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978-0-521-29191-0 - Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency: The League of Revolutionary
Black Workers

James A. Geschwender

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Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers

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The League of Revolutionary Black Workers

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For Laura Ellen

May she come to understand the nature of the struggle
May she choose to participate in her own time and her own way

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Preface

Several research techniques were utilized during the course of this project although not all lend themselves to ready classification in terms of standard textbook methods. I was a member of the sociology faculty at Wayne State University in Detroit from 1964 to 1968. During this period I came to know several of the principals involved in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers as either they or their wives were students in my classes. As a result I was able to observe at close hand the activities of Uhuru and its evolution into subsequent forms up to the time that DRUM was born. I spent the period from 1968 to 1970 at the University of Western Ontario in London (120 miles from Detroit) before moving to the State University of New York at Binghamton. I watched Detroit television stations and read Detroit newspapers in London, Ontario, and thus kept up with media coverage of League developments. I received a more intimate picture of developments through personal communications, visits to Detroit, informal discussions and formal interviews with participants.

It is not proper to classify me either as a participant observer or an objectively neutral observer. The League of Revolutionary Black Workers was a black Marxist–Leninist organization. I would have been excluded from membership or active participation on the grounds of race even if I had met all other requirements. I was able to gain access to conduct the research eventuating in this monograph because several members of the executive committee knew me and my orientations. They recognized me as a Marxist and were somewhat familiar with my orientations as a result of classroom lectures and out-of-class discussions. We were able to relate to one another as Marxists and engaged in discussions as to the proper tactics and strategy for a Marxist–Leninist organization. I never interacted with members of the League as a white giving advice to a black organization as to the correct line of struggle for black liberation. However, I did interact with them as a Marxist discussing the correct line of struggle for a Marxist–Leninist organization

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to follow as part of the larger proletarian struggle. It was not until the fall of 1970 that I finally decided to write a historical analysis of the League. This decision was communicated to all concerned as soon as it was made.

I developed an understanding of the historical evolution of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers through observation and discussion. This was supplemented by some formal interviews, by reading all items written about the League by either movement people or journalists, and by reading as much of the League's own writings as was available. I managed to collect a virtually complete set of the DRUM newsletters, a slightly less complete set of ELRUM newsletters, some newsletters from FRUM and other revolutionary union movements, most copies of the *Inner City Voice*, as well as a set of League pamphlets.

I have adopted a somewhat unusual strategy of citations for material incorporated as part of the following presentation. In many cases I will cite an article or interview written by someone else as the source for information of which I have independent knowledge. I do this so that the interested reader may more readily check a source and see the context in which a particular statement was made. This technique enables me to have confidence in the veracity of the quote because I have independently ascertained the same information. The alternative strategy of citing myself as source for this information would make it more difficult for the interested reader to determine whether a particular statement was correctly interpreted or cited out of context.

I have utilized two additional checks on the accuracy of my accounts and interpretations. A first draft of this material was prepared in 1973 and sent to several key members of the League and to a representative of the UAW International leadership. I then interviewed these persons regarding their perception of the accuracy of the manuscript. A second draft was completed in 1974 and subjected to the same treatment. I carefully considered and responded to all suggestions of factual error. I also carefully considered, but was less responsive to, suggestions of errors in my interpretations. I believe that it is my responsibility as a scholar to get the historical record straight and to make my own interpretations in light of that record and in relation to a theoretical focus. I have sometimes departed from strict literal accuracy in reproducing quotes from revolutionary union movement literature. I retained their own expressions but sometimes corrected misspellings. I believe that there is nothing to gain by using the traditional "sic" indication next

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to spelling errors. That procedure subjects persons to needless embarrassment without corresponding profit.

