

## Chapter Two

# Our Thing Is DRUM

## 1

*There will always be people who are willing to work the 10-12 hour day, and we're going to look for them. . . .*

James Roche, President, General Motors Corporation,  
quoted in William Serrin, *The Company and the Union*,  
1973

Chrysler Corporation, Detroit's single largest taxpayer and employer, is among the seven largest corporations in the United States. Since the end of World War II, like the entire auto industry, Chrysler has experienced wild fluctuations of sales, profits, and capital investments. Companies such as Hudson, Nash, Fraser, Briggs, Kaiser, and Packard did not survive the boom-and-bust cycle and were liquidated or bought out. Even GM, the patriarch of the auto industry and the world's largest private employer, made more capital investments in terms of real money in 1956 than it did fifteen years later. More cars were produced by the industry in 1950, 1955, 1960, and 1965 than in 1970. Chrysler suffered more from the roller-coaster economic pattern than the other auto makers, for a number of reasons. Originally distinguished by superior engineering, Chrysler let its standards fall, settled for

*Opposite page: A DRUM-led demonstration at the UAW convention, November 1969.*

being a style-follower instead of a style-setter, and made poor domestic and foreign investments. This poor corporate record was capped by a management scandal in the late fifties that nearly drove Chrysler into bankruptcy. In spite of these developments, Chrysler still had some outstanding profit years; and in Detroit, the prosperity of Chrysler was crucial to the prosperity of the city itself.

By the late fifties significant numbers of Americans had begun to buy well-built, small, inexpensive foreign cars, but the auto industry resisted the trend and continued its traditional policy of making big cars with high-priced (and highly profitable) accessories. Each new "compact" from Detroit tended to grow larger and less economical after its first year of sales. Instead of producing a single model that could be built for a number of years with increasing reliability, Detroit insisted on the annual model changeover, which put a premium on visual rather than engineering changes. Gas consumption per mile increased steadily. Cars were designed for quick obsolescence, and parts were designed to be replaced rather than repaired. The recall of cars for defects in production, a rare event in earlier periods, became routine in the sixties and was a symbol of falling standards. The industry began to suffer from a saturated American market and from a host of problems related to advanced middle age, yet it still directly or indirectly employed one out of six Americans. Auto production remained a cornerstone of the U.S. economy.

The difficult postwar decades had brought one tremendous advantage to the Big Three (GM, Ford, and Chrysler): a chance to counter the effects of unionism. Frightened by the radical spirit and mass actions of the late thirties, the Big Three made a deal with the UAW after the war. Their overriding managerial concern was maximizing profits, and the prime condition for doing that in the auto industry was control of the shop floor. All operations had to be evaluated in terms of worker-hour and worker-minute costs. Time-study experts investigated each job to eliminate wasted motion and to invent new procedures for increasing the work load. A worker at the GM plant at Lordstown explained the process in an

interview printed in the September 9, 1973, issue of the *New York Times*: "They tell you, 'Put in 10 screws,' and you do it. Then a couple of weeks later they say, 'Put in 15 screws,' and next they say, 'Well, we don't need you no more; give it to the next man.' " This worker was giving a specific example of the way management tried to systematize speed-up on an unprecedented scale. Sometimes the entire assembly line was accelerated either on a permanent basis or for temporary periods. Sometimes the number of operations required of a single person was increased. And sometimes workers were forced to keep up with the precise rhythms of a new machine or tool. Management could not get back to the "good old days" of Henry Ford when workers were not allowed to talk during lunch; but washing-up times, rest periods, job-preparation periods, and other paid nonproduction times were reduced. The net result of all facets of speed-up was that more labor was extracted from each person during each working hour. This increased tempo of work was not confined to a forty-hour week. The companies discovered that the savings from not paying fringe benefits to additional workers made it cheaper for them to pay time-and-a-half rates for overtime than to increase the total workforce. Compulsory overtime was enforced throughout the industry during the fifties. Auto workers were made to work one to four hours overtime after finishing their regular eight-hour shift, and many were made to work on Saturdays and occasionally on Sundays.

The union acquiesced to company demands and was rewarded by support in dealing with its own internal problems. One form of support was that the companies collected union dues directly from the workers' paychecks, freeing the union from the worker's tactic of withholding dues if dissatisfied with union performance. Company and union amiability went so far that, during the GM strike of 1970, the company allowed the union to delay payment of \$46 million into the health-insurance program because of the enormous financial burden that would place on the union. GM was paid 5 percent interest by the union after the strike was over. In effect, the company had floated the union a loan in the middle of the strike

and thus financed a work stoppage against itself. Such cooperation found further expression in three- and five-year contracts with which the mutual interests of company and union were insulated from annual crisis. The chief consequence of the long contracts was that there would be no work stoppages of any kind. Any unauthorized (wildcat) strike could be punished by the courts as a breach of contract, pitting the offending workers against the union as well as the company. William Serrin, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning reporter of the *Detroit Free Press*, summed up union-management relations in his 1973 book, *The Company and the Union*:

