

**Detroit, Theory, Practice: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers and Black Power at the Point of Production, 1967-1971**

**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the work of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers as it developed out of the Detroit Rebellion of 1967, the city's prosperous auto industry, the labor movement and the Black Freedom struggle. Heavily influenced by personal experiences in the civil rights and Black Power movements as well as the work of James and Grace Lee Boggs, the League's leadership cadre created an organizing program unique from that of the Black Panther Party that can provide contemporary activists with an example of intersectional mass movement building informed by a careful attention to conditions and strategy.

In 2007, philosopher, activist and long-time Motor City resident Grace Lee Boggs reflected on what are now popularly known as the Detroit Riots of 1967. She argued that "everyone who cares about Detroit and the future of American cities" should struggle with the question of what to call "those tumultuous days in the summer of 1967."<sup>1</sup> As she had with her late husband Jimmy over thirty years earlier, Boggs challenged the notion that a mobilization of the city's economic and racial underclass could be reduced simply to a headline or encyclopedia entry about lootings and senseless violence.<sup>2</sup>

The rebellion officially began in the early morning hours of July 23<sup>rd</sup> when police conducted a raid on the "Blind Pig," an after-hours drinking establishment catering largely to middle-class Black Detroiters. On this particular night, a party had gathered to welcome back a returning Vietnam veteran. Chaos ensued following the announcement of the raid, and officers attempted to arrest everyone in the building. Tensions escalated as the arrests proceeded and a

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<sup>1</sup> Grace Lee Boggs, "Detroit 1967: Riot or Rebellion?" *Michigan Citizen*, April 8-14 2007, Freedomarchives.org, 1 November 2013  
<[http://freedomarchives.org/pipermail/news\\_freedomarchives.org/2007-April/002130.html](http://freedomarchives.org/pipermail/news_freedomarchives.org/2007-April/002130.html)>.

<sup>2</sup> See James and Grace Lee Boggs, *From Rebellion to Revolution* (Detroit, Correspondence: 1974). I use the term riot throughout the paper, though as reliably as possible as a descriptor rather than judgment of events, taking the stance that—in technical terms—a rebellion might also be a riot, as was the case in Detroit.

crowd gathered outside the building. One onlooker identified as “Greensleeves” is recorded as stating: “Black Power, don’t let them take our people away; look what they are doing to our people...Let’s kill them whitey motherfuckers...let’s get the bricks and bottles.”<sup>3</sup> By daybreak participants had started to flood the streets and engage in property destruction, as well as rock and bottle throwing.<sup>4</sup> The rebellion spread from there and prompted Michigan governor George Romney to call President Lyndon Johnson asking to send in the National Guard. In all, 9200 members of the National Guard—many from predominately Black regiments—were called. Romney also deployed an additional 800 state police and 4700 paratroopers. Only four days later were forces able to quell the situation. 7200 people were arrested, and of the forty-three people killed, thirty-three were Black, the remainder white; most were killed by the police and military.<sup>5</sup> By the time it ended, Detroit’s was the deadliest riot of the many that followed Watts in 1965.

The Boggses were not alone in their observation that the riots bore broader political implications. The events of July prompted the Johnson administration to convene the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, otherwise known as the Kerner Commission.<sup>6</sup> In another set of congressional hearings on urban unrest, Senator Karl Mundt (R-South Dakota) stated, “I think the people of Detroit ought to know they have a hard-core group of Communists working in these elements. They are engaged in a satellite war, the same as freedom is involved in Vietnam.”<sup>7</sup> Despite such claims, there is little evidence to suggest that the events of the

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<sup>3</sup> Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2007) 160.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>5</sup> Andrea Burns, “Waging Cold War in a Model City: The Investigation of ‘Subversive’ Influences in the 1967 Detroit Riots,” *Michigan Historical Review* 30 (2004): 10

<sup>6</sup> Though not dealing directly with Detroit, the House Un-American Activities Committee conducted hearings entitled *Subversive Influences in Riots, Looting, and Burning* from October 25<sup>th</sup> through November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1967. These form the basis for Burns’ (2004) analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Burns, “Waging Cold War in a Model City,” 13.

rebellion were in anyway pre-mediated.<sup>8</sup> The lack of a coordinated effort should not suggest, however, that the rebellion was apolitical in nature. Most histories contend that the rebellion was a consequence rather than cause of Detroit's social and economic tension.

Though Johnson's fears of a well-planned uprising were unfounded, the rebellion's most revolutionary impacts would only be felt in their wake. As Boggs writes, "The rebellions brought Blacks to political power...because they warned the Establishment that white political power could no longer maintain law and order."<sup>9</sup> Just months later, a cadre of militant Black organizers began to build towards a rebellion that sought an end to the state and industrial capitalism. In 1969, James Watson told an interviewer for the *Inner City Voice* that the ultimate goal of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers ("the League") was to bring about an "organized general strike" that would enable a Black Vanguard of workers to seize state power.<sup>10</sup> From 1968 to 1971, Watson, the League and affiliated chapters of the Revolutionary Union Movement (RUM) would coordinate a series of wildcat strikes, work actions and community initiatives that both forced Detroit's thriving auto industry to treat with respect the workers it had been content to ignore and devalue while mobilizing workers into the Black Freedom struggle.

How was it that a subsection of Detroit's Black left came to capitalize on the frenetic energy of the July 1967 uprising? Why was the League so successful in responding to the rebellion while the city's Black Panther Party chapter remained a marginal entity? I argue that

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<sup>8</sup> Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 366-367.

<sup>9</sup> Boggs, "Detroit 1967." Rebellions refers to the series of similar events that followed the Watts rebellion in Los Angeles, 1965. These include incidents in Newark, New York and Chicago among other major American cities.

<sup>10</sup> James Watson, "To the Point of Production (Interview)." *Inner City Voice* (Detroit: Black Star Press, 1969): 9. Watson himself was involved in founding *Inner City Voice* in 1967, itself imagined as a "positive response to the riots to the Great Rebellion, elaborating, clarifying and articulating what was already in the streets." (Dan Georgakas and Martin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution* [New York: South End Press, 1998]: 16.)

League founders and the organizations they catalyzed and created were not only well positioned in their conditions and organizational backgrounds to mobilize Black workers, but presented a strategic and ideological sophistication that provides an alternative set of lessons to those imparted by the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP). Articulating their program from a Boggsian and Marxist-Leninist perspective, the League operated from an intimate understanding of its own context and an intersectional analysis of race and class as it sought to build a mass movement led by Black workers. Studying the League in this light allows us to understand both their ideological and strategic departure from the Black Panther Party, and also trace that departure through League founders' formative relationships with the Boggses and the older Left traditions they inherited. Given the popularity of intersectional analyses within contemporary social movements, the League provides a crucial linkage between today's identity and anarchist-influenced politics and the more hierarchical, base-building Black Freedom movement, combining the last fifty years' two perhaps most influential modes of organizing. This creates discursive space for contemporary activists to envision a mass politics that incorporates an understanding of power and privilege while maintaining a commitment to mass organization. Critically, the political education League founders undertook through both mentor-mentee relationships and movement experience enabled them to—for a time—enact their ideological and strategic visions in ways fundamentally threatening to both Detroit's automobile industry and the establishment Left. League involvement in Detroit's vast political landscape was crucial in creating not only more equitable unions and workplaces, but also greater representation for black Detroiters in city politics and operation by the end of the decade. As I intend to show, neither Black Power nor its iconic call for struggle “by any means necessary” in the late sixties and early seventies was a “one size fits all” model.

