

**Martin Glaberman**

**Black cats, white cats,  
wildcats: Auto workers  
in Detroit, 1969**

Chrysler plant in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Detroit workers have been through many stages. From carriage production to car production to tank and plane production and back to car production. From prosperity to war to depression to war and back to prosperity and depression. From open shop to union shop; from democratic union to bureaucratic union.

Modern mass production is most closely associated with the introduction of the moving assembly line by Ford before World War I. The combination of relatively high wages combined with the most intense exploitation is also associated with the auto industry and Ford's famous 'five-dollar day.'

Ford also provides the crucial turning point in the modern history of Detroit. In 1941, the year that Ford was organized, the transition was made from the organizing days to the period of stability and legality. After 1941 what was left to be organized was accomplished either by government fiat in the war plants or by NLRB election. The workers were kept out of it.

Just as important was the Ford contract, which was also intended to keep the workers out of it. Everyone was amazed that Ford, who had resisted the union to the bitter end, had granted concessions to the union far beyond what had been won at GM and Chrysler. Full time for union committeemen and the dues check-off were the keys to the Ford contract. What it achieved was the incorporation of the union in the management of the plant.

The earlier contracts were simple documents which left the workers free to fight with any weapon they chose.

## **NEW WORKERS**

During the war years there was a tremendous influx of new workers into the auto plants. They were Southerners, black and white, and women. The demands of the war and the shortage of labor combined to give workers substantial weapons in their struggles. Black Workers fought for upgrading into production jobs (other than foundries), Women became production workers on a large scale. The union leadership attempted to surrender the bargaining powers of the workers by rushing to give the government a no-strike pledge. Union officials took places on government boards. There began the growing merger of union hierarchy with the political power structure. The resistance of workers to this process began to widen the gap between the rank and file of the union and the officials at the top. It was in Detroit that this resistance reached its high points.

A struggle against the no-strike pledge was carried on in the UAW against the major caucuses in the union. This reached its peak at the 1944 convention of the UAW when the top officials were chastized and embarrassed in front of the government officials they tried to serve by the defeat of resolutions to retain the no-strike pledge.

A curious example of the problem of working-class consciousness came out of that convention. The question of the

pledge was referred to a membership referendum. In this vote by mail, the no-strike pledge was accepted by a vote of two to one. However at the same time, in the Detroit area auto-war plants, a majority of autoworkers wildcatted time and time again.

## **REUTHER'S CAREER**

The Reuther regime in the UAW coincides with the major post-war transformation of the auto industry. The centralization of power with the elimination of the smaller auto companies (Kaiser, Hudson, Packard, etc.) was combined with the decentralization of production in the newly automated or modernized plants. Reuther continued the policies begun by old Henry Ford and followed by CM's C. F. Wilson. The five-dollar day was superseded by the cost-of-living allowance as the golden chain that was to bind the workers to the most intense and alienating exploitation to be found anywhere in the industrialized world. No wage increase can compensate for the fact that the operations required of one worker on an auto assembly line never total as much as one minute.

In 1955 auto workers erupted in a wave of wildcat strikes that rejected the policy of fringe benefits combined with increasing speed-up. They made it clear that what was at issue was the inability of the union contract to provide any solution to the day-to-day problems on the plant floor. In some plants, at the expiration of the three-year contract, there are literally thousands of unresolved grievances testifying to the need of workers to manage production in their own name.

Ever since 1955 Reuther has attempted to incorporate the local wildcats into the national negotiations, with very little success. In the 1967 contract negotiations in auto it took one year, one third of the life of the contract, to wear down the workers, local by local.

## **OVERTIME AND PRODUCTIVITY**

From 1958 to 1961 the massive reconstruction of the auto industry led to a major depression in Detroit. It made visible the erosion of working-class power engineered by the auto union. Chrysler workers, some laid off for over a year, picketed Chrysler plants (and UAW headquarters) to prevent overtime work. Chrysler was able to get a court injunction against the picketers on the ground that they were in violation of the no-strike clause of the union contract.

## **BEYOND RANK AND FILE CAUCUS**

In the 1960's, also, the pressure of the black working class was constantly changing the level of employment in those plants that were within the reach of concentrations of black Americans. By the time of the Detroit rebellion of 1967, the majority of auto workers in the Detroit metropolitan area were black. These workers were a combination of older, long-seniority workers who had achieved power and stability in the plants and young militants who took what was there for granted and began the movement toward new forms of organization.

Black workers felt most intensely the exploitation and alienation of autoworkers, and they led the way in newer struggles. The Detroit rebellion of 1967 exposed the vulnerability of the auto corporations to the populations of the inner cities in industrial America. One year later was organized the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, which, with companion organizations in other plants, became part of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

What was crucial about the development was that it went beyond earlier black caucuses which were limited to pressure against management and the union hierarchy. And it went beyond earlier caucuses of all kinds in that it was not an electoral machine that functioned as a loyal opposition within the union. It was a direct, shop-floor organization that was willing and able to call strikes in its own name and fight against both the union and the management in a struggle to assert the power of the working class in production. Tensions between black and white workers have existed in varying degrees since the earliest days in auto. Sometimes they have erupted into open struggle. Sometimes they have been submerged in major battles against the industry. Tensions exist today, especially in relation to the skilled trades, which can easily break out into battles between workers. But that is secondary to the fact that black workers are attempting to assert working-class control on the shop floor.

Detroit, through its black workers, has again taken the lead in showing this nation its future.

MARTIN GLABERMAN spent two decades in the auto shops of Detroit He was a member of and frequent writer for the socialist group Facing Reality, and is an associate editor of RADICAL AMERICA.

EDITORS' NOTE: The below article is excerpted from the book, DETROIT: I DO MIND DYING, to be published by St Martin's Press.

## **Niggermation In Auto: Company Policy and the Rise of Black Caucuses**

*(Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin)*

I work at a small shop in Troy.... Three weeks ago a woman on the day shift got her arm chopped off in a press. The week before this happened the press repeated and they said they 'd fixed it and kept people working on it and then this lady got her arm chopped off People were really freaked out; some of the people on days ended up quitting.

