



From the film, *Finally Got the News*.

Detroit: I Do Mind Dying:

A Review

ERNEST MKALIMOTO ALLEN

DETROIT : I DO MIND DYING is a highly readable and accessible book, available in both hardcover and paperback editions. It should be considered imperative reading for anyone wishing to acquire an understanding of the radicalization of Detroit's black production workers in the late 1960's and early 1970's. A little more than half the book is devoted to the organizing efforts of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, which was born from the ashes of the 1967 Detroit rebellion, and passed from the scene in late 1971. (1) The remainder of the study touches upon such diverse topics as the Black Workers Congress, one of the direct (and now defunct) political successors of the LRBW; Detroit's police decoy squad, STRESS, subsequently disbanded under Mayor Coleman Young's administration; the radical judge, Justin Ravitz, of Records Court; and, finally, a brief overview of the political and social situation of black workers in 1973 Detroit.

Many an observer of the 1960's noted with surprise and approval the remarkable surfacing of the Civil Rights, Black Power, and New Left movements so soon after the stench of McCarthyism. Within this context, equally remarkable was the fact that an organization such as the League, with a leadership in its twenties and

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thirties, could have emerged with such a relatively coherent political line and practice. To the extent that such coherence existed, it seems to me, credit should be given in part to the presence in Detroit of a number of older and more experienced individuals and organizations. One could mention, for example, the Socialist Workers Party and its "spinoffs": the "Facing Reality" group of C.L.R. James and Martin Glaberman; the discussion circles organized by Grace and James Boggs; as well as present and past members or fellow travelers of the Communist Party. Whether one disagrees either partially or substantially with the politics of these organizations or individuals is quite beside the point; what should not be overlooked is that collectively they functioned as ongoing radical institutions which preserved and transmitted historical information and revolutionary values to a fresh generation of Detroit activists. And this, I would affirm, is what helped to make the ideology and practical activities of the League so radically different from other black political organizations of the period — League leadership did not have to start from scratch.

Obviously all the credit should not be attributed to Detroit's relatively unique political climate. If LRBW leadership had merely replicated that climate organizationally, there would be little else to discuss here. What made the LRBW different from most other radical organizations was that it moved beyond the stage of leafleting at plant gates, and actually organized black workers to oppose exploitative conditions inside the plant. Its vision and internal structure were decidedly not those of an opposition "caucus" within existing unions, but were those of an independent organization dedicated to the fundamental transformation of social relations in the United States.

At their height in the 1968-69 period, the in-plant organizations which composed the LRBW were able to organize hundreds of black workers and command the respect of thousands more. The League's political influence spread far beyond the geographical confines of metropolitan Detroit. The LRBW itself became involved in a number of community-organizing projects, owned and operated a modest printing plant, set up an independent legal-defense operation, and was in the process of developing a revolutionary alternative to the United Fund — the International Black Appeal — on the eve of its demise in the early 1970's. Ultimately, it is true, the LRBW succumbed to the same critical deficiencies characteristic of other political organizations of the period. The details of that story, unfortunately, are not revealed in the Surkin/Georgakas book, and will have to await another format.

In the introduction to the book, the authors' purpose is stated succinctly:

At various moments in this effort by working people to gain control of their own lives, different individuals and organizations became more important than others. Our

purpose has been to follow the motion of the class which supported them rather than to trace particular destinies or to speculate on the possible future importance of specific individuals, ideologies, or organizations. (p. 5)

It must be said, however, that *DETROIT: I DO MIND DYING* is more an account of the actions and ideas of leading individuals within a specific organization — the LRBW — than one of “the motion of the class which supported them....” Moreover, though speculation with regard to the future of individuals is wisely avoided by Georgakas and Surkin, by means of a process of omission, surface description, and relativism, greater weight is subtly lent to the actions and ideas of specific individuals within the League as it then existed. That the viewpoints of the book in many instances one-sidedly reflect the outlooks of Executive Board members John Watson, Ken Cockrel, and Mike Hamlin will not be immediately apparent to those readers who had no first-hand experience with the organization. We shall return to that point shortly.