## Placing the League in the literature

Scholars have drawn a number of conclusions about 1967 and its implications for Detroit. Importantly, the Detroit uprising was just one of many: a series of riots took place in the late 1960s, many of them sparked by incidents of police brutality. While not dealing explicitly with Detroit, Perez, Berg, and Myers' essay, "Police and Riots: 1967-1969" (2003), contends that riots—like those in Watts, Newark and Chicago—were more likely to occur in cities already racially divided that both lacked police preparedness and that had recent histories of police brutality.<sup>11</sup> Though it succeeds in telling a compelling statistical story, the essay sacrifices historical for empirical data. A statistical study does exist for Detroit, conducted in the midst of the riots by Singer, Geschwender and Osborn.<sup>12</sup> Forty years on, however, its sociological conclusions deserve placement within an understanding of the events surrounding the riots on either end. Geschwender expanded on *Black Rioters* in 1978 with *Class, Race and Worker Insurgency*, and the text remains a dated, but invaluable resource for information about the League, centering on their relationship with Marxist ideology.<sup>13</sup>

Aside from Geschwenders' study, there have been few direct treatments of the League.<sup>14</sup> A more recent account by Kieran Taylor in the 2010 volume *Rebel Rank and File* places RUMs and the League in the labor movement of its time. That narrative history provides a rare and

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Olzak, Suzanne Shanahan and Elizabeth H. McEneaney, "Poverty, Segregation, and Race Riots: 1960 to 1993." *American Sociological Review* 61.4 (1996): 590-613.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin D. Singer, James A. Geschwender and Richard W. Osborn, *Black Rioters: A Study of Social Factors and Communication in the Detroit Riot* (Lexington, Mass.: Heath Lexington Books, 1970).

<sup>13</sup> James Geschwender, *Race, Class and Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

<sup>14</sup> James Geschwender, "League of Revolutionary Black Workers" *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 2.3 (1974): 1-23.

useful, if brief, context for the League, tracing founders Mike Hamlin, General Baker Jr., John Watson and the often-ignored Marian Kramer from their days in student activism to the group's dissolution in 1972.<sup>15</sup> Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin locate the 1967 uprising as a necessary launching pad for RUMs and the League, focusing on the conditions of economic disenfranchisement and mistreatment in the workplace which created the conditions for a riot, as well as the white flight and further economic segregation that followed.<sup>16</sup> Unlike Georgakas, Sidney Fine and Heather Thompson see the riots as having accelerated a decline in the standard of living for Black Detroit by exacerbating existing inequalities through white flight.<sup>17</sup> Thomas Sugrue and Kevin Boyle have further elaborated upon these factors, discussing the stark divide between white and Black Detroit residents in relation to the riots. Sugrue argues that white-controlled institutions such as Walter Reuther's United Autoworkers (UAW) and Mayor Jerome Cavanagh's progressive administration created the conditions for the riots among Black Detroiters as well as the economic security for whites that made Detroit truly seem to be a "model city."<sup>18</sup> Taking as his subject working-class white Detroiters, Sugrue's *Origins of the Urban Crisis* (1996) points to de-industrialization and discrimination as the central causes of the 1967 uprising. White workers and homeowners, he argues, went to great and sometimes violent lengths to maintain white majorities in various sectors of day-to-day life. Sugrue's analysis

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<sup>15</sup> Kieran Taylor, "American Petrograd: Detroit and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers," in Aaron Brenner, Robert Brenner and Cal Winslow eds., *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and Revolt from Below During the Long 1970s* ed. (New York: Verso, 2010): 319.

<sup>16</sup> Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Heather Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) and Fine, *Violence in the Model City*.

<sup>18</sup> Kevin Boyle, "The Ruins of Detroit: Exploring the Urban Crisis in the Motor City," *Michigan Historical Review* 27.1 (2001): 109-127 and Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). For a thorough account of the Cavanagh administration's relationship to the riots, see Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City*.

convinces on this front, but has been criticized for ignoring the agency of Black grassroots organizing in shaping post-war Detroit.<sup>19</sup> Thompson's *Whose Detroit?* (2001) details the shop-floor racial discrimination that created an element of sometimes violent distrust between white and Black workers, while also filling the gaps in Sugrue's analysis in thoroughly describing how workers responded to hostile bosses and co-workers through grassroots workplace organizing. Boyle notes that electoral wins by African Americans in the early 1970s, which Georgakas cites as victories of post-uprising Black militancy, were in reality more beneficial to white liberals than the working-class Black Detroiters that these office-holders claimed to represent. Describing the Black Manifesto, a plan for Black economic self-sufficiency advanced by League member James Forman, Keith Dye's 2009 article "The Black Manifesto for Reparations in Detroit" centers economic sovereignty as a prime motivation in post-riot League organizing. Following the riots, an array of factors produced a plethora of responses from grassroots organizers and their opponents, a diversity that is well reflected in the literature.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the field's diverse analysis of social and economic factors, few authors position the League and its post-rebellion organizing specifically within the context of the broader Black Power movement. For many writers, the riot itself was a palpable manifestation of the racial and economic tensions that shaped the Black Power movement, but the rebellion's afterlife drifted off the radar of movement historiography. While the field has paid scant attention to organizing in Detroit, it is worth considering how existing scholarship might help us better understand the

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<sup>19</sup> Beth Bates, Timothy Bates and Grace Lee Boggs, "Where are the People? Review Essay on Thomas Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*," *The Review of Black Political Economy* 27.4 (2000): 13-26.

<sup>20</sup> Keith Dye, "The Black Manifesto for Reparations in Detroit: Challenge and Response, 1969," *Michigan Historical Review* 35.2 (2009): 53-83. Also, Thompson, *Whose Detroit?* and Boyle, "The Ruins of Detroit."

work of the League as it relates to that of the Panthers.<sup>21</sup> Moving beyond the rebellion and League-specific studies, Angela Dillard's *Faith in the City* (2007) asserts a different time frame for the civil rights movement, including prominent examples of faith-based organizing from the 1930s and extending beyond the traditionally held end of the movement with King's death in 1968.<sup>22</sup> Her discussion of Reverend Albert Cleage Jr., a prominent Detroit movement fixture and Christian nationalist, also challenges the perception of Black Power as a wholly secular or "godless" movement. Ahman Rahman focuses on Detroit's various iterations of the Black Panther Party, highlighting—along with the other essays in *Liberated Territory* (2008)—various regional divergences under the BPP banner.<sup>23</sup> Notably, Rahman does not discuss the field of civil rights and Black Power organizing in Detroit with which it co-existed, including Cleage's career. Paul Alkebulan's *Survival Pending Revolution* (2002) embarks on a similar project to Rahman's, leaving behind a focus on image and rhetoric for an evaluation of the BPP as community organizers, finding them to be adept communicators but tragically prone to factional ideological division.<sup>24</sup> Peniel E. Joseph's *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour* (2006) presents what is surprisingly the first narrative history of the Black Power, grounding its roots not in Stokely Carmichael or the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) of the late mid-sixties, but the Garveyites and street speakers who influenced a young, newly politicized Malcolm X.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See Peniel E. Joseph, "Black Power Movement: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History* Vol. 96 (2009) for a more general discussion of the contours of Black Power historiography to date.

<sup>22</sup> Angela Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Yohuru Williams and Jama Lazerow, eds. *Liberated Territory: Untold Local Perspectives on the Black Panther Party* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Paul Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution: The History of the Black Panther Party* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2006).



Joseph's narrative, while impeccably thorough, remains focused on the movement's already most notable names—King, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, etc.—even as it is careful to underline the intra-group divisions within SNCC and the BPP. The account is understandably ill equipped to tackle the movement's less popularly-known facets, but provides readers with a larger framework through which to place and understand quieter work like that of the League. Examining the optics of the BPP, Curtis Austin and Jane Rhodes present two sides of the same coin. Austin's *Up Against the Wall* (2008) acknowledges the notoriety that violent posturing brought to the group, but also names it as a major reason for their ultimate decline.<sup>26</sup> Rhodes' *Framing the Black Panthers* (2007), conversely, discusses the skill with which the Panthers were able to manage their public image, including violence, countercultural appeal and revolutionary rhetoric, to attract national media attention and, indeed, maintain the organization's cultural cache even as it folded internally.<sup>27</sup>

Over the last twenty years, the historiography of the Black Power movement has grown immensely. Unfortunately, this emergent field centers almost entirely around the Black Panther Party, and, within that, its most charismatic leaders: Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, Bobby Seale and a handful of others. This focus has provided a rich understanding of both national and local iterations of the BPP, but paid little attention to work that took place outside of its organizational apparatus and the purview of the Panthers' most famed personalities. Because the BPP never maintained a strong presence in Detroit, Black organizing in the city—including that of the League—is imagined as either removed from or a marginal outgrowth of the movement's cores in Oakland and Harlem. Taking inspiration from Joseph's recent work, understandings of

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<sup>26</sup> Curtis J. Austin, *Up Against the Wall: Violence in the Making and Unmaking of the Black Panther Party* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Jane Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

Black Power must expand temporally, but also geographically and organizationally; as an industrial powerhouse and frontline of the late sixties' race riots, Detroit and the work of the League provide a key means of understanding the shifting battlegrounds of the Black Freedom movement from South to North, and an example of a Black Power organization that strategized around locally unique economic, social and political forces and took little direction from Oakland.<sup>28</sup>

While the League built their program around the contours of Black life in Detroit, they maintained internationalist revolutionary designs. Properly organized, they argued, the Black worker could “overthrow and forever eradicate the evils of racism, capitalism and imperialism.”<sup>29</sup> Their influences, too, should be understood as locally situated, but globally oriented. Not only did their placement in Henry Ford’s Motor City give League founders an intimate acquaintance with the ravages of industrial capitalism, but their ideological mentors also remained committed to world revolution, not simply the seizure of Detroit’s means of production. Like Dillard and Joseph, I intend to situate my analysis of the League in its roots: how did the League develop as it did? Who and what were their influences, and how did this differentiate their work from that of adjacent and more nationally recognized organizations? Though much of this analysis will focus on the few founding members of the League, this essay is not an attempt to valorize their work above others’ or create cults of personality where they did not previously exist. Instead, the story of the League is offered simply as testament to the importance of mentorship and thorough strategic thought.