Denise Stevenson, in a statement to a People's Court convened by the Motor City Labor League, April 3, 1973.

One of the major concerns of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was the deteriorating working conditions at the point of production. In 1946 some 550,000 autoworkers had produced a little over three million vehicles, but in 1970 some 750,000 autoworkers had produced a little over eight million vehicles. Management credited this much higher productivity per worker to its improved managerial techniques and new machinery. Workers, on the other hand, claimed the higher productivity was primarily a result of their being forced to work harder and faster under increasingly unsafe and unhealthy conditions. The companies called their methods automation; black workers in Detroit called them 'niggermation.'

Niggermation, not automation, was clearly the watchword at Chrysler Corporation's Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle plant. Clustered alongside four other Chrysler plants -Huber Foundry, Winfield Foundry, Chrysler Forge, and Plymouth - Eldon employed a workforce of over 4000, of which 70% was black. Eldon covered over a million square feet, was surrounded by another half-million square feet of storage and siding areas, and housed 2600 machine tools of 170 types. In a report to the National Labor Relations Board on November 30, 1971, Chrysler Corporation described Eldon as 'engaged primarily in machining metal parts for rear axles of most Chrysler-built automobiles, for which it is the sole source, and assembling the parts into completed axles.'" Workers considered this key plant the most niggermated factory in Detroit.

Even though Chrysler acknowledged how vital Eldon was to its operations, working conditions at the plant continually deteriorated. These poor conditions reached such proportions that by 1970 harassment, industrial illnesses, injuries and deaths on the job pushed Eldon workers to the breaking point. After James Johnson shot and killed two foremen and a job setter, his attorney, Ken Cockrel, said, 'We'll have to put Chrysler on trial for damages to this man caused by his working conditions,'" The Johnson jury was taken to El-don, the 'scene of the crime,'" to observe for itself the conditions which Judge Philip Colista had called 'abominable'" and which UAW Safety Director Lloyd Utter termed inexcusably dangerous" and evidence of 'a complete neglect of stated maintenance procedures.'" The jury agreed and concluded that James

Johnson was not responsible for his actions, That August, during the local contract negotiations, Chrysler admitted to 167 separate safety violations at Eldon; yet a year and a half later, in January of 1971, the Michigan Department of Labor found hundreds of violations of the Michigan safety code still uncorrected, In a separate case brought against Chrysler by Johnson, he was awarded workman's compensation of \$75 a week, beginning from the day of his 'breakdown.'

Eldon workers knew that James Johnson was not an isolated case. Serious provocations, injuries, illnesses, and deaths were the realities of their everyday work. On May 26, 1970, less than two months before Johnson fired his M-1 carbine, another death had occurred at Eldon. Gary Thompson, a black 22-year-old Vietnam veteran, had been killed when his defective jitney overturned and buried him under five tons of steel. UAW Safety Director Utter investigated the cause of the accident. On November 12, 1970, his written conclusions were sent as an official union inter-office communication to Art Hughes, the Assistant Director of the National Chrysler Department:

'I examined the equipment and found the emergency brake to be broken; as a matter of fact, it was never connected. The shifter lever to the transmission was loose and sloppy. The equipment generally was sadly in need of maintenance, having a lost steering wheel in addition to other general needs. I also visited the repair area and observed other industrial trucks in this area that were sadly in need of repair, noting: no lights, lack of brakes, horns, broken LP gas tank fasteners, loose steering wheels, leaky hydraulic equipment, etc. I was informed

that there is supposed to be a regularly scheduled maintenance procedure for this equipment in this plant. I was also informed that operators are instructed to take trucks to the garage and tag them when they are in need of repairs. However, it seems to be the practice of foremen, when equipment is needed, to pull the tags off the equipment in the repair area that badly need corrective maintenance and put them back into service on the floor. Finally, a general observation as we passed to and from the location of the fatal accident: there seemed to be little attempt to maintain proper housekeeping except on the main front aisle. Water and grease were observed all along the way, as we proceeded. Every good safety program has its basic good-housekeeping procedures. Proper steps should be taken immediately to improve conditions within this plant."

Thirteen days before Gary Thompson's death, Eldon had claimed the life of Mamie Williams, a 51-year-old black woman who had worked for Chrysler for over 26 years. Mamie Williams had been ordered by her doctors to stay home because of a dangerous blood pressure condition. Chrysler, however, had sent her a telegram telling her to return to work or be fired and lose all the benefits she had accumulated in almost three decades of employment. An intimidated Mamie Williams had returned to her job on the first shift in Department 80, One week later, she passed out on the line and died shortly after being taken home. A year before the deaths of Gary Thompson and Mamie Williams, Eldon had taken the life of Rose Logan, a black janitor. Rose Logan had been struck in the plant by an improperly loaded jitney whose driver's vision was blocked

Her doctor told her to stay off her feet, but Chrysler's doctors ordered her back to work, She returned to Eldon from fear of losing her job, developed thrombophlebitis in her leg, and, like Mamie Williams, ended her service at Eldon in a coffin.

Higher production at Eldon had been achieved not with advanced technology and automated assembly-line procedures, but through the old-fashioned method of speed-up. The single goal of the company was to increase profit by getting more work out of each individual worker. Eldon conditions were typical of conditions in the industry. Even when there were technological changes, usually only one segment of the assembly line was automated, so that the workers on other segments had to labor more strenuously to keep up. Often, the automation eliminated interesting jobs, leaving the more menial and monotonous tasks for people. Many of the 'new' machines were not technological advances at all, but simply updated models of tools introduced as early as the 1920's and 1930's. Health and accident data on the auto industry was difficult to obtain. Only in the early seventies did the UAW and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare begin to make studies in this area. One important report did appear in 1973. Called the HEALTH RESEARCH GROUP STUDY OF DISEASE AMONG WORKERS IN THE AUTO INDUSTRY, it was based on figures compiled by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health and was written by two medical doctors, Jannette Sherman and Sidney Wolfe. The report estimated 65 on-the-job deaths per day among autoworkers, for a total of some 16,000 annually. Approximately half of these deaths were

from heart attacks. There were also some 63,000 cases of disabling diseases and about 1,700,000 cases of lost or impaired hearing. These statistics did not include many long-term illnesses endemic to foundry workers and others exposed to poisonous chemicals and gases, nor did they include deaths and injuries by accident. Even these limited figures made it clear that more auto workers were killed and injured each year on the job than soldiers were killed and injured during any year of the war in Vietnam.