The authors are essentially correct when they characterize the primary concern of General Baker and Chuck Wooten as that of plant organizing; that of Watson/Cockrel/Hamlin as more visionary, in the sense of advocating a greater political involvement of the LRBW in the larger Detroit community as well as beyond; and that of Luke Tripp and John Williams as steering a cautious middle course between these two positions (pp. 85-94). Surkin and Georgakas fail to take into account two critical points, however. Although aside from one or two exceptions one can present solid political justification for supportive and other organizational activities carried on outside the plants, the truth is that the League's Executive Board failed to integrate such activities into any comprehensive and centralized developmental plan. In other words, the proliferation of offices and activities of the LRBW throughout the Detroit metropolitan area, while no doubt illustrating “the depth and vision of the League's approach,” (p. 93) as Surkin and Georgakas would have it, was, at the same time, a series of helter-skelter operations which often drained the organization of precious human and financial resources. In the worst of cases, such activities assumed the form of purely personal projects, where individual Executive Board members appeared to be carving out semi-independent organizational fiefdoms. For example, there was the “Cortland office,” main center for worker organizing; the “Linwood office,” where Parents and Students for Community Control as well as the International Black Appeal were housed; the “Dequindre office,” where the Black Star Bookstore and an abortive community-organizing project were launched; the “Fenkell office,” headquarters for the Black Star Printing operation. There were

also geographically separate offices for Black Star Film Productions, the Labor Defense Coalition, and UNICOM, a community-organizing center. To outsiders the operation appeared quite impressive; rank-and-file insiders often saw it as an organizational and bureaucratic nightmare.

Second point: by the time of the first general meeting of the LRBW in July, 1970, the workers' components (DRUM, ELRUM, etc.) had literally ceased to exist; at the very most only a handful of members remained in each. This latter revelation, especially, places in appropriate perspective the essential character of a key division within the League's Executive Board — that between plant organizers and those who pushed for wider community and national involvement. In reading Georgakas and Surkin, one is left with the impression that Baker and Wooten were hopeless provincials incapable of extending their vision beyond the big gates of Chrysler's Hamtramck plantation. The point, however, is that they were attempting to regain lost terrain. By mid-1970, when the LRBW was becoming increasingly well known among radical black workers throughout the United States, as well as in domestic and international Left circles, it had also lost its working-class base at home. Hence by glossing over the substantive underlying realities confronting the LRBW, Surkin and Georgakas lend greater credence to the Hamlin/Watson/Cockrel position that the principal task of the League in the 1970-71 period was that of expansion rather than consolidation. Quite obviously I take the directly opposite view.

Let us now concentrate on what I consider to be another of the book's major shortcomings: its generally negative treatment of Afroamerican nationalism. The League itself (more precisely, its predecessor, the Revolutionary Union movement) was launched on the crest of a mass nationalism unleashed during the July, 1967 Detroit Rebellion. It should not be too surprising to learn, then, that nationalist sentiment in one form or another thoroughly pervaded the organization from bottom to top. Ironically, though the LRBW (through its top leadership) widely projected itself as a Marxist organization, such categorizing had little to do with the concrete political sentiments of its rank and file. Aside from its leading body, the Executive Board, all sorts of ideological eclecticism prevailed within the League, from nationalist distrust of all whites, to Christianity, astrology, pro-socialist sentiment, and even anti-Marxist sentiment. Here is reason enough why the LRBW as a whole could not be justifiably characterized as a Marxist-Leninist organization at any single stage of its development. On the other hand, an apparent majority of the membership at least nominally accepted the proposition that Marxist theory and practice were vital to the liberation of Afroamerican workers, but most seem to have done so more out of faith in the political correctness of the Executive Board than out of any deep ideological conviction rooted in study. (The political gulf between the top leadership and

the membership is manifestly evident in the League film "Finally Got the News." On one hand there is John Watson lecturing on the question of surplus value and of the need for socialist revolution; on the other there is Ron March, one of the many dedicated in-plant leaders of DRUM, who states, "We of the League organized to show management and the union that the workers will not tolerate these type of conditions.")

Surkin and Georgakas completely underplay the positive role of nationalism in the formation of the LRBW, mention only its negative aspects, and correspondingly overstress its Marxist-Leninist side — which, as we signaled above, remained mostly the "property" of its leading body. In this way the authors' analysis lacks comprehension of one of the principal "fueling sources" of Afro-American political movements of the past decade — and that of the League in particular.

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers was undoubtedly the most coherent and capable black political organization of the late 1960's, this in spite of its tremendous internal problems and leadership deficiencies. Shortcomings aside, DETROIT: I DO MIND DYING is the most comprehensive attempt thus far to place the activities of the League in perspective. If only for this reason it deserves serious consideration.

NOTES

1. One section of the LRBW merged with the Communist League, founded in 1969 in southern California; the CL subsequently became the Communist Labor Party. Another section became the Black Workers Congress. Both are highly-sectarian organizations.

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