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<sup>28</sup> Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 50.

<sup>29</sup> *The General Policy Statement and Labor Program of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers*. Detroit: League of Revolutionary Black Workers, 1970.

## Placing the League in the City

Determining how and why the League developed as it did and how it distinguished itself from other Black Power organizations first begs an understanding of the social, economic and political conditions that produced the rebellion and indeed defined post-war Detroit. During World War II, many African Americans in the South migrated north to manufacturing cities in search of higher-paying jobs in a booming wartime economy.<sup>30</sup> The city became known as the “Arsenal of Democracy” courtesy of wartime defense contracts issued to major Detroit-based manufacturers. City residents, then, began fighting violent battles over housing, fights previously associated with the South and civil rights activists’ well-publicized struggles for integration. Newly arrived Black Detroiters faced considerable retaliation from white residents eager to maintain racial homogeneity.<sup>31</sup> As the war and the contracts ended, the city lost 82,000 jobs from 1954 to 1957.<sup>32</sup> Further, a number of firms left the city for the suburbs, leaving less mobile Black workers not only with fewer job options, but further segregated neighborhoods and underfunded schools and services.<sup>33</sup> Still, the racial make-up of the city continued to shift through the post-war era and so also continued neighborhood disputes. Notably, whites were far less obstinate about the racial make-up of their workplaces.<sup>34</sup> Another major contributing factor was persistent police brutality visited on the city’s Black communities, and a continued unwillingness toward reform among white officials. Leading up to July, the NAACP in coalition with other civil rights group in Detroit pressured the mayor’s office to reign in the police department. After years of inaction,

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<sup>30</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 141.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 19.

even from the progressive and generally well-regarded Cavanaugh administration, coalitions of community organizations as well as individuals took up complaints against the police department that were met with little response.<sup>35</sup>

Workplaces, too, were notoriously brutal—especially for Black workers. One major problem was finding a job to begin with; when recession hit in the 1950s, Black workers fell into a tragically applicable Depression-era adage: “last hired, first fired.” Black workers, when they were employed, typically received the hardest and worst paying jobs. Georgakas and Surkin write of Dodge Main that “99 percent of all general foremen were white, 95 percent of all foremen were white, 100 percent of all superintendents were white, 90 percent of all skilled tradesmen were white, and 90 percent of all skilled apprentices were white.”<sup>36</sup> At Hamtramck, Black workers were estimated to account for some 70 percent of the workforce, with similar numbers replicated across other plants. Injuries, too, were commonplace enough to warrant cold reactions from management. In *Finally Got the News*, produced in 1970 by a team of white filmmakers in coordination with the League-operated Black Star Productions, one worker remembered,

“He lost his finger at the second knuckle and he got \$3000. They wanted him to come back to work two days later. They wanted him back on that press two days later, producing with the bandages and all that.”<sup>37</sup>

Though labor unions would traditionally handle these grievances, predominantly unskilled Black workers found little recourse in the United Auto Workers (UAW) that represented them. The combination of union negligence to address Black workers’ concerns and long-searing

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<sup>35</sup> Angela D. Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007): 267.

<sup>36</sup> Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 28.

<sup>37</sup> *Finally Got the News*, dir. Stewart Bird, Rene Lichtman and Peter Gessner, Digital, Newsreel, 1970.

tensions over racial imbalances in UAW leadership created an atmosphere of hostility between predominantly white union officials and Black rank and file. In a pamphlet from the winter of 1969, the Eldon Revolutionary Union Movement (ELRUM) wrote that it was fighting a battle on two fronts: “1) with the union because of its racist practices 2) with the corporation.”<sup>38</sup> They declared further that, “The UAW is a white racist organization controlled by racists [including Walter “Pig” Reuther] and financed by Black Wages.”<sup>39</sup> Despite ELRUM’s and other RUM organizations’ principled opposition to the UAW in the late 1960s, the union’s past militancy greatly informed the tenor of the RUM organizing efforts: confrontational sit-down strikes for recognition in the 1930s—most notably at the Ford plant in nearby Flint, Michigan—defined the earliest days of the UAW, and the union as a whole contributed immensely to a swell of labor militancy throughout the decade.<sup>40</sup> Former League Executive Board Member Muhammad Ahmed, formerly known as Max Stanford, roots the League specifically in the history of Black workers in Detroit and their complicated relationship to institutionalized labor, most notably in the formation of the Trade Union Leadership Conference (TULC). Organized by Black unionists in Detroit just as the CIO was set to purge communist members in its merger with the AFL, the TULC involved as many as 2500 members by 1961 in advocating for the concerns of Black workers but weakened shortly thereafter.<sup>41</sup> The introduction to *Finally Got the News*, too, links the League to UAW militancy, featuring a montage that moves from images of slavery directly

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<sup>38</sup> ELRUM 2.4 (Detroit: Self-Published, 1969): 4.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Irving Bernstein, *The Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1940* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010): 499-571. See also Nelson Lichtenstein, *Walter Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press): 47-131 and Philip Dray, *There is Power in a Union: The Epic Story of Labor in America* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011): 410-484.

<sup>41</sup> Muhammed Ahmed, “The League of Revolutionary Black Workers: A Historical Study,” *History is a Weapon*, Web, Accessed Nov 13 2013.

to realist depictions of Black and white workers of the 1930s occupying factories and marching in picket lines. Sadly, the once-fighting union had since given way to a state of compromise with auto-industry that left many Black workers feeling betrayed. In a particularly cruel blow to Black workers, the UAW had even granted the National Guard access to the Local 3 (Dodge) and 7 (Chrysler) union halls as temporary headquarters during the July uprising.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to the rebellion, opposition to the UAW and on-the-job concerns about wages, working conditions and job insecurity became entry points through which the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) would form and begin to raise revolutionary consciousness among workers. On May 2, 1968, largely Polish white and Black workers organized a 4,000 person wildcat strike at Dodge Main out of concern for speed-ups on the assembly line. Unsanctioned by the union, the choice of a wildcat was as much a statement against the UAW as it was against the Chrysler Corporation. Though often credited for the strike, DRUM actually emerged from its immediate aftermath. Autoworker Chuck Wooten wrote, “[After the strike] a few workers and I went across the street and sat in a bar...It was here that we decided we would do something about organizing Black workers to fight the racial discrimination in the plants and the overall oppression of the Black workers.”<sup>43</sup>

The first DRUM pamphlet, handed out by members just days later outside of Dodge Main, began with a call for solidarity with workers fired as a result of the strike, General Baker among them. Having continued to hand out pamphlets at the Dodge Main gates, DRUM called for a boycott of restaurants and bars surrounding the plant that refused to hire Black workers in July.<sup>44</sup> The call represented a test of strength for the group; with their primary means of communication

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<sup>42</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, *Walter Reuther*, 433.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Dudnick, *Black Workers in Revolt: How Detroit's New Black Revolutionary Workers are Changing the Face of American Trade Unionism* (Detroit: Guardian, 1969): 13.

<sup>44</sup> Taylor, “American Petrograd”, 319.

having been informal conversations and pamphlets, there were few other ways of gauging support. The boycott was wildly successful, garnering a 95% cooperation rate.<sup>45</sup> Wooten, Baker and their comrades were now tasked with building their organization.