The hazardous conditions were supposedly compensated for by high wages. Autoworkers were among the highest-paid workers in the United States, yet wage rates were deceptive. In the 1920's, Henry Ford made headlines by promising \$5 a day to every worker in his enterprises. Ford workers soon discovered that it was not quite \$5 a day for not quite everyone. Fully a third of all Ford workers never got the \$5 a day. Likewise, at Eldon, the 1969 \$4-an-hour average Chrysler wage proved a fiction. Before any deductions and without the cost-of-living factor, which did not cover all workers and was never more than 21¢ an hour, most job categories at Eldon paid around \$3.60 an hour and none paid more than \$3.94. Workers found it difficult to get figures on per-hour pay for their particular job, and they were often cheated out of increases by complex union and company clerical procedures. What the workers did know was that overtime had become compulsory and that most of them needed the time-and-a-half paid for overtime to keep pace with inflation. Census Bureau figures revealed that the value of the products shipped out of the plant, minus the cost

of materials, supplies, fuel, and electricity, came to \$22, 500a year per worker, as compared to an average wage of \$8,000 for a worker putting in a 40-hour week.

During the period 1946-1969, wages had increased by 25% profits went up 77%, dividends 60%, personal corporate incomes 80%, and undistributed corporate profits 93%. The industry moaned about its cycle of booms and busts, but in 1970 General Motors remained the nation's (and the world's) largest manufacturing enterprise. Ford was the third largest. And Chrysler, 'the weak sister,' was fifth. Niggermation at Eldon gave rise to three separate rank-and-file opposition groups. The one with the longest record in the factory was a militant trade-union group led by Jordan Sims, the black chairman of the shop stewards' committee. A radical group called Wildcat began publishing a newsletter in February 1970, and ELRUM, the local unit of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, made its official appearance in November 1968. The three groups, separately and in various combinations, produced a steady barrage of information for the workers and succeeded in closing down the plant in several successful wildcat strikes. Chrysler was more than a little concerned about this activity. If Eldon were closed for any lengthy period, all gear and axle production would stop; and with that stoppage, all of Chrysler would stop. Chrysler remembered how, in 1937, General Motors had been forced to recognize the UAW when it occupied Fisher Body #1 in Flint and Fisher Body in Cleveland, the only plants having GM's valuable dies. Eldon had the same sort of pivotal role in Chrysler production. At this point of

maximum vulnerability, Chrysler faced one of the largest concentrations of black workers in the industry. Eldon was Chrysler's Achilles' heel. Chrysler knew this, and so did the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

ELRUM's history was similar to that of DRUM. Meetings, rallies, and newsletters built up a hard core of supporters and a much larger number of sympathizers. Leaders of ELRUM such as Fred Holsey and James Edwards found themselves under continual pressure from company, police, and union. Physical assaults were frequent, but the ELRUM leadership did not crack under the pressure. On January 22, 1969, ELRUM led over 300 workers to confront the local union leadership with a grievance list in much the way DRUM had confronted the leaders of Local 3. Five days later, ELRUM called a strike to back up its demands. ELRUM kept out 66% of the workers the first day of the strike and 50% the second. The company's retaliation was to fire some two dozen workers and to discipline 86 others.

In retrospect, the League evaluated the January 1969 strike as premature. Too many ELRUM members were knocked out of the plant, and the remaining base of support was insufficient to maintain the struggle at the same level as in the previous six months. Despite these facts, ELRUM continued to fight, and it continued to have a cadre and sympathizers in the plant. During the early part of 1970, ELRUM once more took a leading role in plant struggles, and it arrived at a working coalition with other militants.

You don't have to read about them in NEWSWEEK or see them on television. They're too dangerous. They 're too dangerous to the system to have information about the kind of work being done at Eldon to be disseminated widely. This is a war we're talking about There is literally a war going on inside the American factories. This is a violent struggle. Sometimes it is organized and guided. Most times it is unorganized and spontaneous. But in the course of this struggle more American workers have died than in all the four major wars. John Watson, interview in QUADERNI PIACENTINI (Italy), Winter 1970.

One of the key figures in the new series of events at Eldon was a white worker named John Taylor. In August of 1972, he gave the authors a retrospective account of the events at Eldon as he had experienced them. At the time of the interview, John Taylor was a member of the Motor City Labor League. His personal testimony regarding the period from 1968 to 1970 is a textbook of what was wrong with the company and the union. It also presents a candid view of the problems within the ranks of the insurgents themselves:

"My name is John Taylor, I wasn't born in Detroit, I was born in West Virginia. My father was a coal miner who worked in the mines for 17 years. My grandfathers on both sides were coal miners. My grandfather on my mother's side was the recording secretary for the first miner's local in that part of the country back in 1916. We moved to Detroit in 1949 as part of the migration of white Appalachians northward. My father started to work at Chevrolet gear and axle plant as a production-line worker in October 1949 and he retires in 1975. My mother

works at the Federals Department Store putting price tags on clothes. She's worked there since 1952 and expects to retire soon. I went to the Detroit public schools and Wayne State University. I came out with a bachelor's degree in English and a law degree. Along the way, I worked eight years for the Better Business Bureau in Detroit, a capitalist front organization, and I worked for Chrysler Corporation on the management side as a workman's compensation representative. That job took me into almost every Chrysler plant in the Detroit area. It put me into contact with literally hundreds of injured workers per week. I worked there from June 1966 to September 1968. In November of 1968, I got a job as a production-line worker at Chrysler's Eldon Avenue Gear and Axle factory, the same factory where I had worked for management.