What the companies desire—and receive—from the union is predictability in labor relations. Forced to deal with unions, they want to deal with one union, one set of leaders, and thus they have great interest in stability within the UAW and in a continuation of union leadership. They also want to have the limits of the bargaining clearly understood and subscribed to. "GM's position has always been, give the union the money, the least possible, but give them what it takes," says a former negotiator. "But don't let them take the business away from us." The union has come to accept this philosophy as the basis of its relationship with the companies: it will get money, some changes in work procedures, usually nothing more. "We make collective bargaining agreements," Reuther once declared, "not revolutions." Both the union and the companies, a mediator says, have one major goal: "They want to make cars at a profit."

The only weapon left to the worker was the grievance procedure. If a job was speeded up or an extra procedure added, if safety goggles or gloves were inadequate, if a machine malfunctioned, the worker could not fight it out on the factory floor in a direct confrontation with a supervisor. The worker could only write out the complaint, file it with the union "rep," and wait

the complaint to be processed. Meanwhile, whatever the new procedures or safety violations might be, they remained in effect unless they were gross enough to trigger a walkout by all the workers. The grievance procedure became yet another device by which company and union eliminated worker participation in decision-making. The companies and the union had developed a division of labor. The companies looked after the machines, and the union looked after the workers. American auto workers were told by their mass media that they had one of the world's highest standards of living. They were not told that they also had one of the world's highest and most gruelling standards of work.

The company-union agreements meant that American factories remained unnecessarily noisy, unhealthy, and dangerous. Rather than retooling or rebuilding, the corporations, especially Chrysler, tended to just patch up. White-collar workers in management considered air conditioning in summer and heating in winter to be matters of course; but in the shop temperatures in summer could soar to 120° in some departments, while in the winter they fell to near freezing in others. Compulsory overtime meant that workers had to put in nine to twelve hours a day, six and seven days a week, at such factories. Safety infractions and contract violations mounted, but the grievance procedure was a joke. By 1970, there were 250,000 written grievances at GM alone, or one for every two workers. It didn't matter if a worker was employed at GM's new Lordstown plant, publicized as a model of progress and modernity, or at cranky old Dodge Main. Ultramodern Lordstown had a roof that leaked whenever there was a hard rain, and Dodge Main had been declared a fire hazard as early as 1948. Conditions in the auto factories of the sixties were as bad as they had been in the days before the union. George B. Morris, Jr., a GM Vice-President and Director of Labor Relations, explained the situation in *The Unions*, a 1972 book by Haynes Johnson and Nick Kotz, Pulitzer-Prize-winning reporters working for the *Washington Post*: "I guess it was understandable when the unions were beginning to organize that they had to be militant and aggressive. And they adopted a vernacular vocabulary that was militaristic,

aggressive, and inculcated into the minds of their constituents this idea of conflict, of war between the classes, between the worker and the employer: Hell, that day is gone. That's like nickel beer and button shoes. It's gone."

## 2

*Few industries, if any, can match the auto industry in terms of the vast array of poisonous chemicals, gases, and other health and safety hazards which its workers are exposed to daily.*

Jannette Sherman, M.D., and Sidney Wolfe, M.D.,  
*Health Research Group Study of Disease among Workers in the Auto Industry*, September 1973

A new explosive element in the factories of the late sixties was the presence of a quarter of a million black workers. Except for Ford, which had a special policy of using large numbers of blacks as an anti-union ploy, none of the auto companies hired many black workers until the labor shortages of World War II. At that time, blacks, mainly fresh from the South, were hired by the tens of thousands. Chrysler's number of black women employees went from zero in 1941 to 5000 by 1945. Detroit blacks often wisecracked that Tojo and Hitler had done more for the emancipation of black labor than Lincoln and Roosevelt. Many of these new jobs were taken away in the recessions of the fifties. To cite Chrysler again, there were years when no blacks were hired at any plants. The company's blue-collar force fell from 100,000 to 35,000 and its white-collar force declined by 7000. Other com-

panies were in no better shape. In the General Motors Building in midtown Detroit there were two black workers out of a force of 3500.

When the auto industry staged a comeback in the early sixties, blacks began to be rehired. Since Ford and GM had moved most of their operations out of Detroit in various decentralization schemes, the bulk of the new black workers in Detroit were employed by Chrysler. They invariably got the worst and most dangerous jobs: the foundry, the body shop, and engine assembly, jobs requiring the greatest physical exertion and jobs which were the noisiest, dirtiest, and most dangerous in the plant. Blacks were further abused by the 90-day rule, under which workers could be dismissed at will before coming under full contract protection. The companies made it a practice to fire hundreds of workers per week, creating a rotating and permanent pool of insecure job seekers. The UAW was kept at bay on the issue because it received a \$20 initial fee and \$21 in dues for each 89-day worker. The companies also received poverty-program fees for the purpose of "training" parolees and welfare recipients. These individuals were often blacks and they were usually put on the least desirable jobs. Any protest could mean an end to government aid and possibly a return to prison.

