in the ceiling. The fumes and odor were so bad we had no appetite left by lunchtime.

When I was first hired, there were all white men in the room. But as they hired blacks, the whites were transferred to better jobs. One day they brought in the first black woman. By the end of that week they had brought in about five black women, and there were only one or two white men left. That's when we decided to get those girls out of there. The women had been talking about their husbands who were in the service in Germany—and here they couldn't even get a job in the sewing room next door. That was for white women only. These things just burned us up.

None of us knew anything about the union, but I finally got to talk to our white Chief Steward, who told me the reason there were only white women in the sewing room was because they had so much seniority, 10 or 15 years. We knew they were lying, because some of those girls were just out of high school. So we told the Steward that if he didn't do something about it we were all going to quit at the same time, on the same day. We didn't know it would be called a strike. All we knew was that every factory had "Help Wanted" signs up and if we quit and went together to some other factory, we'd be working the next day.

On the day we walked out, they locked the gates on us. (That was the first we knew that the huge fence around the shop wasn't so much to keep saboteurs out, as to keep us in.) By that time, other workers inside the factory were coming out with us. We didn't even know what they were coming out for. I thought maybe they just had a problem like we did. It wasn't until the company sent for me as the "strike leader" that I realized what we had actually done.

We learned a lot in that strike, including what to expect from the union leaders. It was a Negro committeeman who, after the company had agreed to transfer the black women to the sewing room, talked them into going to Mack plant where they would make 15¢ an hour more—but be separated from the rest of us. They didn't know until the fifth day they were there that Mack didn't even have a sewing room and that they were going to work on a press.

The TULC and the "Gentlemen's Agreement"

ONE STAGE IN THE BLACK WORKERS' REVOLT, in fact, arose because workers began to realize that we would have to fight the union bureaucracy as much as we had fought management up to then. This unrest was what led A. Philip Randolph to organize the Trade Union Leadership Council (TULC) ten years ago. What workers didn't know was that there was some sort of "Gentlemen's Agreement" between Reuther and Randolph.

UAW members all over the country were attacking the bureaucrats—much as the black caucuses are doing today, except that there was no exclusion of whites such as you find in some of the current black caucuses. Randolph came to Detroit to hold his little convention and ran it just like the UAW conventions, "from the top," evading all the questions the rank and file wanted to discuss.

After the convention, we kept pressing Randolph about the question of discrimination in the shop and he told us plainly that this was not going to be an organization to take up grievances of black workers on the shop level. All TULC was going to do, he said, was to raise the question of discrimination but writing grievances would have to be done through regular channels. A lot of the workers said, "Hell, this is what we've been doing all the time and nothing has ever happened." But, because they made a big splash in the papers, many black rank and filers came around, in the beginning.

The leaders always emphasized that it was *not* a "black organization." Yet that is just what the black workers wanted to make it—not by excluding whites but by *blacks controlling it*, for themselves, not for the UAW. As TULC developed, it played around more with community problems than shop problems and when it did raise shop questions, it was more concerned with the building trades or things outside of the UAW than inside it. Reuther has always been a master of substitution—and he managed to teach Randolph the same trick.

After two years there was a tremendous drop in membership, and today, no matter how urgently a meeting is called, you seldom see a rank and filer around. Recently they called a meeting, and sent letters to every older black "activist" they could think of. They said they called it to discuss how they could protect themselves from the "vicious racist extremists"—like the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM). But there were more young black workers outside picketing the meeting than older blacks inside attending it.

The whole situation was summed up pretty well when 26 young black workers were fired after a wildcat strike at the Eldon Axel plant and went down to picket Solidarity House, early this year. The UAW sent a black official, Sheldon Tappes, to meet with them. Tappes had to admit that if TULC had done what it was organized for, there wouldn't have been any such development as DRUM. And one of the young black pickets answered "And if Reuther and the other bureaucrats had done what the *union* was organized for, there wouldn't have been any need for TULC."