"I was asked to resign my management job because of what they called a 'bad attitude.' The truth is that the company was fucking the workers on compensation. One of their devices was to refuse to discuss the cases with the union. They claimed workman's comp was covered by statute and therefore not part of the contract and therefore not negotiable. My feeling was that while the substance of the decisions was not negotiable, the administration was and was therefore grievable. I thought I should discuss these cases with the various shop stewards. I did what the union should have done. I gave the stewards an outline of the rights of workers -their constituents. I noticed that, during a period of nine days, about every steward in the place was in my office, I didn't find out until several years later that Jordan Sims had noticed what I'm doing and had made it

part of his program as Chairman the Shop Stewards' Committee to send all of the stewards to see me, Finally, he came in himself and we had a long rap. I gave him a copy of the statutes. I used to have almost daily relations with the Labor Relations Committee. I remember on more than one day how they would say, 'Oh, we're going to have a rough afternoon coming up because Sims is coming to bargain.' That's the kind of reputation Sims had.

"After I got kicked out of Chrysler management, I went back to Wayne State; but I didn't want to be a lawyer or a teacher. I wanted to organize, and the logical place seemed to be the plant. I had the reputation in the Eldon personnel Department of being the best comp man they had ever had. I talked them into letting me work hourly, and they put me into Department 75, first as a conveyor loader and then I worked up to being a precision grinder. That's the best job I ever had in my life. I didn't have any organizing agenda at that time. The only politics I had came out of the FIFTH ESTATE. Detroit's underground paper. I had never read Marx or Lenin. The first time I read the COMMUNIST MANIFESTO was late 1969. I thought, "This is far out. They are talking about this plant." That was an important event for me.

"One funny coincidence from that time is that I entered the plant on November 8th, 1968, and on November 10th some black workers in other departments founded ELRUM, the Eldon Avenue Revolutionary Union Movement. They had been turned on by the agitation at Dodge Main and became an affiliate of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. I would like to

relate these events in the sequence I lived them, rather than strict chronological order. I will come back later on and fill in the most important dates and events. "Our steward in Department 75 on the third shift was a man named Frank McKinnon. I got to know him when I was in workman's comp because McKinnon was a witness in a case involving a fight. Chrysler had a policy of firing the aggressor, so the question of who started the fight was important. McKinnon gave me a statement that the worker had started the fight. I found out later he lied to me. That was the kind of steward he was. When I got to be a worker, he refused to write up my safety grievances. A number of us also had grievances relating to pay raises due us because of promotions. We were supposed to get a 5 cent-an-hour raise within a week, and it took me six weeks to get mine because the foreman wouldn't do the paperwork. He was trying to save on his own budget, and McKinnon wouldn't write up the grievance about it. That's how things worked at Eldon.

'My safety grievance typifies the problems in that factory. I worked on what they call a modern grinder. We used to laugh about it because there was nothing modern about it at all. It was ancient. We had to burn off the rough edges of rangers which looked like donuts with metal teeth. This part went into the differential. There was a lot of fine dust generated by this grinding. The company put vents on the machines to hold this down, but every shift the filters would get clogged. The supervision would never give us the little time needed for someone to come and do some maintenance on them, I

requested a mask. I got this thing that didn't look right and asked for the box it came in. It turned out to be for paint and gas fumes and was no help against dust, I ran all this down to McKinnon, but he refused to deal with it. So I called for a department meeting. I organized around him. The union President wouldn't schedule the meeting for more than two weeks because he said we had one word wrong in our petition. Richardson (the President) was just pissed because he had just taken office, and now, less than two months later, there was dissatisfaction with one of his stewards. Richardson told me straight off he wanted people to cool off because he didn't want angry people in the union hall. That's another indication of the union's attitude. They do not want to deal with angry workers.

"I started seeing Sims in the cafeteria every morning. This was in early 1969, and he suggested I get on the union bylaws committee. I worked on that for a year with Sims and a guy named J. C. Thomas. We drew up some bylaws that would have made that union as honest and democratic as unions can be in this period. Needless to say, those by-laws were never presented to the membership. "By 1970, we had gotten to a situation where Chrysler was making most of its money off small cars, the Valiant and the Dart, One reason things got so bad at Dodge Main was that is where they made those cars. Behind the need for increased production and because they wanted to harass the union, Chrysler did a lot of firing, disciplinary actions, and all sorts of bullshit. There was attempted speed-up in my department at Eldon, One foreman

arbitrarily raised the quota on the grinder machine, which was totally against the contract, What we did was lower to 400 instead of the usual 700 gears, and that cooled his ass about a speed-up.

'On April 16th, 1970, things built up to what we call the Scott-Ashlock incident. There was a black worker named John Scott who was a physically small man. His foreman was a fairly large guy from Mississippi named Irwin Ash-lock, They got into an argument, and Ashlock picked up a pinion gear and said he was going to smash Scott's brains out. Scott complained to his steward, and the union took it up with the company. Well, Chrysler came up with the claim that Scott had taken a knife from his pocket - you know, like all blacks carry knives, They claimed Ashlock had a right to protect himself, and rather than discipline Ashlock, they were going to fire Scott. This sparked a wildcat strike which shut the place down for the whole weekend. That was a beautifully successful strike. It had an old-fashioned unity - young and old, black and white, men and women. Everyone was militant. The skilled tradesmen went out too. At a union meeting a white worker named John Felicia, who had seen the whole thing, spoke from the stage at the hall. There were maybe a thousand people there. Felicia said there were white workers at Eldon and black workers at Eldon, but the main thing was that they were all workers and that he had seen the whole thing and that John Scott was telling the absolute truth and was totally in the right. The company needed our gears for those Valiants, so they backed down.

"Everyone thought we had won, but then, after a couple of weeks, the company started acting up, They threatened to discipline the second-shift stewards who had led the walkout They began to have foremen follow these guys around, and then, on May 1st, they were told toward the end of the shift that they were all going to be suspended for an unauthorized work stoppage in violation of the no-strike clause of the contract. They were shown the door leading to the street. What happened was that a guy named Clarence Thornton shoved the plant guards out of the way and led everyone back into the plant. This was shift time. I remember meeting a steward, and he said, "We're shutting her down. Go home." By midnight, the factory was shut down. Chrysler went for an injunction and got it. The union lawyer from Solidarity House refused to defend Local 961 on the grounds it might bring legal action against the whole union. They sold out the strike. They advised us to go back to work without our stewards. We worked most of that summer without any stewards. Both Jordan Sims and Frank McKinnon were fired in this action.