The exploitation experienced by all workers was compounded for black workers by the institutional racism which pervaded every aspect of factory life. Dodge Main was typical: 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. All the better jobs were overwhelmingly dominated by whites, and when whites did have difficult jobs, there were often two workers assigned to a task that a black worker was expected to do alone. The company was not even subtle in its discrimination. Sick notes signed by black doctors were refused as inadequate. Organizations like DRUM emphasized how the company deliberately cultivated and institutionalized racism in order

that white workers and black workers would face their workaday lives in racial conflict with one another rather than in class solidarity.

The large majority of white workers at Dodge Main were Polish-Americans. They tended to dominate the union and to hold the better jobs. Many of them were immigrants or first-generation Americans who had acquired negrophobia as part of their Americanization. The plant itself was located in Hamtramck, an independent city totally within the city limits of Detroit, and a city that had a Polish population larger than that of Poznan. Hamtramck was run by a Polish-dominated city government and a Polish-dominated police force. In addition, the Poles voted Democratic by margins of 70-90 percent, and their voter turnout was very high. This gave them enormous power in the Democratic Party, which needed to carry the Detroit metropolitan area heavily in order to win elections in what was otherwise a Republican state. The political power of the UAW was closely linked to its ability to get out the vote in areas like Hamtramck. The Polish-Americans did not like working conditions at Dodge Main any better than the blacks did, but they had a power base in the union and in the local government that made them concerned with the prosperity of Chrysler as well. They had no apparent option but to view their own vested interests as interlocked with the vested interests of an already interlocked system of company, union, and government.

The Polish-Americans had the reputation of being a conservative force. This conservatism, like the so-called conservatism of other white ethnic groups, was often a defensive response to deteriorating social conditions in urban life. Seeing hard-won gains threatened by increasing insecurity at work, inflation, and crime in the streets, many white ethnics began to act defensively in support of what they considered their own interests. In fact, however, the Polish-American politicians in the Democratic Party were often New Deal liberals who fought for progressive social legislation, especially legislation affecting the working class. Earlier in the century, the Polish-Americans and Eastern Europeans had a tradition of being associated with the most



progressive social movements. Even in the 1960s, Hamtramck still had a Polish-language communist newspaper and a restaurant which was a well-known meeting place for leftists; but these were only remnants of a former activism that had been effectively submerged in a climate of fear and insecurity.

The only other identifiable groups of workers of significant size were the white Appalachians and the Arabs. The Appalachians had come to the North from the states of Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia at pretty much the same time as the blacks. They too tended to cluster in ghettos, to attend inferior schools, and to move back and forth to the South as employment waxed and waned. Factory conditions were not much better for them than for blacks, but racist feelings kept the two groups effectively divided most of the time. The independent, individualistic hill people were unpredictable, however. They liked the liberal Kennedy brothers, and they also liked George Wallace and the Ku Klux Klan. They fought blacks all the time; but during the Great Rebellion, they had joined blacks for looting purposes, and an amazed Detroit Police Department had discovered that the majority of captured snipers were not blacks, but white "hillbillies."

Possibly the only group exploited more than blacks at Dodge Main was the recently immigrated Arabs. In 1968 they already numbered 500, and in the next six years that number would multiply fourfold. These workers were often totally confused by American conditions, and they were fearful of losing their jobs or being deported. The bulk of them were men who lived alone and sent most of their pay to relatives in the Middle East. A 1972 bulletin put out by Spark, a radical organization at Dodge Main, described the situation:

Chrysler figures that no one will try to help an Arab worker when Chrysler attacks him. So now Chrysler is attacking. Foremen tell Arab workers to do more work than their jobs call for. Eventually the "extra" work is "officially" added to the job. Other Arab workers are kept as floaters and continually put on the worst jobs.

*despite* their seniority. Medical passes get put off. Reliefs are forgotten about. . . .

It's the same kind of shit they have pulled for years with black people. At first, black people were given work *only* when Chrysler was trying to break a strike. Chrysler consciously set white workers against black workers—both fighting for the same job, during the desperate high unemployment of the Depression, when there was no union.

Then when Chrysler finally did hire black workers regularly into the plant, it was *only* in the foundry (or the Body Shop a little later)—all the hot, heavy dirty work around. . . .

Then in the fifties, the company finally figured it could get a greater advantage by letting black workers go on the line in other parts of the plant. And most white workers in the plant were suckered into the company's plan—most of the whites sat down, to protest that black people were coming onto the line. . . .