AN ENTIRELY NEW STAGE WAS BORN with the appearance of groups like DRUM within the auto shops. The Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement was organized after Chrysler fired seven of the black workers who had struck the Dodge Main plant last year to protest a speed up on the line, while the UAW Convention was being held in Atlantic City. In July, when DRUM called for a strike to support a list of demands against racism, both by Chrysler and the UAW, the call brought thousands of workers out of the plant and shut down production for two days.

In February of last year, several months *before* the Dodge strike in Detroit, 500 workers at the Mahwah, New Jersey, Ford plant had shut down production for three days after a racist foreman called a production worker a "black bastard." Out of that spontaneous wildcat, the United Black Brothers of Mahwah Ford was organized. This caucus has just led another wildcat strike over continued racism at that plant.

What is new about these caucuses is that they represent a much more basic opposition than any Reuther has ever before faced. The UAW had, until the appearance of these new caucuses, pretty much eliminated any organized opposition—by any means, ethical or unethical. The bureaucracy has not really had to give a damn about rank and file problems in the shop for years. Now they are facing some real opposition, *from below*.

In the early stages of the black caucus at Dodge, DRUM raised a proposal that amounted to "dual unionism." They proposed in their paper that all black workers stop paying dues to the UAW and pay them instead to DRUM, to be used in the black communities. Many black workers I spoke with, who were very sympathetic to DRUM's activities *in the plant*, were opposed to this idea completely. They were all for a black caucus that would fight racism and inhuman working conditions in the plants. They were all for militant black workers taking over leadership in the unions for the purpose of making a complete change at the point of production. But they became skeptical of the objectives behind a proposal like this.

Black workers at Sparrow's Point, a Bethlehem Steel mill in Baltimore, on the other hand, formed a group outside the union, called the Committee for Equality, rather than forming a caucus within the union. They had a specific situation there, in which they could apply pressure on the government to end its multi-million dollar contracts with the company unless the company stopped discriminating. These workers created a "dual union" of a sort but it was tactical in their case. They felt they had to find some way to shake everything up—the racist company, as well as their racist union. And it worked.

The opposition of the black workers is part of the opposition of black people as a whole to white racist America, a movement that has been gaining in momentum ever since 1961.

In 1964, a mass picket line of about 500 got world headlines by surrounding the GM building in Detroit with signs saying "Racism Hurts All Labor," "Automation Layoffs—Lily White Departments—Slow Upgrading—What is my job future?" The demonstration had been called by the NAACP and was distinguished from traditional labor picket lines by the presence of student youth and the singing of Freedom

songs. GM agreed to negotiate and even without the threat of a demonstration, Chrysler and Ford did the same. What happened after the talks is another question.

In 1965, SNCC helped to organize a Mississippi Freedom Union and later a Tennessee Freedom Union. They had found, while trying to work on voter registration, that what black people in the South wanted most was to do something about their \$3 a day wages and miserable working conditions. From organized labor all they got was evasiveness.

Later that same year, the grape workers in California began their strike for a farm workers organization with the help of CORE and other civil rights groups. By March of the next year, 1966, the Freedom Union idea moved North to the cities when CORE organized a pilot project in Baltimore—and the Maryland Freedom Union was born. The greatest victory there was the manner in which the unorganized black workers of Baltimore took matters into their own hands when nursing home workers walked out first and then called to tell the “organizers.”

That same year, *organized* black workers were also taking matters into their own hands. When the UAW convention delegates met in Long Beach, California in the summer of 1966, they found black workers from Local 887 of the North American Aviation plant picketing the convention to protest discrimination by their local union against Negroes, women and Mexican Americans. They said, simply: “We’ve written lots of letters to Reuther. We even sent them return receipt requested. We have a pocketful of receipts. But no answers.”

By September, these same NAA workers held the first “civil rights strike” of its kind to protest the discriminatory practices of the company. They wrote me that “One Negro worker who had been trying to be a drill press operator for two years was finally accepted the day after the strike. Another worker who had been told a few months earlier that he had failed (by one point) the test for machine operator’s apprentice was told he had been accepted. Another was promoted to assistant foreman, whatever that means. And the company even announced that a Negro top brass was promoted to a \$30,000 a year job. Long live tokenism!”