"In response to those firings, a grouping called the Eldon Safety Committee was formed which included myself, some members of ELRUM, and the fired stewards led by Jordan Sims. Our program was to research and document the issue of safety in the plant. We got advised by lawyers Ron Glotta and Mike Adleman that we had the right to refuse to work under abnormally dangerous conditions. That would not constitute a strike, and the company could not get an injunction We saw that we had an umbrella for closing down El-don. We were so

naive we thought words meant what they said. When you look at our leaflets of that period, you will see that we quote the law and all that stuff. We put out a few leaflets, but events overtook us. The plant was indeed abnormally dangerous. On May 26th, 1970, this was proven when a man named Gary Thompson was buried under five tons of steel when his faulty jitney tipped over. Thompson was a black Vietnam veteran about twenty-two years old. The jitney he was running was full of safety flaws.

"On May 27th, we set up picket lines. By 'we,' I mean the Eldon Safety Committee and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. This was not as successful as the first strike, but it cost them 2174 axles over two days. We're proud of each and every one of them. The three wildcats within a month and a half cost them 2200 axles during a period when they desperately needed them for their Valliants. Chrysler immediately fired me and three members of the League: James Edwards, Alonzo Chandler, and Rob McKee.

"I need to backtrack here to tell something about ELRUM. Like I said before, they had started on November 10, 1968. My first awareness of them was when they began to put out leaflets. There was an immediate response, about 50% positive and 50% negative. The negative response came from the older black workers and of course from white workers, mainly because the ELRUM language was harsh. They called people 'Toms' 'honkie dogs,' 'pigs,' etc. No one seemed to have trouble with calling the supervision those names, but this was something different. The older people definitely had a lot of trouble with their whole

tone. In early 1970, there was an election for convention delegates. That was just before the Scott-Ashlock Incident, Given their numerical superiority in that plant, black workers could have elected an all-black slate. There were like 33 separate black candidates, and ELRUM put out a leaflet calling them Molly-Toms and all that. That divided the black vote.

'ELRUM was already in bad shape by that time. In January of 1969, there was a lot of complaining about the coldness in the plant and about union discrimination against blacks. Chrysler disciplined some ELRUM people who had lost time from their jobs to do an action against the union. A wildcat followed, and after that 22 ELRUM people were fired. I think that broke the back of ELRUM right there. I think those actions were premature. There was no way to logistically support that strike. They had no outside mobilization, It was just premature. Still, everything we ever did at the plant was premature. Maybe it was vanguard activity, and they just didn't have any choice. Anyway, through 1969, the INNER CITY VOICE, the League paper, was sold at the plant. I had no personal contact until early 1970, about the time of 'the convention.

"At that time, I was still mainly involved in the bylaws struggle and troubles in my own department. Still, I used to see their leaflets and groups of us would discuss them, blacks and whites. I would say that we might not be able to relate to the rhetoric, but what they were saying was true. That was the position Jordan Sims took, too. A lot of his enemies said he was the secret leader of ELRUM, in an attempt to erode his base among black and white workers. Sims said their language was

crude but they were telling the truth. He would defend them as aggressively as he would any militant. That was a position of principle. I should say that I wasn't all that aware of all they were doing. I can say that the young white workers didn't like them. They could relate to what I said, but they had a hard time with ELRUM.

"What really turned people off was this one leaflet they put out on the union secretaries. There was an old retiree named Butch and several white secretaries in the office. ELRUM put out a leaflet running that these white women were prostitutes for Elroy Richardson, the black President of the local. They ran all kinds of vicious stuff that people could not relate to. We knew these women and did not perceive them in that fashion. People were really put off by that issue. Another thing is that some of those young black workers who were enthusiastic about the leaflets never joined ELRUM, and some of them crossed the Safety Committee picket line. So there was this mixed response to ELRUM as we went into 1970.

"Things were very complicated by 1970. Local 961 had its first black President. This was before the Scott-Ashlock Incident. ELRUM had supported the black slate in 1969, but now it had become critical and was calling Elroy a Tom, a fat-belly faggot, etc. When the wildcat came, ELRUM dropped that and supported him again. You can say that Richardson had a united plant behind him, but he was too incompetent and inept to be a leader. He had it all in his hands at the time of the wildcat following the Scott-Ashlock thing, but he blew it.

'After the wildcat, the ELRUM cadre and myself worked on the Safety Committee. I did most of the research and writing because that was an area I had expertise in. They did most of the organizing for the strike. We met at League headquarters on Cortland Street, People ask if I felt any nationalism or reverse racism, and I can say I did not. I had a lot of basic respect for what they were trying to do. When they said, "Come on over; it's all right," I did and it was, I also had a nodding acquaintance with Ken Cockrel from law school. That may have helped, but our main contact with the League was General Baker, We had a lot of contact with him and also with Chuck Wooten. They both came on the picket line with us, even though they didn't work at the plant. I would say the performance of the ELRUM people around the safety strike was exemplary.

"I need to backtrack again. By early 1970, I had come to realize that I had to get beyond Department 74 and 75. I knew you had to have an organ of some kind, a mimeographed sheet. I think that came from seeing the ELRUM example. I thought it was correct when they said whites should work with whites, which was what I was trying to do, even though I was doing it on my own from what I see now (in 1972) as correct instincts. A little earlier, a paper called WILDCAT had been given out. People in my department had picked it up and read it. Then, early in 1970, they began to put out the ELDON WILDCAT, a mimeographed plant newsletter, At that point, I was ready to leap out. I waited until they were at the gate, and I told them I worked in the factory and wanted to do some articles for them. We set up a

meeting. Those people were experts at plant newsletters. I became identified with them immediately because people spotted my writing style.