Now today, Chrysler is trying the same thing again—bringing in still another group of workers. Chrysler hopes to make conditions worse for all of us by first attacking conditions for the Arab workers. And they count on turning us against each other so they can do this.

The composition of the workforce at Dodge Main was indicative of the workforce throughout the city. The older, established work group was made up of European immigrant stock, while the newer force contained blacks, white Appalachians, Arabs, and other, nonwhite minorities. Facile analysts often stated that the older force was conservative and the younger radical. While this was true as a vague rule of thumb, there were many serious exceptions and qualifications. The older workforce, for instance, tended to be far more union-minded and was less intimidated by corporate threats than some of the new force. Young white workers in the

skilled trades could be just as socially conservative as their fathers and mothers. Yet Local 160 of the GM Technical Center, representing 4000 mainly white skilled workers with the highest-paying jobs, was among the most militant locals in the UAW. Its members dropped nails, snarled traffic, and formed car barricades during the 1970 GM strike, and it was the only unit to defy a UAW directive to allow certain technical personnel through the union lines. Local 160 was also the base of Belfast-born Pete Kelly, one of the two chairmen of the United National Caucus, a multi-plant organization opposed to the UAW leadership and advocating worker control of the shop floor. Conversely, some young blacks who were quick to clench their fists and shout "Right on!" proved less reliable and militant in the long run than some older black workers schooled in patience and in the skills of protracted struggle. Black or white, young or old, male or female, the workers on the shop floor were angry, yet the UAW offered no solutions. An agitational leaflet put out by workers at Chrysler's Eldon Avenue plant in March 1971 quoted UAW President Leonard Woodcock as having told reporters: "If some company says to us tomorrow, 'Okay, you take it, humanize the plant,' we wouldn't know where to start. . . . We don't have the answers."

### 3

*I never went on a strike in my life, I never ordered anyone else to run a strike in my life, I never had anything to do with the picket line. . . . In the final analysis, there is not a great deal of difference between the things I stand for and the things that the National Association of Manufacturers stands for.*

George Meany, President of the AFL-CIO, in a speech to the National Association of Manufacturers, 1956

By the late sixties, the UAW had lost touch with its mass base, especially its minorities. At least 30 percent of the UAW membership was black, yet the 26-person executive board had only two blacks, Nelson Jack Edwards\* and Marcellius Ivory. In 1969, blacks filled only seven out of one hundred key staff positions. Fourteen percent of the UAW membership was female, yet women had even fewer posts than blacks and only one representative on the executive board, Olga Madar. Once considered the cutting edge of militant industrial unionism, the UAW showed little interest in organizing the numerous nonunion feeder shops in the industry, in moving for unionization in the South, or in fighting for substantial gains such as forty hours' pay for thirty hours' work. Walter Reuther, President of the union until a fatal plane crash on May 9, 1970, Vice-President Leonard Woodcock, and Secretary-Treasurer Emil Mazey had once belonged to the Socialist Party; but they had grown distant from dissident social movements, and they had come to power within the UAW by leading a purge of Communist Party members and sympathizers. Reuther, who had once run for Congress as a Socialist and who had worked in a Soviet auto plant, did not like the militants of SNCC, the white radicals of Students for a Democratic Society, or peace marchers who insulted the nation's President. Rather than honest-to-goodness slugfests with the corporations, Reuther staged elaborate rituals in which neither side was badly hurt. He enjoyed having his photo taken embracing nonviolent activists such as Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez; but under his leadership the UAW did little to combat racism, anti-Semitism, or sexism, either within its own ranks or where it had influence. *Detroit Free Press* reporter William Serrin made the trenchant comment that the UAW was a right-of-center union with a left-of-center reputation.

Reuther died in a plane crash en route to the \$23-million Black Lake educational and recreational center which was the obsession of his later years. The center's price tag had swelled enormously

\*Edwards was fatally shot on November 2, 1974, when he tried to break up an argument at a west-side Detroit bar.

from original estimates, and most of the financing was arranged without the approval of the union membership or the executive board. Angry DRUM leaflets attacked the project as symptomatic of what the union hierarchy thought was important. DRUM pointed out that at maximum the complex could accommodate 600 people at a time. At that rate, it would be 7 1/2 years before all of the 1 million UAW members had a chance to spend one day at the resort, even if they went alone. Just one guest per member would double the time to 15 years. The center was obviously not intended for the workers' use at all, but as a hideaway for UAW executives and their inner circle.

Black Lake was only one gross example of how the UAW leaders acted like corporate executives. The executive-board members drew salaries comparable to those of industry officials, and they affected the lifestyles of their business counterparts, even though they had begun their careers as production workers. Corporate headquarters was the sleek Solidarity House, built on the Detroit River at a cost of over \$6 million and having a healthy annual maintenance budget.