Shop Papers Appear as Diversity Grows

ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENTS out of that NAA situation was the appearance of a mimeographed shop paper, edited by these black workers themselves, which they called *The Protester*.

In Detroit, a group of auto workers at the Highland Park Chrysler Plant had come out that same year with a mimeographed shop paper called *The Stinger*. Another *Stinger* has just appeared this year at the Mack Avenue Chrysler plant.

The richness and diversity of the black workers’ groups is constantly growing. Moreover, there are significant *differences* between the various black workers’ groups that are springing up everywhere. The Mack Avenue “Stinger,” for example, though it is edited by black workers, makes a distinction between the “whitey” who is a rank and file worker, and the “whitey” who is either a company representative or a union bureaucrat. The black editor puts it this way: “It’s true that we are fighting discrimination against black workers in the shop as one of the most important questions of our lives. But that isn’t the only question.

The reason many of the white workers in our shop also read—and even support—*The Stinger*, is that we are raising the question of the *inhuman conditions* of all workers in production. Automation speed-up and the inhumanity of the company and union bureaucrats is against workers as a whole. That is what *The Stinger* is fighting, and why white workers have told us they are glad we are distributing it.”

There is nothing more stupid than to think that all black workers think alike, or that there is only one face to the whole new phenomenon of the black caucuses. This was one of the most important points discussed at a conference sponsored by News & Letters in Detroit in January of this year, where black youth, workers, women and intellectuals had a chance for the first time to discuss with each other.

One black auto worker at the Detroit Conference felt that “too much of the activity of some black caucuses is pointed to getting on supervision rather than elevating labor on the line. The company doesn't care whether it's a white man or a black man as long as they get the production out. The company is getting very expert at using black supervisors to fight black workers.”

Some younger auto workers felt that “trying to get a coalition with white workers is impossible because they are hung up in their racist bag.” But a steel worker from the East described the black workers' organization in his mill which was so effective in ending some of the racist practices there that it was recognized by white workers who had their own problems with the union. When the black workers invited a group of white workers to come with them on one of their marches, the same white workers who hadn't wanted to associate with “those raving black militants out to destroy everything” suddenly decided maybe it wasn't such a bad idea, after all, and couldn't wait for the next march.

The United Black Brothers at Mahwah have also made it a point to appeal to all the workers in the shop. A leaflet issued in their wildcat two months ago put it this way:

Why We Ask Your Support?—Because the same thing can happen to you. The company has been laying off men by the dozens, but the lines have not slowed up a bit. You have been given more work, and if you can't do it, you lose your job or get time off. The supervisors are harrassing the men and calling them all kinds of names such as 'Dirty Guinea Bastard', 'Black SOB', and 'Stinking Spick', to name a few . . . We, the United Black Brothers, demand an end to this now and those guilty of these charges be removed . . . We ask all of you to stay out and support us in this fight!

What Is New Is Revolution

THE GREATEST DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE NEW CAUCUSES EMERGING today and those that appeared before is that most of us who were in black opposition groups up to now thought that the most important thing to do was to throw out the leadership, or change the union structure, or something of that nature. The young people today aren't thinking that way. They are thinking in terms of a complete change—of revolution.

They are just filled up to their necks with racism. And with the war. One professor from Cornell, during the recent revolt there, reported

talking to one of the black students about their use of guns. He had sympathized with their demands but he had been trying to point out to them how powerful this country is and to warn them that they were facing tremendous oppression if they continued using such tactics. The black student had just laughed in his face: "You're talking about oppression coming upon me? I've been oppressed all my life. It's you and the people who call themselves liberals who are going to feel the oppression that's coming." It shocked the professor, because he knew the black student was right.

Young blacks today aren't joking about the complete change they are out to get. When the group at Dodge named themselves the Revolutionary Union Movement, it was very significant. Years ago if workers called themselves "revolutionaries," other workers would have shied away from them. Today the very word can attract workers.