### **The Political Education of the League Cadre**

Organizing DRUM was hardly the League founders' first exposure to political activity in Detroit. Mike Hamlin, Luke Tripp and General Baker each came to the city by way of the South, and took refuge as well as strategic direction from fellow Southern transplant and auto worker James ("Jimmy") Boggs and his wife, philosopher Grace Lee. Angela Dillard writes that, "If cross-generational influence was indeed key to the development of political radicalism in 1960s Detroit, Grace Lee and James Boggs personified that influence."<sup>46</sup> Luke Tripp and other future RUM organizers had crossed paths with the couple at formative stages in their develop as part of a revolving door of activists that congregated at the Boggses' home throughout the sixties. Max Stanford, an unofficially "adopted" son of the Boggses, would go on to found the student-led Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and participate in the League. Another of their informally adopted children, Tripp, played an instrumental role in its founding<sup>47</sup> These two enjoyed a particularly close relationship with Jimmy and Grace Lee, and the four of them continued working together on various projects over the next several years, including on collaborations with native Michigander Malcolm X until his assassination in 1964. Through these relationships, the Boggses and the intellectual circles of which they were a part served as

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<sup>45</sup> Geschwender, "The League of Revolutionary Black Workers", 5.

<sup>46</sup> Dillard, *Faith in the City*, 226.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour*, 58.

parent figures for a new generation of Detroit activists.<sup>48</sup> Participation in the Facing Reality discussion groups run by the Boggses, and, even more, so casual conversations around the couple's living room proved formative moments to future League founders.<sup>49</sup> Martin Glaberman, an autoworker and one-time intellectual partner of the Boggs's, taught political education classes on Marx's *Kapital* to Baker, Tripp, Watson and John Williams, another League founder.<sup>50</sup> In late night discussions, Jimmy and Grace Lee would challenge the young activists to envision and enact a new society as they organized the Detroit ghettos.<sup>51</sup> Rick Feldman, a white former SDS member who went onto work closely with Jimmy Boggs in the National Organization for an American Revolution, recalls the couple's desire to answer the question in the late sixties of how to resolve a crisis once it had been created.<sup>52</sup> "Crisis" here applies dually: to the crisis of capitalism, as well as the spontaneous actions, even riots, that it engenders. In formulating a response to another crisis, the 1967 rebellion, League founders drew heavily upon the Boggses' mentorship and experiences.

Grace Lee Boggs had been heavily involved in the Workers Party, an off-shoot of the larger Socialist Workers Party formed by well-known Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R James. Along with

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<sup>48</sup> Bill V. Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004): 138, 142.

<sup>49</sup> It deserves mention as well that Dan Georgakas, a Detroit native, also had a relationship with the Boggs's through Facing Reality, and was personally acquainted with many of the founding members of the League who he writes about in *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*. See ed. Robert H. Mast, *Detroit Lives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994): 289-294.

<sup>50</sup> Glaberman had remained loyal to C.L.R James after the Boggses' split with him in 1962 and move towards dialectical humanism. Mullen describes dialectical humanism as "the Boggsian program for [the] emancipatory ... work" of collective and individual transformation, as well as the "proletarianization" of philosophy. This also involved the Boggses more full embrace of Third World Marxism along with Marx's concept of seeking the fullest productive activity of human beings. For a more exhaustive description, see Mullan, *Afro-Orientalism*, 134-162 and James Boggs, *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Journal* (Detroit: Monthly Review Press, 1963).

<sup>51</sup> Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 58-59.

<sup>52</sup> Mast, *Detroit Lives*, 269.



James and Raya Dunayavskya, Grace Lee split with the WP to form the Trotskyite Johnson-Forrest Tendency in 1940. Named for James' and Dunayavskya's party names, the Tendency was fiercely critical of the "state capitalist" Soviet Union and advocated for the centrality of Black struggle and the self-organization of Black workers.<sup>53</sup> In two Johnsonite texts, *The American Worker* (1947) and *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (1950), Grace Lee developed ideas that would become central to the Boggses philosophy for years to come. Namely, members of the Johnson-Forrest Tendency argued for the unique revolutionary potential of Black workers, the rejection of bureaucratic unionism and the "proletarianization of philosophy."<sup>54</sup> It was in their subsequent appeal to Black autoworkers that Jimmy Boggs entered the JFT fold, honing the group's analyses and activities around revolution at the point of production (factories), a concept the Boggses would greatly expand on in 1963's *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Workers' Notebook* following their split from James in 1962. The couple grew at odds with James for his Marxian depersonalization of the working "masses" above individuals sharing unique but systemic relationships to both race and class.<sup>55</sup> As the sixties continued, the Boggses increasingly aligned themselves with the Black Power movement and were influenced greatly by Third World revolutionaries as well as domestic insurgents like Robert Williams.<sup>56</sup> Unique from the Panthers' mainly international intellectual influences, the Boggses' theories were consistently informed by the international *and* local context that they shared with the League: on the Black workers' position as revolutionary vanguard, the effects of the automation of production on the lives and consciousness of those workers and the

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<sup>53</sup> Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism*, 122.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>56</sup> For more on Williams, see Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

bureaucracy of the institutionalized Left. Given their focus on the Black worker and revolution at the point of production, evidence of both the Boggses' and the Johnson-Forrest Tendency's influence is abundant in the words of League members, and in the organizing program they constructed.

The League was perhaps the closest any organization could come to a tangible expression of Boggsian values. The group clearly outlined in writing and practice the intersectional understanding of race and class that had led to the couple's departure from James and the SWP: "We're not talking about a single issue as the only factor, nor are we talking about reforms in the system; we are talking about the seizure of state power."<sup>57</sup> Like the Boggses, they believed that the struggle for Black liberation was at the heart of the struggle against class oppression.<sup>58</sup> A long-form League document from 1970, "The General Policy Statement and Labor Program of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers", elucidates the group's theory of change, no more so than when discussing power at the point of production. Because the historical process of capitalism had systematically placed Black workers at the base of industrial production, the League believed they represented both the most disenfranchised and therefore most conscious section of the proletariat and that which could prove the biggest threat to capital. The only viable path for Black workers was, as they saw it, to incrementally raise class-consciousness, develop resilient Black communities and seize the means of productions before ultimately "carrying out a

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<sup>57</sup> *General Policy Statement*, 10.

<sup>58</sup> "The American Revolution" in Stephen Ward ed., *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook: A James Boggs Reader* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011): 137. Ken Cockerel in *Finally Got the News*: "We are explicitly Marxist-Leninists, but we are also, of course, cognizant of the fact that there's a peculiar oppression that effects Black people... we have to deal with the racial component as it operates in terms of producing and maintaining oppression and exploitation."

Black General Strike which would bring the entire U.S. productive capacity and its Monopoly Capitalist owners to their demise.”<sup>59</sup>

Their power analysis was distinct from that of the Black Panthers, who in 1968 believed that “the only other source of power left is that of the ability to inflict destruction as a consequence [of capitalist white supremacy.]”<sup>60</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to investigate the entirety of the Panthers’ hardly monolithic theories of power and change. In contrast to the League, however, the BPP’s organizing program and its early mobilization around political prisoners (Huey Newton, the New York 21, etc.) flows from a Fanonian belief in the primacy of struggle, one which stood at odds to the League’s focus on power at the point of production. A journalist for *Radical America* wrote in 1971 that the League disdained “revolutionary rhetoric and commercial suicide” for failing to “contribute to capitalism’s downfall; if anything they contribute to its maintenance.”<sup>61</sup> The League had an intense interest in mass mobilization and, more importantly, a conviction that it was achievable through concrete, locally focused resistance and well-formulated strategies. While a considerable faction of the BPP would eventually drift away from self-defense and towards resiliency methods such as the free breakfast programs, they continued to lack the power analysis around production that defined the work of the Boggses and the League into the early seventies.<sup>62</sup>

### **In the streets and on the page**

By the time the League was officially founded, then, its chief organizers had already

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>60</sup> *An Introduction to the Black Panther Party*. Ann Arbor, MI: The John Brown Society, 1970, 4.

<sup>61</sup> Eric Perkins, “The League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the coming of revolution,” *Radical America* 5.2 (1971).