Like all business ventures, the UAW had labor troubles. In March 1971, custodial and secretarial workers went on strike, demanding pay increases of approximately \$11 a week. The strike lasted three weeks; and just as important an issue as the wage increase, which was \$3 more than the UAW wanted to pay, was the reputed paternalism of the UAW leadership. In *The Company and the Union* William Serrin quotes Emil Mazey as calling the striking women "little bitches." Other officials called the 400 strikers "greedy," "blackmailers," "unrealistic," "selfish," and "pea-brained women." The heads of the UAW crossed the picket lines every day. Their only concession to collective bargaining was to inform all nonstriking staff members and workers that they could honor the picket lines without fear of union retaliation, although, of course, they would receive no pay if they did so.

The UAW had a national reputation for having a progressive stance on racism, but the UAW looked good only when compared to the lily-white and stridently racist unions which composed so

much of the organized labor movement. Racism had always been used as a weapon against unions in the auto industry, and Henry Ford had systematized the practice. Beginning in the late 1920s, Ford made it a rule to employ blacks in his factory at every job level in the same percentage as that of the blacks in the general population. Ford helped finance the all-black suburb of Inkster and always provided low-paying jobs to any unemployed residents. This new-style "plant-ation" owner also cultivated a select group of black clergy and professionals. Ford was called a humanitarian for some of these actions, but his motives were strictly business ones. His personal views on blacks, Jews, communists, and other "un-American" elements were expressed in the *Dearborn Independent*, a paper he owned and personally financed for more than a decade, even though it lost more than \$5 million. Ford considered the Jews to be the world's major problem, and in 1938 he went to Nazi Germany to accept an Iron Cross from Adolph Hitler. Dearborn, the city which Ford built, the home of the mammoth River Rouge complex, and the headquarters of the Ford empire, prohibited black residents. As late as 1970, Orville Hubbard, Dearborn's Mayor since 1940, regularly used the word "nigger" in his public utterances.

Ford Motor Company was the last major auto firm to be unionized, and Ford's black policy was a factor in the delay. Most of the 10,000 black workers at Ford participated in the final organizing strike which began on April 1, 1941; but Ford's hand-picked coterie of black "leaders" agitated for black workers to break the strike. On April 3 one group of approximately 800 black workers made three serious physical assaults on the UAW lines in what was the only genuine worker resistance to the union. Racial antagonism and suspicion did not end with the strike. Two years later, Detroit erupted in the worst race riot in the history of the United States; and long after World War II had ended, white workers staged walkouts whenever a factory or a department hired its first blacks. The corporations had virtually no black officials, and the situation in the UAW wasn't much better.

The strongest organized attack on racism within the auto industry came with the formation of TULC (Trade Union Leadership

Conference) by angry black unionists in 1957. The major leaders were Horace Sheffield and Buddy Battle, activists from the giant Local 600 at Ford's River Rouge plant. Viewed with alarm by most of the union leadership at first, TULC eventually became part of the bureaucracy, although it often took independent political approaches, especially in the area of Detroit elections. TULC became instrumental in getting out a large vote for liberal Jerome Cavanagh in the 1961 contest in which Cavanagh unseated Louis Miriani, the latest in a series of conservative, police-oriented mayors. TULC had a membership of 9000 at times, and it was consulted by the mayor, industrial executives, and leaders of various unions. TULC hoped to win jobs for black apprentices in the skilled trades and otherwise to advance the cause of black job upgrading and equal pay for equal work. In 1963, in a totally peaceful March for Freedom, Martin Luther King led some 200,000 mainly black Detroiters in a mammoth walk down Woodward Avenue, Detroit's main thoroughfare. Twenty years after the bloody 1943 race riot, Detroit gave the appearance of a commitment to racial harmony. King, Cavanagh, Reuther, and a host of dignitaries locked arms to achieve a local victory in the land of the New Frontier.

But the New Frontier kept receding into a forever-deferred tomorrow. The all-white unions and the all-white skilled trades remained all white. Blacks were sent to die in Vietnam in the name of democracy when they couldn't buy a home in Dearborn, Grosse Pointe, Warren, or many other Detroit suburbs. The most minor reforms met resistance from the companies, the union, and white workers. When DRUM's first leaflets addressed the question of unresolved black grievances, the UAW viewed the group as another bellicose rank-and-file caucus, a more radical version of TULC. B. J. Widick, a former union official associated with progressive leadership in the UAW, wrote DRUM off in his *Detroit—City of Race and Class Violence*, as simply "an important symptom of frustration among black workers over the lack of progress within plants." He thought DRUM "allowed social steam to blow off harmlessly." Emil Mazey didn't think DRUM was quite so harmless. He said the black revolutionaries rep-

resented the most dangerous radical thrust since the 1930s, and he was instrumental in having 350,000 letters sent to Detroit-area UAW members accusing DRUM of being a hate organization whose purpose was to divide the working class along racial lines.