'The WILDCAT people were Old Left, They were so secretive they had crossed over to paranoia. They used false names and all that stuff. They didn't want to expose their shit to open struggle. My opinion, then and now, is that that is an incorrect way to work. They strongly advised me not to distribute WILDCAT. It was their policy that outsiders distributed. My opinion was that the paper had to get into the plant. We were only covering one gate. One morning I went out and took some papers and gave them out at another gate. It soon got around the plant that I was the publisher of WILDCAT, which was a mistruth. I was only a junior member of that circle. They would edit the shit out of my articles. They would change the content and the style. Sometimes we did this together, but sometimes they said there wasn't time. I usually didn't mind, but they would put in bad stuff sometimes without consulting me, which put me into a trick as I was identified with the paper. Other workers held me responsible. I found out later that two people in the group took the position that I was only a contact and had brought my troubles upon myself by identifying with the paper in an overt way. You must remember that ELRUM was open with their thing. I thought that was correct, and I was open with mine. That made it easier to trust each other.

"What we did during that period was have ELRUM put something out one day, WILDCAT the next, and the Safety Committee the third. Then we would start the cycle going again

so that there was a steady stream of information and agitation. It was like a united front. People knew I was associated with the Safety Committee, and stewards would take me off on the side to show me violations. Management tried to keep me from going out of my department on my break, They got a guy to pick a fight with me so we both could get fired. They tried all that shit.

'ELRUM did not participate as fully as it could have in gathering information, and on the day of the strike they tried to stop distribution of the WILDCAT. My brother was giving them out, and they said this was basically a black action and he should get out. Anyway, he didn't move. I don't think that was correct, but overall ELRUM was very good. The trouble was that after Rob, Alonzo, and James were fired, they had no one else to carry on. That was after the other 22 had been fired. Their thing was just ripped. Then they made a bad mistake, which may have been unavoidable given problems within the wider context of the League. That summer and fall they only put out one leaflet. They lost their visibility. They could have had workers from other plants distribute. They could have gone to union meetings, which was something I did. They went sometimes, but they were into a program of disruption. I didn't think that was correct, and I couldn't work with them on that. I thought it was insulting to those workers who had come to the hall in good faith to take care of whatever business they thought important. I thought it was disrespectful.

"I think it would be fair to say that they were not good at dealing with people within the class who did not agree with

them but who were not enemies either. I don't know what internal education the League was giving them on this. I don't know what kind of instructions they were getting. If there is not structure by which people's actions can be criticized and reviewed, you get into this kind of situation. "ELRUM still had a few people inside, but they were essentially not doing much. Now, in 1971, union officials came up for election. ELRUM ran a candidate named Eric Edwards, a guy who I have a lot of respect for. He ran a strong third as a straight ELRUM candidate, getting 342 out of about 1000 votes. That indicated a residue of support'. The company and the union were running a heavy organized barrage against Jordan Sims, who was running against Frank McKinnon for President. Sims could have won with the solid help of older workers, but they were turned off by his association with ELRUM. Jordan and I went over to the Cortland offices and talked with Baker, Wooten, and a whole bunch of them. They had always seen Sims as a sellout and right-wing opportunist. I don't think that was correct. Anyway, he told them he didn't want their endorsement, which would be a kiss of death. The first day of the election, ELRUM did not come out in favor of Sims, and Jordan was ahead. The second day they endorsed him, and the vote turned away. I believe that was an indication of how negative older folks had become to ELRUM. That was one factor in his defeat. It would be interesting to know who made the decision to endorse him.

'The union ran its usual shit on us. They challenged 284 ballots because of dues default, which is strange because you have checkoffs at Chrysler so if someone is behind, it is not their

fault but the union's and the company's. I analyzed those ballots, and 90% of them were in black production units, and I think they would have gone to Sims. They would have put him over as President of the local. 'The administration, the international, and the company had sold this program that we were' all violent individuals. They even said I was a member of ELRUM! They said I was a violent motherfucker. We got into a situation in the hall the night we were tabulating. We were there as challengers, and they brought in armed guards with shotguns, carbines, and pistols. They were provocative as hell, trying to get us into a fight. I'm convinced they wanted to gun us down. We took our time real easy. I even took my shirt off so people couldn't claim I was strapped (carrying a gun). There was one argument which was really hot where James Edwards raised his voice, and the whole table got surrounded by those guards. These black guards were hired under the instructions of George Merrelli, the Regional Director. I got into a hot dispute with Russell Thompson, who was solid with the administration. Some ELRUM people came over, and Thompson reached into his shirt for a piece. I saw the guards starting over, so we just split, me and the guys from ELRUM. We were not prepared to handle that shit. What is interesting is that most of the people counting the ballots were older black women, and they were physically afraid of ELRUM people. They thought ELRUM people had guns and were going to go berserk. I knew right there that there had been a tremendous failure of ELRUM. You can't have people in the plant afraid of you in that way. Also, the same women who were afraid of ELRUM were not afraid of me. Several of them went out of their way to say this.

"A similar incident occurred around the safety strike. It happened at the East Gate, which is a principal gate for the second shift coming in. The second shift is basically black and young, with little seniority. This is the 2.30-10:30 shift. James Edwards was on the gate, and at one point, James grabbed a white worker and slapped him around, Now, we had agreed there would be no violence, on advice of our attorneys, so that we could preserve the strike's legality. James violated our organizational decision. That hurt us. When people heard about that, they turned against us. They even cut a hole in the parking-lot fence so they could get in easier. 'I almost did a similar thing myself. I grabbed this one dude I had a thing on. He had caught me outside on the street one day and slugged me on my Mind side. I had this plan for getting him that day, but I didn't. Maybe a policy of violence would have been better. Slapping some of those fuckers around might have made a difference. I don't know; we had decided not to, and I stuck to that decision. We sure as hell moved too fast. We hadn't organized our base correctly. We weren't ready for that strike hit. We should have agitated more around the issue of Gary Thompson and on safety in general. We could really have made it hot, but as a result we had a not totally successful strike for which we got fired. You must understand we were genuinely angry at the death of Thompson. It verified everything we had been saying. We got self-righteous. In our arrogance, we failed to note that Memorial Day was on Friday. The people were getting triple pay for working. We couldn't have picked a worse day for a strike. It's just incredible that we didn't consider that factor. We were wrong and stupid.