<sup>62</sup> Alkebulan, *Survival Pending Revolution*, 43.

gained a wealth of knowledge from both the Boggses and their own organizing. While young, most of the group's founders had at least some experience in either the civil rights movement or Detroit-based organizing projects. John Watson had worked with both SNCC and Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) before joining Albert Cleague's Freedom Now Party and Max Stanford's Revolutionary Action Movement, both groups with strong connections to the Boggses.<sup>63</sup> Mike Hamlin had been active with a number of socialist organizations, including the Communist Party and SWP as well as the Black nationalist Republic of New Africa (RNA), the NAACP and CORE.<sup>64</sup> General Baker and Luke Tripp had travelled illegally to Cuba in 1962, where they met with Robert Williams and Cuban revolutionaries. Tripp and Stanford both had gained considerable experience in activism by working to organize Detroit's ghettos in the early sixties.<sup>65</sup> Coalescing around the Wayne State University campus, this group of young activists would form UHURU in 1963, a name taken from the Swahili word for freedom. It was in working with UHURU that Baker, Tripp, Watson and their comrades John Williams and Gwendilyn Kemp were arrested for the first time as they protested the murder of Cynthia Scott, a Black prostitute.<sup>66</sup> Their demonstration took place alongside an NAACP picket against the city's bid for the 1968 Olympic Games, into which the UHURU cadre was eventually absorbed.<sup>67</sup> More notably, the group's consultation with Malcolm X in the lead-up to 1963's Northern Grassroots Leadership Conference in Detroit lead them to organize a 1964 convention for Black student activists at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee that was arguably the beginning of

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<sup>63</sup> Geschwender, *Race, Class and Worker Insurgency*, 171.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>65</sup> Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour*, 59.

<sup>66</sup> Dillard, *Faith in the City*, 266.

<sup>67</sup> Geschwender, "League of Revolutionary Black Workers", 2.

the Black student movement's shift towards Black Power.<sup>68</sup>

These same individuals would go on to found the *Inner City Voice*, a weekly newspaper whose masthead promised “Detroit’s Black Community Newspaper” and “the Voice of the Revolution.” Jimmy Boggs had a regular column—“Birth of a Nation”—in the *ICV*, which also published essays by CLR James, Robert Williams and the writings of prominent Third World Marxist intellectuals such as Mao Tse Tung, Franz Fanon and Che Guevara.<sup>69</sup> While the tactic was certainly not unique to this group of activists, the inspiration to create a paper came directly from Lenin. His 1901 essay, “Where to Begin?” names creating a newspaper as the crucial first step in any revolutionary program:

“[a newspaper] may be likened to the scaffolding round a building under construction, which marks the contours of the structure and facilitates communication between the builders, enabling them to distribute the work and to view the common results achieved by their organized labor.”<sup>70</sup>

Hamlin later recalled that he and John Watson had started the *ICV* “because that is what revolutionaries should do because a newspaper would organize people.”<sup>71</sup> A precursor of sorts to the RUMs’ pamphlets, the *ICV* employed a provocative “tell it like it is” rhetorical style, though one balanced with longer-form essays, news stories and interviews. Not long after founding the paper, Hamlin, Watson and their fellow *ICV* would expand their efforts from the printing press and into the factories.

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<sup>68</sup> Peniel E. Joseph, *Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2013): 263.

<sup>69</sup> Third World Marxism refers to anti-racist and anti-imperialist ideology heavily influenced by struggles for national liberation by Marxist variants in Cuba, Vietnam, China and other areas throughout the Global South. For more on the concept of Third World Marxism and its relationship to movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, see Max Elbaum, “What Legacy Radical Internationalism?” *Radical History Review* 82 (2002): 37-64.

<sup>70</sup> V.I Lenin, “Where to Begin?” in *Lenin Collected Works Volume 5* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961): 19.

<sup>71</sup> Jack Taylor, “Revolution at the Point of Production: An Interview with Mike Hamlin and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers,” *Spectrum* 2.1 (2013): 102.

Where the League itself was meant to be a collection of RUM chapters and community organizations, the body's strategic engineers—the focus of this essay—were limited to the relatively small group of core organizers discussed above. Unless otherwise noted, this group comprised what would eventually become the Executive Board (EB) of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, a leadership body responsible for mapping the League's strategic direction.<sup>72</sup> Part of overseeing this strategic direction was continued involvement in a variety of community initiatives. Just as General Baker, Ken Cockerel and Chuck Wooten were all centrally involved in the founding and maintenance of RUM organizations, they and other members also worked to catalyze and maintain connections with existing and emergent community groups. Another central force behind the in-plant organizing, Mike Hamlin, advised the Black Student United Front, a group of self-organized high school students from across Detroit public schools who had organized a series of walkouts for the hiring of more Black teachers and a Black studies curriculum.<sup>73</sup> John Watson, who took over editing Wayne State University student newspaper the *South End* in 1969, helped to found a coalition entitled Parents and Students for Community Control (PASCC) in 1970 through his leadership in the West Central Organization (WCO). PASCC sought Black community control over schools as the city's Board of Education attempted to decentralize, a redistricting plan that would have left schools already struggling from post-riot white flight further segregated and under-funded.<sup>74</sup> Emboldened by the rebellion, community opposition to police brutality galvanized a large swath of Detroit's Black community into political action. *Finally Got the News* shows League

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<sup>72</sup> The Executive Board is also referred to as the Executive Council in some accounts.

<sup>73</sup> Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 86.

<sup>74</sup> Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 76-77.

involvement with community demonstrations against the murder of 9 year-old Danny Smith. Shortly thereafter, Ken Cockerel carried out an extended legal campaign against Mayor Roman Gribbs' STRESS ("Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets") policing policy, a brutal governmental reaction to the rebellion that essentially empowered white vigilantes to take the law into their own hands with few repercussions.<sup>75</sup> James Forman's controversial "Black Manifesto", presented at the 1969 Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC), demanded white churches and synagogues pay \$500 million (later \$3 million) in reparations to ensure economic self-determination for Black Detroiters.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, as the EB explored ideology through practice, an engagement with institutions became another terrain on which they sought to harness an emergent Black vanguard. As Mike Hamlin recounted years later, "Everything we did involved institutions."<sup>77</sup> Where the factories were the point of production for industrial capitalism, unions, schools, local government and churches were where communities produced their day-to-day realities.

Members of the League were involved in key community struggles, but—with the notable exception of Forman's BEDC—many of the ventures with which they partnered were organized autonomously; the League built its own program, strategy and vision around ongoing activism in Detroit. As they write in 1970, "Our black community is comprised of industrial workers, social service workers, our gallant youth, and many ad hoc community groups."<sup>78</sup> That is, the actual work of the League beyond its more direct involvement with RUM chapters was to provide a

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<sup>75</sup> Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 81-82 and 145-152.

<sup>76</sup> Dye, "Challenge and Response", 53. Notably Grace Lee Boggs, who at the same conference presented her and Jimmy's *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party*, was "horrified" at the plan, noting that Forman's plan "put blacks back into the position of supplicants playing on the guilt of white liberals." (Boggs, *Living for Change*, 174-175)

<sup>77</sup> Taylor, "Revolution at the Point of Production", 106.

<sup>78</sup> *General Policy Statement*, 1.

“big tent” for militant Black organizing in Detroit rather than direct different organizations’ exact outcomes. Remaining rooted in their base of Black autoworkers, the League had a wholesale vision for revolution that extended well beyond the factories and was reflected in its founding members’ diverse commitments.

The League’s more general support for Black organizing in Detroit translates to the paper trail the group left behind. By looking at a variety of publications from the League, we begin to see that their program even just in the factories incorporated a wide range of ideological perspectives. Just as they produced publications and pamphlets for distribution to workers outside of factory gates, League members also produced their own tracts, gave interviews and made speeches, contemporaneously and for years after the League’s dissolution. These two sets of documents illustrate key differences between the EB’s broader political philosophies and what they deemed strategic in mobilizing rank and file members. Where the interviews and personal writings of the League mapped out calculated directions towards revolution, pamphlets handed out at the factory gates generally fell short of articulating an expansive transformative vision.