Both Widick and Mazey were mistaken in their major premise that DRUM was a caucus. DRUM was not a caucus, at least not a caucus of the type the UAW had dealt with for thirty years. Caucuses fought within the union for control of the union. The United National Caucus, led by Pete Kelly of the GM Tech Center and Jordan Sims, a black worker at the Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle plant, hoped eventually to supplant the Reuther-Woodcock machine with their own. DRUM was something else. It bypassed the UAW to organize workers directly into a structure dedicated to principles which went far beyond simple trade unionism. DRUM's earliest leaflets stated its goals of gaining direct representation of black workers. More like the IWW of an earlier generation of radicals than like a trade union, DRUM had many aspects of a popular revolutionary movement that could go in many directions. Although not always clear about its tactical methods or all of its strategic goals, DRUM was an illustration of what James Boggs had written in 1963 in *The American Revolution*: "Historically workers move ahead by the new. That is, they bypass existing organizations and form new ones uncorrupted by past habits and customs." DRUM had no intention of sharing the economic pie with Chrysler, and it had no interest in making cars for a profit. DRUM wanted workers to have all the pie and to produce goods only for social needs. DRUM concentrated its organizing efforts on black workers, but it was conscious of the long-term necessity of organizing all workers. Its immediate program was a combination of demands for the elimination of racial discrimination and demands for workers' control, which would be beneficial to all workers, regardless of race, sex, or age. DRUM publications regularly stated that the organization was working in the best long-term interests of all workers and that the overall struggle must be fought on class rather than racial lines.

For years, Detroiters had heard conservative Fulton Lewis, Jr.,



spar in back-to-back newscasts with the UAW's Guy Nunn. Lewis made the union sound like a dangerous and radical threat to "the American way of life," while Nunn made it sound like the fearless champion of every righteous cause in America. The programs were on the same radio station which brought Detroiters adventure stories like "Captain Midnight" and "Sergeant Preston of the Canadian Northwest Mounted Police." Like these serials, the hoopla about the illustrious UAW was mostly a matter of sound effects. The business of the company executives had always been the business of maximizing profits. They viewed the city and its people as a corporate resource. The business of the union executives had become labor control. They viewed the city and its people as a union resource. In the auto industry, as in so many industries, the company was the senior partner and the union the junior partner. A worker with a decade of seniority in the plants wrote an article for the October 1970 issue of *ICV* explaining the formation of DRUM in the context of this company and union partnership:

More than an opportunist officialdom, the working class suffers from the conversion of the institution of the union itself into a part of the boss' apparatus. The sacred contract, once viewed as the register of the workers' gains, has become the written record of their subordination to the power of capital. The seniority system, once a defense against favoritism and arbitrary firing, has been adapted to give legal force to the white male monopoly of the better jobs. The automatic dues check-off system has removed the union entirely from any dependence on its membership. The huge treasuries, originally conceived to stockpile ammunition for class warfare, have put the unions in the banking, real estate, and insurance business. The closed shop has become the token of wholesale selfishness.

In this wasteland of labor's twisted hopes, where else could redemption come than from among those whose

interests were at every turn sacrificed so that another, more favored group could make its peace with the masters? Where else, indeed, but from among the black workers at the automobile manufacturing infernos of the city of Detroit?

## 4

*Assuming control of the means of production essentially means that you are at the first stage of assuming state power.*

John Watson, interview in *Fifth Estate*, July 1969

The wildcat of May 1968 at Dodge Main was followed by a flurry of plant bulletins put out by DRUM. A series of meetings, demonstrations, and actions attracted hundreds of workers from Dodge Main and surrounding factories. The May strike had involved both black and white workers concerned about speed-up, but the administrative punishments were directed primarily at blacks, causing a swelling of black support for DRUM. In the sixth week of its official existence, DRUM demonstrated its strength by calling for a boycott of two bars outside the plant gates that were patronized by blacks but did not hire blacks and practiced other, subtle forms of racial discrimination. Near-unanimous cooperation quickly brought the desired concessions without the use of pickets, signs, or violence.

Three weeks later, DRUM attracted over 300 workers to a rally held at a parking lot across from the factory. After speeches from DRUM leaders, the workers, accompanied by a number of neighborhood groups and a conga band, formed a line and marched to the headquarters of UAW Local 3, two blocks away.

The panic-stricken executive board opened the union auditorium and listened to criticisms aimed at the company and the union. Unsatisfied with the cliches that President Ed Liska and Vice-President Charles Brooks, a black, responded with, DRUM stated it would close Dodge Main in defiance of the union contract.