I should also state that this monograph does not represent the account of a disinterested or dispassionate observer. I have retained some of my contacts with League members to the present. I had, and have, a positive emotional tie to the League and its members. I am firmly convinced that the United States is in dire need of a basic transformation of the type that can only be brought about by an organized body of workers consciously struggling in their own collective interests. I believe that black workers occupy a position in the American system of production that makes it inevitable that they will play a prominent role in any such change-oriented movement. Thus I have conducted the following analysis of the career of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers development, partially because of the importance of the League as a social and historical development, partially because of what it reveals about the nature of racial stratification in America, and also partially because of what may be learned for future use. If we can determine the set of factors that contributed to the growth of the League, and the set that contributed to its demise, then it may be possible to build a stronger and more successful worker's movement in the future.

I would like to state at this point that *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency* was not my original choice for a title. I had wished to use as a title, *But the Beat Goes On: An Analytic History of DRUM and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers*. I chose that title because of the various connotations and symbolisms associated with it. The phrase "but the beat goes on" is often used in Detroit to refer to the almost ceaseless pounding of the assembly lines that produce so many of the nation's cars. This has an obvious tie-in to the content of this monograph. Beat also bears an obvious relation to DRUM as an organizational name and the use of drums to decorate the DRUM newsletters. But I really wished to convey far more than this. I wanted to convey the notion that DRUM and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers may have been the organizational forms that embodied the beat of black worker militance during the time of their existence but that they were neither its cause nor the only possible vehicle for this expression. Chapter 11 of this work demonstrates that the "beat" of black worker militance continued to find expression in rebellion even after DRUM and the League disappeared from the scene. At the publisher's request, I selected the

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present title so that the content of the book might be clarified for an international audience. Although it is an adequate title, it does not convey the meaning or have the impact of my original choice, "But The Beat Goes On."

It is impossible ever to acknowledge all the debts one incurs in conducting research of this nature. I owe a great debt to all members of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, who proved to be so cooperative and helpful. To single out any individuals for special citation is to run the risk of omitting others who should also be mentioned. Nevertheless, I would be derelict if I failed to thank Ken Cockrel, Luke Tripp, John Watson, and John Williams for having been especially helpful. I am also grateful for the cooperation of Jordan Sims of the United National Caucus, and Homer Jolly and Douglas Fraser of the United Automobile Workers. The staff of the Detroit public library was extremely helpful as was the staff of the Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University.

Portions of the material included within this monograph were previously published in *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* 2:2 (Fall 1974) and in Raymond L. Hall (ed.), *Black Separatism and Social Reality: Rhetoric and Reason* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1977). These materials are included herein with the permission of the original publishers.

Many persons have been kind enough to read various drafts of this monograph and to make suggestions that substantially improved its quality. These include, in alphabetical order: William H. Form, Barbara N. Geschwender, Martin Glaberman, Lewis M. Killian, Arthur Liebman, James Petras, James Rinehart, Elliott Rudwick, Theda Skocpol, and Immanuel Wallerstein. Patricia Dolaway made an invaluable contribution in typing and editing various drafts. I am also indebted to the Research Foundation of The State University of New York for funding a portion of the research involved in preparing this monograph.

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Abbreviations

AFL	American Federation of Labor
BSUF	Black Student United Front
BEDC	See NBEDC
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
CRU	The Committee for Real Unionism
DRUM	Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement
ELRUM	Eldon Avenue Revolutionary Union Movement
FRUM	Ford Revolutionary Union Movement
GOAL	Group on Advanced Leadership
HUAC	House Un-American Activities Committee
IBA	International Black Appeal
IFCO	Inter-Religious Foundation for Community Organization
KKK	Ku Klux Klan
LSDF	National Black Labor Strike and Defense Fund
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples
NAC	Negro Action Committee
NBEDC	National Black Economic Development Conference, later simply called Black Economic Development Conference (BEDC)
NIRA	National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933
NLRB	National Labor Relations Board
NRA	National Rifle Association
PASCC	Parents and Students for Community Control
RAM	Revolutionary Action Movement
SDS	Students for a Democratic Society
SMSA	Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area
SNCC	Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee
TUEL	Trade Union Educational League
TULC	Trade Union Leadership Conference
TUUL	Trade Union Unity League
UNC	United National Caucus
WCO	West Central Organization
YSA	Young Socialist Alliance