

# The Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement - Martin Glaberman



Martin Glaberman's analysis on the formation of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, a radical organisation of black car factory workers who placed themselves in opposition to both their bosses and the union.

The first major stage has ended for a new form of black organisation based on black industrial workers. The organisation is the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and is made up of black workers at the Hamtramck Assembly plant, formerly Dodge Main, of the Chrysler Corporation. Hamtramck is an industrial suburb completely within the city limits of Detroit. Both the town and the plant were for many years overwhelmingly Polish. Now the plant is 70 per cent black but the union local (UAW Local 3), the plant management and lower supervision, and the Hamtramck city administration is essentially Polish.

DRUM was formed in May 1968 during the course of a wildcat strike that protested against an increase in production without an increase in man-power. Most of the plant porkchoppers were off in Atlantic City at a union convention and the plant was shut down by a joint effort of older Polish women from the Trim Shop and young black workers. Since that time, DRUM has called and led four additional wildcat strikes, including one in July in which 3000 black workers shut the plant down for two and a half days, preventing the production of 3000 cars.

DRUM demands, in addition to the specific issues of speedup, discrimination, etc., include black control of the local union and black control of Management, from the lowest to the highest echelons. They have succeeded in disrupting the main Chrysler office and administration centre and they have held a sit-in in Solidarity House, national headquarters of the Walter Reuther's UAW. Although racism exists throughout the plant, in the management, the union, and rank-and-file workers, there has been significant white participation in all of the wildcats associated with DRUM. DRUM publishes a weekly newsletter that is distributed throughout the plant. There have been signs that the path being broken at Dodge is being followed with the formation of similar organisations at Ford and at Chrysler. At Chrysler, a group of young white workers have formed CRU – Chrysler Revolutionary Union.

Having established itself with direct rank-and-file activity, DRUM decided to take advantage of an accidental vacancy on the local union executive board to run a candidate for that office

(trustee). DRUM's candidate, Ron March, made it clear that he was not following the usual course of union caucuses in attempting to get a share of the power. There was no pretence that a revolutionary black trustee would effect any change in the union. The election, in September, was conducted under conditions of tremendous harassment of black people generally and DRUM people in particular by both the union officials and the police and city administration of Hamtramck. Black workers were beaten, electioneering groupings were broken up, bars around the plant were invaded and parking tickets were liberally distributed to all cars of DRUM supporters. They were, in addition, invasions of the union hall by the pigs and the clubbing and macing of union members without any criticism from the white and uncle torn local union leadership.

March won the largest vote in the election but had to compete in a run off against a white candidate who had the backing of the union machine. In early October, March was beaten in the final election. In part this was a consequence of the built-in conservatism of the union election machinery. Reuther has for a number of years now added retired workers to the union electorate so that local union executive boards no longer reflect the actual workers in a plant. As a result, retired Polish workers could be brought to the polls to vote against the young black workers who were bearing the brunt of the growing exploitation.

Discussion with young black workers at Dodge indicated that most people are sure that March also got a bad count. In any case, the election sewed to strengthen DRUM. The campaign was used to put forward DRUM proposals throughout the local union. In addition, the basic character of DRUM as a day-to-day action organization instead of the usual caucus limited to electoral activity was confirmed. Nobody has any illusions about the possibilities of beating the Reuther machine at its own game. Nor is anyone especially worried about charges of dual unionism.

Although DRUM was formed in May of this year, it did not spring fully formed out of thin air. Part of the basis for DRUM in a city like Detroit was the insurrection of the summer of 1967. The power of the black industrial working class was indicated, if indirectly, by the fact that the July days saw the shutdown of three giants of American capitalism: Ford, Chrysler and General Motors. In addition, there has long been a tendency in the black movement in Detroit which had a serious concern for the black industrial worker (as distinct from simply the unemployed or marginally employed). This has been most recently reflected in the powerful and lively, if irregular, paper, Inner City Voice, edited by John Watson. DRUM is, in some respects, an offshoot of Inner City Voice (as is a black high school paper that is appearing).

The signs are that DRUM will grow and spread. This is not, of course, assured. But whatever the future course of events what has already happened is of tremendous importance for revolutionary developments in the United States. When talk and action about the white power structure moves from local sherriffs and city administrations to General Motors, Ford and Chrysler, there is not much further to go.

*April/May 1969*