The following morning, a Friday, workers were met at the gates by DRUM pickets who told them the situation. No attempt was made to interfere with whites, and the majority of white workers entered the factory. Many others honored the picket line out of years of working-class savvy. Sympathetic or not, they went home. Some 3000 black workers did not go home or into the factory. They stood outside the gates as production all but halted. At noon, six DRUM members went to the local to meet with Liska and other officials. They presented their grievances a second time, emphasizing that having only 72 blacks out of a union-wide total of more than a thousand paid union representatives was unacceptable to black workers. The UAW was expected to change its ways and to change them rapidly. The demands were then read to the striking workers as police began to arrive in sufficient numbers to make trouble. DRUM dispersed the strikers after organizing a hard-core group of 250 into car pools. The cars then drove five miles to Chrysler headquarters in Highland Park. There the demonstration was repeated, and the demands read to the company as they had already been read to the union. The Highland Park police soon arrived with gas masks and riot weapons. Satisfied with having shaken company and union and having caused the mobilization of two departments of police, DRUM transported its demonstrators back to their homes.

That Sunday a dozen DRUM members were invited to the regular citywide meeting of black UAW representatives. Tempers flared. Even after guarantees were given that the black UAW officials would support specific DRUM demands, there was clearly a parting rather than a meeting of minds. The following Monday, picketing resumed at Dodge Main until John Doe injunctions were served by the Hamtramck police. DRUM felt it had done well with its limited forces in such a short period of time. Rather than

continue the strike, the activists tore up their injunctions and either went in to work or went home for the day.

In the weeks that followed, DRUM organized parties, demonstrations, and rallies which were attended by workers, students, and people from church and neighborhood groups. DRUM also threw up a picket line at Solidarity House to publicize its demands, just as, a year later, it was to demonstrate at a special UAW national convention to reach delegates from all over the country. DRUM stressed that one of the major historical lessons of the black struggle in the United States was that it had failed because of "traitors" from within. The "traitors" had often been white leaders who capitulated to racism among white workers or who habitually postponed meeting specific black demands until there was a more "favorable" political climate. Just as often, however, the "traitors" had been blacks. They had subordinated the mass struggle to their personal careers or had gone along with the cowardice of the white leadership. As a consequence, DRUM was unsparing in its condemnation of "Uncle Toms, hoinkie dog racists, and knee-grows." DRUM lashed out at the hypocrisy of the supposedly infirm Chrysler Corporation, which donated over a million dollars to black-owned banks and gave away vans to the Detroit police department while crying poverty to avoid meeting the demands of its workers. DRUM stated that it would be pleased if whites and moderate blacks would support its demands, but it would offer no concessions for that support and was prepared to fight alone. In *Finally Got the News*, a film made in 1969-1970 by black and white revolutionaries about the struggles in Detroit, Ron March described DRUM's policy toward alliances with white workers: "White workers came to support us. Some wanted to work with us. But we found out that management knew how to divide the whites. We decided that we could work best by organizing alone. We told whites to do the same thing. Once they did that, we could work with them on a coalition basis."

The weekly DRUM leaflets covered every aspect of working-class problems: the unaccountability of UAW officials, discriminatory hiring, unsafe machinery, capricious time studies, the

exclusion of blacks from skilled trades, speed-up, holdups in pay, short paychecks, harassment over sick leave, the need for job upgrading, and increasing regimentation at the plants. DRUM attacked the salaries of UAW officials, the UAW grievance procedure, the policies of the UAW credit union. It advocated worker rather than company control of production, but the rhetoric was often that of a revolutionary black nationalism, a fact which tended to confuse people about the major issues. A union election in September provided DRUM an opportunity to test its strength at the ballot box. In the film *Finally Got the News*, Chuck Wooten recalled the experience:

Our man was Ron March. Most of the old-line guys told us that we didn't have a chance. They said we didn't have experience- we didn't have a platform. All that kind of crap. We went out anyway. Ron pulled 563 votes. The next highest guy was a white worker who had 521. There were other candidates, so we had to have a runoff election. Immediately after that, the Hamtramck police department began to move in a much more open way. They gave us tickets on our cars and just generally harassed us. One day about fifty of us were in the union hall, which is right across from the police station. The mayor of the city and the chief of police came in with guns in their hands. They told us to stop making trouble, and we said all we wanted was to win the election. We asked them why they weren't harassing the others. While we were talking, a squad of police came through the door swinging axe handles and throwing Mace around. That gave us an idea of the kind of repression black workers seeking to make a revolutionary organization would face. It tipped us off about what would happen when we tried to create a black labor struggle to be part of the black revolution.