'These events took place in May 1970. On July 15th, James Johnson entered the factory and blew away two foremen and a job setter. He was looking for his shop steward, Clarence Thompson. That was the same guy who had led the fired stewards back into the plant by shoving the guards aside. That was exemplary because Clarence was an older dude, about 46 years old with 23 years' seniority. He was considered a good steward. Clarence was one of those sold out by the union. They left the stewards in the street for a time, and when Clarence came back he had to sign a statement that if there was any further trouble he would get permanently fired. When Johnson first approached Clarence about his grievances, Clarence told him, 'I can't do much for you because I just got back myself.' Clarence had been intimidated and sold out to the point where it was no longer safe for him to fight for his membership. Johnson saw his union could not function for him and decided to deal with it himself. Those connections are important. The whole preceding set of events was to break down the stewards so they wouldn't defend their people. The company refused to deal with safety and other legitimate grievances. That's why we say Chrysler pulled the trigger. Chrysler caused those deaths, Yes, indeed, James Johnson 'was just an instrumentality.

'It's important to note how ELRUM related to white people. The first thing is around the distribution of their leaflets. They would always refuse to give those leaflets to white workers. It wasn't until around March of 1970 that they would respect my practice enough to give them to me. Then James Edwards would go through changes about that, He would wad them up

in his hand and sort of pass them to me surreptitiously, so none of the black workers would see him giving a leaflet to a white. When ELRUM had its wildcat in January 1969, there was no attempt to relate to white workers about their demands. Consequently, many white workers crossed their lines, and many black workers who had close friends in the white force took the same position. They could not relate to the strike because they perceived ELRUM as having taken a racist position. One of the interesting aspects of the safety strike was that the Eldon Safety Committee was a coalition of trade unionists, ELRUM black revolutionaries, and white revolutionaries, mainly myself.

"What happened to the Safety Committee is instructive. There was a steady process of attrition among the trade unionists, one of whom was a white named George Bauer, another of whom was Frank McKinnon. Some dropped out early. Some stuck right up to the strike. At the end, we had only Jordan Sims, J. C. Thomas, and a couple of others. During the strike, the trade unionists stayed for the first-shift picketing and then, except for Jordan Sims, were never seen again, The revolutionaries stayed with it to the bitter end because they had more than trade-union reform to fight about, That may be a clumsy formulation, but the point is they were going to fight as long as they could, George Bauer, a skilled trades steward whom I have a lot of respect for, was fired with the other second-shift stewards. He participated actively in giving us safety information, but he never took part in picketing or in various confrontations with the union. George Bauer was not

and is not a racist, and he has encountered a lot of opposition with his own skilled tradesmen. They call him a nigger - lover. George had a quick temper. He used to be a professional boxer. He got into an argument outside the plant with an individual who had scabbed during the wildcat, and George decked him. This was outside the plant. Management moved to fire him, and the union wouldn't write a discharge grievance for weeks. Eventually, George got back in there, but he understood that he had better be careful.

"Our first confrontations with the union brought a reduction in the ranks of the Safety Committee. Reuther had been killed, and the international was using that as an excuse to keep the hall closed. We insisted on the right to use our own hall. We were using the conference room to get information, write leaflets, discuss strategy, etc. Elroy Richardson came in and told us to leave. We stood up and confronted him, saying he would have to throw us out. He said he'd call the police. We said, "Fine, Elroy, you want to call the police, call the police." He went away and left us alone. The next day, when we came back, the conference room was locked. Some of the unionists felt uneasy and talked about going to lunch. James Edwards and I went over to the door. I tried to pick the door with my knife, and we put our shoulders to it. Then we went outside and found a window. We got screwdrivers and got the conference-room window open. We had to actually break into our own hall. We got in and opened the conference-room door. As soon as they saw this, some of them went to lunch and never came back. We started having the meeting, and another of the

stewards got more and more agitated. He got on the verge of physically attacking me because I had broken into the hall. He had a very heavy thing on how Walter Reuther had been the black man's friend and ally. He was very insulted that I, a white man, had desecrated the memory of Reuther's death. He went into this thing with me and left and never came back. That was another contradiction in our ranks.

"The reaction of the people in my own department to the strike bothered me. I was on the West Gate, where most of my department comes in. I'll never forget this. Almost unanimously, the people in my department and people I knew did not go in when they saw me picketing. They talked to me, and some of them even gave out leaflets. What a lot did, though, was go to another gate. I couldn't understand that for a long time. What it meant was that they could relate to me as a person, but not the politics of the situation. There was the additional problem of how they related to the ELRUM people who were on the gate with me. This reinforced my assessment that we moved too fast. We had to do more agitation. We cost Chrysler 2174 axles, but we could have done more. We also succeeded in exposing the Chrysler-union cooperation to the workers in the plant. That is, we produced the documentation on all the safety violations the union wouldn't deal with. This was dramatized by the death of Gary Thompson. Even the UAW couldn't ignore that. Our strike lifted the consciousness of everybody. It used to be that workers wouldn't take the leaflets or would throw them away. Now, people at the plant almost always take the leaflet, put it in their pocket, and read it inside.

That is very positive and indicates a level of consciousness, higher than in most plants and higher than it had been in their plant.

"How workers relate to material given at the gate isn't understood by most people in the movement. When WILDCAT first appeared, ELRUM tried to front them off by physical threats. The WILDCAT people came back, and ELRUM backed off. ELRUM remained extremely hostile to the WILDCAT, even after it became known I was associated with it, ELRUM had the opinion that the WILDCAT was from the Communist Party, and they had minimal respect for the CP. They thought the WILDCAT was racist and an outsider sheet.

"I would like to say something about other radical groups which made interventions from 1970 onwards. Up front, let me say that I am presently a member of the Motor City Labor League, a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary group. Now, progressive Labor came out to the plant in the summer of 1970 and started selling their paper, CHALLENGE. I approached them at the gate one day. This was after I was fired. I looked like an ordinary worker. I was working at Budd Wheel at that time. They assumed I worked at Eldon. And I was shocked at how they related to a person whom they perceived as a typical worker. They were condescending. I ran a little bit about my involvement in the safety strike, and they were very critical of that. They said their policy was to ignore the unions. They assured me that they would be there every week and were not fly-by-night leftists. What happened was that they managed to antagonize a lot of folks, as is their fashion. This was done to

the extent that one day some white workers came out and beat the shit out of them. That indicated a failure of sorts. They told me the same thing had happened at Cadillac. That physical assault was the end of their presence, and they haven't been seen since.