It is too early to draw any sweeping conclusions about what will happen next with many black groups that exist independently and spontaneously in shops throughout the country. No national caucus is on the horizon yet and to give the impression that one already exists, much less to imply that DRUM is it—as the *Guardian* did in its March 8 special supplement on the black workers' revolt—is futile self deception.

In the recent shop elections, DRUM lost badly at Dodge Local 3, despite the fact that the membership there is overwhelmingly black. It is true that the union bureaucracy is not telling the whole truth when they claim that *they* won everywhere. At the Eldon Axel plant, for example, where 65% of the workers are black, ELDRUM ran candidates for only a few positions and, although they lost, black workers are in complete control of the local for the first time. Doug Fraser, Executive Board Member-at-Large for the Chrysler Division, claims that these workers are the "moderates" he was supporting. But ELDRUM supported them, too. And, most important of all, workers know that black workers have never controlled that local before.

The most honest way to judge the response of black workers is to compare the manner in which thousands responded to DRUM's call for a wildcat last year and the way they reacted at a mass meeting called after the 26 workers were fired at the Eldon Axel plant. The meeting was held in a large church and about five or six hundred workers crowded inside. The majority were younger workers but there were many older workers, too. The first thing that struck me was that those in control of the meeting were not workers in the plant or in any plant.

The speakers went on at great length attacking white racism—with the most vulgar name-calling possible. They spent a lot of time clowning and trying to be comedians. Once in a great while they touched on the vital issue of shop problems. Finally, the principal speaker was called. As soon as he got up, he raised his little red book above his head and said, "My Comrades of the Black Revolutionary Movement, how many of you have this book?" He had to ask several times before four or five raised their books in reply. The speaker told the audience that this was what the movement was all about and gave the address where everyone should go after the meeting to get his copy of "Comrade Mao's Thoughts." When he went on to call Mao "our closest ally" many of the workers in the audience began squirming and I felt that this sort of meeting was what labor bureaucrats need to destroy the movement.

It is clear that the labor bureaucracy will try either to crush it or to kill it by "joining" it. It has done that with every spontaneous movement that ever arose, including the unemployed movement of 1959. Many workers are already sure that Reuther's activity with the black hospital workers in Charleston, S.C., was forced on him by what has been happening in his own union. DRUM has not only attacked Reuther and called him a "racist pig"—but has told *why* they call him that. He has to try to remove that stigma from his "image."

He has not fooled black workers. Of course, they are only too happy to see him give \$10,000 to the hospital strikers. But when they see him marching on a picket line in Charleston or Selma or anywhere else, they know that he hasn't been on a picket line with his own UAW workers for so many years he's forgotten what it's like. Reuther is always glad to integrate anything—outside of his own UAW.

The one thing the young black workers may not fully realize is that every time a black independent movement has appeared, the "politicos" who have rushed in to take it over, have helped reactionaries like Reuther to kill it before it can get off the ground. It was true in the first black organization within the union that I was involved with, as early as the '40s. There were about 200 of us, and we "stormed" Lansing and every black worker I knew was enthusiastic about where we were going. But the Communists and the Trotskyists moved in and began a naked fight over control of our organization. It is not so much that the so-called "radicals" come rushing in but every time they come rushing in *they want to take control and direct it*. The same thing is happening today. The only thing the Maoists do differently is to send blacks instead of whites to take control.

The question at this point is: Will the momentum of the movement be great enough to see the black caucuses become a national force separated from the labor bureaucracy and strong enough to keep control in the hands of the rank and file? Or will the bureaucrats and the Maoists succeed in nipping it in the bud?

Everyone in the shop is laughing at the Alliance for Labor Action, which they consider just some more of Reuther's power politics against Meany. They know that Reuther is hoping the black workers in the South will save his neck. Reuther forgets that they have brothers in the North who insist he has to prove his Labor Action at home, in his own union. The black workers have made it clear that they want to stick to shop problems, not get diverted to Reuther's latest schemes for "community organization." That is the message of the wildcats and the shop papers that have appeared in such diverse forms.

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