March and other DRUM activists were candid in admitting that

even if their entire slate of candidates won the election there would be no real improvements at Dodge Main. The major goal of DRUM was another demonstration of insurgent workers' power. All its resources were thrown into a similar campaign one year later. Leaflets were written in Arabic in hopes of picking up votes from the bloc of Arab workers, and an unsuccessful attempt was made to negotiate a compromise with a radical slate which was integrated; basically, however, DRUM relied on its ability to mobilize the black vote. John Watson recalled the results in *Finally Got the News*:

DRUM suspected the union would cheat. We arranged observers for every candidate and machine. Black workers were incensed when the levers for our candidates would not go down. We were in a toe-to-toe battle with the bureaucracy just to make it halfway fair. When the local saw that it could not steal the election, it called for help. George Merrelli, the regional UAW leader, stormed into the hall with his entire fifty-man staff. They were armed and had the additional support of a contingent of police. They evicted the workers and occupied the hall. The voting machines had not even been sealed. The next day the union said Ron March had come in third with only 943 votes. There wasn't even a runoff election. Of thirty-five candidates, only two DRUM people were elected. A week before, in another factory in the city, the ballot boxes had been confiscated by the police and held in the police station overnight. These acts demonstrated the UAW would risk outright scandal rather than let blacks assume any power. It didn't matter whether DRUM won or lost in this election. What counted was that the enemy lost by being forced to provoke the anger and raise the consciousness of thousands and thousands of workers.

The struggle led by ICV and DRUM could not be contained

within one factory, much less within a single election. Although the leaders of DRUM had to cope with police harassments, union denunciations, and court injunctions, workers all over the city were forming RUM (Revolutionary Union Movement) units at their places of work. Students and other sympathizers continued to volunteer for picket lines and leafleting to minimize police, company, and union intimidation of plant militants. On the same day as the first Dodge election, a coalition of white and black supporters of DRUM took editorial control of Wayne State University's daily newspaper, the *South End*. The new editors immediately set about the task of transforming what had been a strictly student newspaper into a citywide daily voice for black and white revolutionaries, both on and off the university campus.



"One Class-C conscious Worker Is Worth 100 Students"

Volume 11 Number 12

WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY

Thursday, January 12, 1966

# D.R.U.M.—VANGUARD OF THE BLACK REVOLUTION

## Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement States History, Purpose and Aims

By LUKE TRIPP

Feature Editor, South End

### HISTORY

DRUM's scope is not limited to the oppressive situation at Chrysler nor all the rest of the plants for that matter. Although mass organizing activity will be in the plants, DRUM sees the long range goal as the complete and total social transformation of the society. This necessarily will take the affairs of the whole Black community as well as other progressive sectors of the rest of the society.

In order to gain more support for Black workers from the Black community at large, DRUM established ties with the mass racial section of the Black church. They helped by putting us in contact with people who could aid DRUM in some way and also by publicizing their support of DRUM's program.

Several weeks after DRUM had done Dodge Mass this summer both the UAW and Chrysler's action both of these racial institutions got into the

net of organizing the public. The UAW tried to shift the attention away from itself to Chrysler. Chrysler did likewise. On August 28, 1965, a story appeared in the *Michigan Chronicle* (a "white" newspaper) about the Black worker's struggle. A UAW official was quoted as saying "DRUM's main danger was towards the company and not the UAW." Over the weekend of August 14 through the 19 there had been several stories in the *News* and the *Free Press* which depicted DRUM as a group of fanatical Black extremists who were trying to get Black workers against their workers.

On the question of getting Black workers, here is DRUM's answer which appeared in the 12th edition of their Newsletter:

"In the recent issue you saw by the UAW, they accused DRUM of getting Black workers white. The purpose of DRUM is to make Black workers to fight the problems that Black workers face, and that problem is racism. How do the white workers get out of racism, if any-

thing, they benefit from it. How do they benefit? It starts in the country-plant office. The white workers are usually seen to work in what is considered the easy areas. They if one should happen to be unfortunate enough to get into the body shop, then the foreman will give him the hardest job he can think of. If it doesn't result in a black worker. When it comes to getting disciplinary action against workers you will find that white workers are given the best. Also, when it comes to advancement, the black workers are given all kinds of reasons why he is not qualified for the job, while a white worker, qualified or not, will get it. How according to the UAW, getting the black people against the white workers creates a work union. When the UAW is too weak to face racism, as a workers union, that it is a fact that white men support throughout the work history. The policy of Black against white starts with the power structure, but it is in the power structure that controls the job, and the job you get is based on the side of your side, not your

background. If you are white you are in. If you are black you are out to get it, then you were that you are not. Because they don't want Black men. They only want Black men. So who is getting Black against white?"

To show what is about the UAW's support for Black people is, DRUM points to those facts. Black workers pay millions of dollars to the UAW headed by Walter Reuther the most corrupt and most acted in the labor movement. He manages to pass up at the head of practically every genuine civil rights justice demonstration. DRUM's protest against racism generated by both the UAW and the company was in several and legal in any administration in the history of the Black Man's Struggle. History shows in every phase of the struggle from the sit-ins to the March on Washington, Walter Reuther and our dues were there.

Further, in Memphis after Dr. King's assassination, Reuther and the Black workers' dues were there. How

(Continued on Page 8)