DRUM pamphlets remained concerned mainly with the details of workplace actions, solidarity with fired workers and relationships between police, white foremen and company management. In a feature that would remain a constant of the pamphlets, a section entitled “Racism in Hiring” notes, for example, that “the Black worker who tries out for skilled trades is given a test [for] practicing journeymen to pass, where the white worker may not be given a test at all.”<sup>79</sup> Despite this focus on the micro-dynamics of plant operation, the actual authors of these first pamphlets were not themselves factory workers. Mike Hamlin—working as a journalist at the time—recounted in a 2010 interview that he would sit in on workplace discussion groups

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<sup>79</sup> DRUM 1.3 (Detroit: Self Published, 1968): 3.



organized by Hamtramck autoworker General Baker and record stories of what was happening inside the plant.<sup>80</sup> In remarkable detail, the first DRUM pamphlet described “The Facts” of long-time worker Willie Brookins’ firing, including such pedantic information as what police shouted at Willie as he was escorted out by Hamtramck police down to what kind of sandwich he brought for lunch that day—details that would have been impossible to attain without connection to workers who experienced the ordeal first-hand. Maintaining a presence in the factories was crucial for DRUM organizers in gaining a sense for what stories were likely to attract workers.

With the strike and the riots having been the founding spark of DRUM, this first pamphlet represented something of a political litmus test for plant workers: assured that on-the-job concerns were at least partially responsible for the walk-out, Hamlin and Baker could be certain that literature dealing with those same issues could connect with the Black workers that struck in May, and hopefully expand DRUM’s reach to those dissatisfied workers who had not yet taken action, or even attended a discussion group meeting.<sup>81</sup> Even so, the last line of this first pamphlet states that continued discrimination against Black workers is “the type of bullshit that will eventually lead to violent revolution right in the plant.”<sup>82</sup> As evidenced by their prior political activity, core DRUM organizers were no strangers to militant rhetoric. The inclusion of this line demonstrates a testing of the waters: what did workers want to hear? How far did their grievances extend beyond purely workplace concerns? In other words, what was the state of Black workers’ consciousness at Dodge Main?

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<sup>80</sup> Taylor, “Revolution at the Point of Production,” 103. Hamlin’s inspiration for the discussion group also came as a result of the July 1967 Rebellion, having sensed a heightened consciousness among workers.

<sup>81</sup> Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 20.

<sup>82</sup> DRUM 1.1 (Detroit: Self-Published, 1968): 2.

The presence of a revolutionary consciousness among plant workers is clear from the evolution of DRUM pamphlets' rhetoric over the course of the summer. The third DRUM pamphlet, published in July, took a more consistently militant tone. Whereas the first issue's back cover featured graphics of African-style drums around a call to read the next issue of DRUM, by this third issue the back cover is the enlarged text Martin Luther King's famous quote, "I have a dream." Having crossed out "dream", the quote reads, "I have a gun."<sup>83</sup> The shift evident in these two pamphlets shows that DRUM organizers had gained a sense for how to communicate with and mobilize workers. Having begun their communications with workers on the relatively safe subjects of wrongful firings and factory floor injuries, the League's rhetorical tactics quickly extended to include *both* on the job concerns and the more explicitly insurgent tone they had been weary to express at DRUM's earliest stages. This shows not an evolution in the League founders' political analysis so much as their careful weighting of what language resonated with workers and would prove the best means through which to organize further actions at the plant. Their testing paid off. In a pamphlet from late 1969, DRUM looked back on a year of significant activity: a 3,000 person wildcat in July that cost Chrysler an estimated three million dollars, candidate Ron March's victory in a UAW primary election, an occupation of UAW's solidarity house, challenging the City of Hamtramck in Federal Court over police brutality, and multiple other disruptions of union and company business.<sup>84</sup>

These calls attracted than more than simply workers. A series of *Wall Street Journal* articles in the summer and fall 1968 took the pamphlets' calls for revolution very seriously. A front page November article responded directly, writing, "Their literature, written in shrill, often obscene,

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<sup>83</sup> DRUM 1.3, 2.

<sup>84</sup> DRUM 2.13 (Detroit: Self Published, 1969): 2-3.

language warns of conflict, bloodshed, possibly even destruction of plants.”<sup>85</sup> The only violence author James Gannon could cling to, however, was rhetorical. Unlike the Black Panthers’ infamous brandishing of guns, DRUM used a tactic by that time standard to the labor movement—the wildcat—to challenge both Chrysler and the UAW to accept the seemingly common-sense demands of improved working conditions and increased representation in management and leadership. Having spoken with “articulate, boyish” DRUM spokesperson and autoworker Ron March, the *Wall Street Journal* story then moved away from the fiery pamphlet and toward the conditions of inequality DRUM sought to address, as well as the powerful effect their actions were having on the company, the union, and even Walter Reuther personally.<sup>86</sup> It is impossible to know exactly what combination of forces drove a series of *WSJ* writers to Detroit in the summer and fall of 1968, but they left having brought Detroit’s Revolutionary Union Movement to the attention of the paper’s considerable readership among wealthy Americans. In the wake of urban uprisings in Detroit and throughout the country, the Black Power movement had exploded onto the national spotlight, achieving a level of cultural cache that went beyond the white New Left’s countercultural fascination with “authenticity.”<sup>87</sup> As rebellions flared a year earlier, the *New York Times* and other mainstream publications featured stories on the Panthers that transformed them virtually overnight into not only celebrities, but commodities whose likeness could be found on posters, t-shirts and book jackets.<sup>88</sup> In adopting aspects of the

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<sup>85</sup> James P. Gannon, “Black Unionists: Militant Negroes Press For a Stronger Voice In the Labor Movement They Spark Walkouts at GE, Chrysler; Bus Drivers Hit White Control in Chicago Demanding Union Staff Jobs Black Unionists: Negroes Demand Stronger Voice in Labor Movement,” *The Wall Street Journal* 29 Nov 1968: 1.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> See Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, The Red Army Faction and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>88</sup> Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers*, 83.

Panther's rhetorical style, the RUMs were able to tap into the BPP's popularity for coverage while offering the media an entirely different story from that being told by the Panthers themselves. That said, the League also rejected key elements of the Panthers' media strategy; namely, "they felt that the masses should be presented with images that were realistic rather than those of superheroes whom they might admire but would be afraid to imitate."<sup>89</sup>

This third DRUM pamphlet is also telling for its understanding of structural violence. Discussing DRUM member Lee Cain's candidacy for plant committee, the pamphlet's authors describe rumors being spread by management that his election would "strengthen the Black power movement to take over the local and would encourage more looting."<sup>90</sup> It then describes the continual nature of looting in the context of industrial capitalism: "The real question is what about the looting by the big corporations. The looting of exploitation, the looting of racist practices...this kind of looting goes on every day of the year."<sup>91</sup> Coming about in the aftermath of the Detroit rebellion, the economic context in which it occurred, and the more general backdrop of a highly militant Black Power movement, RUM organizations' writings and those of the League must be understood through a frame of structural violence. The pamphlet's perspective on looting aligns well with Slavoj Žižek's related theory of an anonymous, systemic violence: "the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political system."<sup>92</sup> Peace Studies founder Johann Galtung similarly describes social justice as the absence of "violence [that] is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and

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<sup>89</sup> Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 61.

<sup>90</sup> DRUM 1.3, 2.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008): 2. See 93-100 for a relevant discussion of objective, systemic violence as it relates specifically to allegations of looting and rape in New Orleans the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

consequently as unequal life chances.”<sup>93</sup> More meaningful than the pamphlets’ escalated rhetoric is that they remain primarily concerned with putting forth an *analysis* of systemic, institutional and interpersonal violence. Their calls for action were either vague (“Stamp out—racism and Black lackeys”) or highly specific (“Vote Jackson/Vote Drum/Vote Black”).<sup>94</sup> Even as their rhetoric escalated, pamphlets rarely asserted a constructive vision for the plants, Detroit or Black America; in short, a plan to dismantle the array of violences that they name. If the goal of these publications was to proliferate an analysis of the plants within capitalism, then it was up to future League founders to communicate a vision for the future. To do so, they drew on a collective wealth of experience in organizing around Detroit, as well as the intellectual tutelage they received from some of the twentieth century’s most innovative Marxist thinkers.