"The reaction of the Socialist Workers Party is interesting because I'm not aware they had any reaction at all to what was going on at Eldon. They never contacted Sims, myself, or anyone in ELRUM to speak at a forum or do any internal education for them. I want to say something about their Detroit activities in the late sixties. At that time I was working for the Better Business Bureau, and I used to go to their Friday-night socialist forums at the Debs Hall. I went pretty regularly for almost a year. Not once did anyone ever approach me politically or be even minimally friendly. I was like a fixture for a year, but they just ignored me. Maybe they thought I was an agent or something, but that has always struck me as a totally ripped practice. You have to be blind or myopic to ignore what was happening at Eldon, and I have never seen them relate in any way out there. If they have worker cadre, they sure as hell aren't at Eldon, Budd Wheel, or Dodge Main.

"The only other groups to do any work are the Motor City Labor League, Revolutionary Union, and International Socialists. Revolutionary Union has mainly tried to get on with some stewards at Eldon, but they haven't distributed leaflets or done any public work. International Socialists have been extremely interested in Jordan Sims. They wanted to do a national campaign around his discharge in pretty much the way the

Angela Davis thing worked for the CP. The Motor City Labor League has had a public presence in the form of leaflets, and we have been working with the various people and with Jordan Sims.

'It is a truism that struggle creates strength. It is also true that you have to find issues that affect people's lives and that you agitate and organize around those issues with the point of view of making some gains and of exposing the concrete contradictions. The aftermath of our strike was that Jordan Sims ran for President of that Local (Local 961). He maintained his membership, and was narrowly defeated by Frank McKinnon, the white steward. The election was literally stolen from Jordan. Now, there is a scandal about the embezzlement of funds by McKinnon and other officials. Very large sums have disappeared for over 10 years, and apparently George Merrelli, the Regional Director, knew about it. That would make it reach right into Solidarity Mouse. People in the plant have gotten a pretty high consciousness about this whole set-up. We managed to get the Department of Labor into the process. We showed we were correct on the statutes and the contract. They had to expose their hand in a situation affecting the health and lives of those workers. We have developed a hard core of people at Eldon who go to union meetings. There's 60-70 people who know how to function. The company and union could just give up, but they can't do that because of the key nature of Eldon. The stakes are too high. But the company, union, and Labor Department continue to shit on people, which

creates more strength for us. Eventually, they'll have to move the factory out of Detroit or let us have it."

In the stamping plant, which we know is a hazardous area any way. I got my fingertip severed off in a press. They sewed it back on.... But that isn't as serious as some of the other things that have happened in the Rouge area in the past Six men in a basic-oxygen plant were killed, and there wasn't enough left of those men to put in a decent shopping bag.

- Wesley Johns, in a statement to a People's Court convened by the Motor City Labor League, April 3, 1973.

John Taylor's recounting of the struggle at Eldon points up some of the problems facing the militants who wanted to carry out the Revolutionary Union Movement (RUM) strategy. Many nationalist-minded blacks were attracted to the RUMs. Although very militant and vocal, the RUMs often held back the development of class-consciousness among other workers attracted to the wider League program. This gap between secondary and primary leadership grew wider after the strike of January 1969. All the members of the League executive would have curbed some of the more counterproductive language in ELRUM leaflets, but there were occasions when Baker and Wooten sanctioned approaches some of the other League leaders would not have approved of. Excessive emphasis on the contradictions between workers not only alienated whites who might have been neutral or sympathetic, it turned away many blacks. Older workers, who had a large stake in improving working conditions, especially disliked the wholesale attacks on "honkies" and "Toms," considering them incorrect ways to get

sustained and positive action. ELRUM's attitude toward individuals such as Jordan Sims and supporters of WILDCAT posed another kind of problem. ELRUM was somewhat sectarian toward them and judged that Sims, at best, was an honest reformist stuck in trade-union attitudes, and at worst could turn out to be another of those "traitors from within" the League warned about. The consequence of ELRUM's attitude was that the organization drew too rigid a line of demarcation between itself and other forces in the plant. Ken Cockrel voiced the additional criticism that the ELRUM workers fired in January had failed to build a defense committee in the plant and in the neighborhoods. He believed that the hostile ELRUM attitude toward white participation and working with revolutionary blacks was retarding rather than building their struggle.

ELRUM clearly failed to rally women to its ranks, Two of the workers killed at the plant during this period were women, and their deaths were an indication of the harassment and poor working conditions women faced, It was an open secret that dating foremen had its rewards, just as refusing them had its punishments. One young black woman who suffered from drowsiness caused by excessive noise got a job classification which would take her away from moving machinery, but she could not get it acted on because of union indifference and the hostility of her foremen. Several other women, in well-known incidents on the shop floor, were forced to tell off supervisors and union representatives after they became tired of fending off constant sexual advances. ELRUM bulletins spoke of the special problems facing the sisters in the plant, but ELRUM

never developed a concrete program for dealing with such problems. ELRUM activists generally bypassed the UAW altogether once they were out of the plant. This caused a gradual breakdown of ties with some of the more militant workers in the factory. Jordan Sims, even after being fired in 1970, went to union meetings regularly and organized his forces as he might have had he been still working inside the plant. Sims continued to contend for power in the union, and on May 23, 1973, after several highly questionable elections, he defeated Frank McKinnon 1599 to 735 and became president of Local 961. As an elected union official and still cochairman of the United National Caucus, Sims was now able to carry on his own fight from within the UAW hierarchy. He demonstrated an honest and aggressive unionist stance during his first year in office.

Citing shortcomings in the ELRUM performance in no way diminishes the importance of the work carried out over a two-year period. A handful of revolutionary-minded production-line workers had set themselves against the company and the union, and against the timidity and weariness of many workers. Taylor, a white Appalachian, called them exemplary; and their nationalism notwithstanding, he considered them the best leadership to have emerged in the plant.

*The introductory article originally appeared in 1969 in SPEAK OUT, a socialist periodical published in Detroit.*

Appeared in Radical America Volume 8, Number 6 January-February 1975)