*Spear*, the short-lived EB-produced series of pamphlets, first articulated League founders’ theory of change shortly after the body’s incorporation in the summer of 1969. In the year since its founding, RUM had spread to include a range of both autoworkers and Black workers from other industries: it now included ELRUM, the Eldon Avenue chapter with a membership that rivaled DRUM’s, FRUM, at Ford’s River Rouge complex, and even NEWRUM at Watson, Cockerel and Hamlin’s former employer, the *Detroit News*, to name just a few.<sup>95</sup> Members had organized yet more successful wildcat strikes, and RUM-supported candidates had achieved considerable margins in union elections. The growth in the RUM organizations, along with the development of the League, is reflected in *Spear*’s language. Featuring just two stories over the course of four pages, *Spear* laid out the purpose of the League, ways to disseminate its message

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<sup>93</sup> Johann Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6.3 (1969): 171.

<sup>94</sup> DRUM 2.2 (Detroit, Self Published: 1969): 4 and DRUM 3.1 (Detroit, Self Published, 1969): 3, respectively.

<sup>95</sup> Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 69-71.

via *Spear* and specific paths to involvement, while also outlining the strategic power of the Black worker.<sup>96</sup> The pieces describe a broader vision than previous RUM pamphlets or even much of the *ICV* material. Since *Spear* supplemented the various RUM publications, and also because the League now enjoyed a solid base of Black workers from across the city, its authors could afford to show more of their proverbial strategic cards. Moving away from a focus on strictly local concerns, *Spear* began to incorporate plant politics into a larger revolutionary program with actionable intermediary steps; in other words, League leaders had begun to publicly articulate the means towards an “organized general strike.” Notably, *Spear* also lacked the focus on armed struggle that characterized the RUM pamphlets. Lastly, *Finally Got the News* is the League’s fullest articulation of its theory of change and the most vivid picture of the organization. Having been produced and supervised by Black Star Productions and intended as a propaganda tool for a mass audience, the film—featuring lengthy interviews with John Watson, Mike Hamlin, Chuck Wooten, Ron March and Ken Cockerel—displays the theoretical analysis and constructive visions the EB intended to be seen and heard by an international audience. Naming themselves explicitly as Marxist-Leninists, League members are careful to point out their constant connection to the material conditions of the workplace. Compared to other League produced publications, including the “General Policy Statement”, *Finally Got the News* is the League’s most theoretical production and that least geared towards rank and file members.

The differences between RUM and the League’s publications should not be viewed as organizational incoherence, but rather as an acceptance of ideological diversity in pursuit of a Boggsian strategic vision. In 1966, Jimmy emphasized the crucial need to “[organize] struggle

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<sup>96</sup> *Spear* 1.1 (Detroit: Black Star Press, 1969): 1.

around the concrete grievances of the masses.”<sup>97</sup> This, he argued, was the key to consciousness raising, and thus to instilling the Black laborer’s revolutionary subjectivity as “the most oppressed and submerged section of the workers.”<sup>98</sup> In an industrial center like Detroit, where Black workers predominated in the auto industry’s workforce, such an analysis would have been all but unavoidable, especially to the autoworkers themselves. Given this, the League’s organizational core remained in the factories even as it diversified into other organizing projects.

John Watson explained:

“The kinds of actions which can be taken (in the community) are not as effectively damaging to the ruling class as the kinds of actions which can be taken in the plant...When you close down Hamtramck assembly plant...for a day you cost the Chrysler corporation 1,000 cars...also...you automatically can mobilize the people in the streets, 5,000 or 10,000 in a single blow...workers are not people who live in the factories 24 hours a day...It’s almost an inevitable and simultaneous development that as factory workers begin to get organized, support elements within the community are also organized.”<sup>99</sup>

The revolutionary subject, then, represents perhaps the fundamental divide between the League and the Panthers. Winning the support of Black workers in the auto sector superseded ideological purity as the League built its program. When League founders experimented with their messaging to factory workers in the summer of 1968, they relied both on popular conceptions of Black Power generated by the Panthers, as well as workers’ material concerns on the shop floor. Where the BPP sought ownership of the means of production in a Marxist sense, their interventions took place mainly at points of distribution and consumption through free breakfast programs, clinics and other services that sought to provide a simultaneous alternative to

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<sup>97</sup> James Boggs, “The City is the Black Man’s Land (1966),” in ed. Stephen Ward, *Pages from a Black Radical’s Notebook: A James Boggs Reader* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 168.

<sup>98</sup> Boggs, *The American Revolution*, 85.

<sup>99</sup> Geschwender, “League of Revolutionary Black Workers”, 9.

the state and a path towards consciousness.<sup>100</sup> Rejecting Socialism's traditional focus on the proletariat, Eldridge Cleaver articulated the Panthers' long-held Lumpen ideology in 1972: "the basic condition of the dispossessed people...is not the proletarian condition described by Marx, but the Lumpen condition."<sup>101</sup> Cleaver even went so far as to claim that "working class consciousness is beside the point."<sup>102</sup> Marx saw the Lumpen, or *lumpenproletariat*, as holding little revolutionary, but possibly counter-revolutionary potential; the "vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers...pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, [pimps], brothel keepers, porters...tinkers, beggars" were also those elements most likely to be drafted into a reactionary armed force. This was a tenant of Lumpen identity that the Panthers' heartily embraced.<sup>103</sup> To Huey Newton, the Lumpen were "an untapped army, potential urban soldiers in search of bold leaders."<sup>104</sup> In the Panthers' ideology, the "Brothers off the Block", then, were textbook *lumpenproletariat* in the most promising way possible. For the League, it was Detroit's auto factories and the workers who inhabited them which held the keys to dismantling both racism and industrial capitalism at their source.

Frustration with the practice of Lumpen ideology and the BPP's popular base in the "brothers off the block" was in part what led the Boggesses to pen 1969's *Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party* in an effort to understand the vital transition from rebellion to revolution.<sup>105</sup> Upon returning from a tour visiting theorists and activists abroad, the Boggesses found a "street

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<sup>100</sup> Alkeluban, *Survival Pending Revolution*, 42-43.

<sup>101</sup> Eldridge Cleaver, "Introduction to: 'On Lumpen Ideology' (1972)," *Anarchist Panther*, Web, Accessed Nov 15 2013.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1994): 73, 18 (respectively).

<sup>104</sup> Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour*, 209.

<sup>105</sup> Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, 33, 156.



force” of largely young Black men had developed throughout the city.<sup>106</sup> Lamenting the absorption of these youth into an ill-prepared Black Panther Party, Grace Lee recalls that

“Like everyone else, the founders of the Black Panther Party were not prepared for this flood of aspiring revolutionaries. Even if they had wanted to, they had not had the time to create a revolutionary philosophy or ideology and a structure and programs to develop the thousands who were knocking at their door. So they borrowed virtually intact Mao’s Little Red Book without distinguishing between what is appropriate in China, or a post-revolutionary situation, and what is appropriate in the United States or a potentially revolutionary situation. Forced into a virtual civil war with the police both by the impatience of members and by provocateurs sent into the organization to destroy it, the party began to fall apart. Countless party members were killed in raids and shootouts with the police, the FBI, and all too often with one another.”<sup>107</sup>

Similarly distraught over the Panthers’ relationship to state authorities, lawyer and main League organizer Kenneth Cockerel issued perhaps the League’s most scathing critique of the Panthers at a conference on repression in Philadelphia in 1971. In what could well be read as a direct response to the BPP, he addressed the idolization of state repression brought upon Black militant organizations. Cockerel denounced plainly “the nominal Black militant who...threatens to decimate the entire white population”, calling instead for the creation of a “political machine”—not unlike the Boggs’s proposed cadre-type revolutionary Black party—that is intent on seizing the state.<sup>108</sup> Believing firmly that committed revolutionaries should devote as much time as possible to the business of organizing, he continued: “We point proudly to the fact that we have functioned as a serious revolutionary organization for years and we have not one man in jail.”<sup>109</sup> While the League certainly faced repression from the state, they stopped short of

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<sup>106</sup> Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change, An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1998): 149.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>108</sup> Kenneth Cockerel, “On Repression: A Speech Delivered January 30, 1970” (Detroit: Black Star Publishing, 1970): 3.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

enacting the RUM pamphlets' more bombastic rhetoric and avoided the murders and lengthy jail sentences that unfortunately came to characterize the lives of many Panthers.<sup>110</sup>

Ken Cockerel and The League's approach to revolutionary organizing grew not simply out of ideological commitments, but also a desire to respond adequately to the political yearnings of post-rebellion Black Detroit. In a study performed just days after the riot, sociologists Singer, Osborn and Geschwender designed interviews for arrested riot participants as well as Black community members. While the team collected data on a number of subjects, the survey question most pertinent to the issue of ideology and popular participation was, "What is the best way to get civil rights?"<sup>111</sup> Results found that there was little correlation between what survey participants had done during the rebellion (i.e., what they were charged with by police) and their answer. Among the categories, "Self-improvement through institutions" ranked highest, accounting for 30.1 percent of community members and 23.9 percent of arrestees.<sup>112</sup> The next most popular answer was "Violence & Force", with 20.5 and 18.0 percent, respectively. The study also found that the majority of participants held blue-collar jobs, though it does not specify in what industry.<sup>113</sup> While Cockerel's and other League members' belief in state seizure existed long before the riot, that their program was able to successfully mobilize Black autoworkers in

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<sup>110</sup> On League repression, see Ernest Allen, "Dying From the Inside: The Decline of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers," 71-110 in Dick Cluster, ed. *They Should Have Served That Cup of Coffee* (Boston: South End Press, 1979).

<sup>111</sup> In the introduction to the study, researchers outline a number of flaws with the study; namely, the hasty nature with which it was drafted, performed and approved. For their full explanation see Singer, Osborn & Geschwender pgs 1-6. Importantly, the study relied on cooperation with police departments in and outside of Detroit that ingested riot participants. While it remains unclear what role the police played in selecting interview participants, researchers do note that they "did not in any way specify in advance any conditions concerning the interviews or the results of this research."

<sup>112</sup> Singer, Osborn & Geschwender, *Black Rioters*, 90.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

1968 should come as no surprise in light of this study. This alignment of program and conditions is intimately connected to League members' identities as longtime Detroit residents.

### **The Fall of the League**

Eventually, the League succumbed to a number of pressures. The Executive Board tasked with overseeing the organization gradually shrunk as members fell away from activism, left entirely or split off to pursue other projects, as Watson, Hamlin and Cockerel did in forming the Black Workers Congress.<sup>114</sup> There was no sole cause for the downfall of the League, only a series of contributing factors to which participants and observers have assigned varying levels of blame. Ernie Allen served as the League's political director after joining in 1970, writing in a 1979 reflection that the end of the League was due to internal rather than external division—distinct from the FBI's significant role in the Panthers' annihilation.<sup>115</sup> Still, ideological divisions played a large part in the group's demise: pervasive cultural nationalism among rank and file members contrasted sharply with the EB's Boggsian and Marxist-Leninist approach.<sup>116</sup> Often, this fell along class lines: at the time of the final split, auto workers Chuck Wooten and General Baker found themselves at odds with Watson, Cockerel, Forman and Hamlin, none of whom were employed in the factories.<sup>117</sup> This separation was in part due to the fact that the League's founders and Executive Board members had undergone a considerable process of political education that had never been offered to rank and file members. As Mike Hamlin remembers, "We had no meaningful political education program. We tried it a number of times

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<sup>114</sup> Ahmad, "The League of Revolutionary Black Workers."

<sup>115</sup> Allen, "Dying from the Inside", 76.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>117</sup> Ahmad, "League of Revolutionary Black Workers."

but it was sabotaged by...reactionary nationalists.”<sup>118</sup> Allen asserts too that attempts at political education were communicated in ways so esoteric that they failed to relate to the lived realities of most workers.<sup>119</sup> Allen, Max Stanford and James Geschwender all agree that a major factor in the League’s demise was an inability to translate its political and strategic analysis to the rank and file. For a young organization, the ideological diversity expressed mainly through a rhetorical diversity evident in League and RUM publications was promising for the willingness it showed to support workers’ entry into mobilization from a number of ideological positions. As the years progressed, however, the roles of the League as distinct from that of the rank and file became more entrenched, with each group drawn in different philosophical directions. Leaving behind “Group A” (for Akbar, or nationalist) members, “Group B” (for Bolshevik)—concentrated in the EB—pursued ventures away from “power at the point of production” without a clear structure for communicating that strategic shift back to workers.

Having formed out of a moment of spontaneity in the 1967 rebellion, the League was now faced with the challenge of sustaining an organization. Its development around the intense bond shared by a cadre of friends and comrades that had been working together for the better part of a decade meant that the League grew increasingly estranged from the workers and community members that the League sought to organize. That cadre decisive role in the founding of RUM organizations and the League cannot be underestimated, but, as Ahmed writes, they “[lacked] a comprehensive conceptual framework that [was] relevant to the living reality of the masses.”<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> “BWC Leader Looks at Past. Sees New Stage of Struggle, an Interview with Mike Hamlin,” *Guardian* (1973): 8-9.

<sup>119</sup> Allen, “Dying from the Inside,” 90.

<sup>120</sup> Ahmad, “League of Revolutionary Black Workers.”

## Conclusion

The RUMs and the later activities of the League are traditionally understood deterministically: *because* the conditions of Detroit were so dramatically different than in other cities, its Black Power organizing was, consequentially, necessarily different as well. Most accounts featuring the League prominently—*Class, Race and Worker Insurgency*, *Whose Detroit*, *Violence in the Model City*, “American Petrograd”—begin with recounting the economic conditions which pervaded Detroit at the time of the riots and of the League’s founding. The conditions, however, extend beyond the intersecting frames of economic segregation, police brutality and industrial unionism through which they are traditionally understood. Rather, League organizers also drew from a rich ideological and movement context that, while not disconnected from material conditions, considerably influenced the way they related to them. This essay is not an attempt at a comprehensive history of the riots, its precursors or the League and its affiliated organizations. It asks only the question Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. did in the same year as the rebellion: “Where do we go from here?”

Looking back on the League from 2013, it would be impossible to come to any conclusion about the League’s modern implications which argue that Black workers remain in the revolutionary vanguard; Eldridge Cleaver’s Lumpen approach today rings more true than it ever has. With just 9 percent of the workforce employed in manufacturing, neither Black nor any industrial workers represent the base of power they once did in the United States.<sup>121</sup> Eighty percent of US jobs are in the service sector, with the service industry itself representing 68% of

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<sup>121</sup> “Facts About Manufacturing in the United States,” *nam.org*, National Association of Manufacturers, Accessed Dec 1 2013, <<http://www.nam.org/Statistics-And-Data/Facts-About-Manufacturing/Landing.aspx>>.

the country's GDP.<sup>122</sup> The League's greatest strength was in knowing the conditions in which they operated; recognizing the ubiquity of the auto industry to Black workers in Detroit, a heightened post-rebellion revolutionary consciousness among Black Detroiters, as well as the everyday brutality of the factory floor. Their attention to the details of those conditions and willingness to structure their organizing program around them not only stemmed from the Boggses' teachings, but also meant that the League was successful in more ways than simply responding to a certain historical situation. The group's inborn connections between variant forms of oppression not only resonated powerfully with Black workers for a short time, but predated contemporary understandings of intersectionality and identity politics. Even before the invention of the term, the League created a thoroughly intersectional praxis that understood racial and class oppression as inseparable. As organizers today continually struggle to break down issue silos between racial, economic and environmental justice—to name just a few—the League provides us with an example of a group that never fit neatly into either the labor or Black Freedom movement, instead choosing to draw from the legacy of each.

Applying the lessons of the League to our current situation demands looking realistically at our own conditions, asking honestly what it means to build a mass movement in the absence of organized labor. Power at the point of production may well still apply as a promising framework for organizing, but “production” itself must be dramatically re-imagined for a largely post-industrial United States. Looking also to the future's looming ecological crisis, and very likely an economic one as well, contemporary activists might take inspiration from the League's ability to mobilize around moments of spontaneous popular unrest, the likes of which will only increase as

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<sup>122</sup> “Services,” *Office of the United States Trade Representative*, Executive Office of the President of the United States, Accessed Dec 1 2013, <<http://www.ustr.gov/trade-topics/services-investment/services>>.

the climate crisis accelerates, expanding outward to places and people previously untouched by the ravages of endless growth that for so long have been easily, dangerously hidden in the slow violence of combustion and extraction.<sup>123</sup> Though determining the nature of our current conditions is grounds for a study far more exhaustive than my own, as the League did we can learn from the strategies, successes, failures, ideas and visionaries of the past and—with any hope—chart our way forward alongside them.

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<sup>123</sup> For more on climate catastrophe and slow violence, see Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence* (New York: Nation Books, 2012) and Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).