

“We understand better than anyone else how much work goes into every pound of bacon”:

Gender and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers

In an interview conducted around 1969, a Black woman working in an automobile factory in Detroit lamented the plight of Black working class women, declaring that they “understand better than anyone else how much work goes into every pound of bacon, and into every slice of bread. We, more than anyone else in the workforce, know what it means to be laid off. We, more than anyone else in the workforce, know what it means to be looking, always looking, for work.”¹ The feeling of frustration with a system that burdened women three times over because of their race, class, and gender took on a particular form in the “Model City” of Detroit and especially among its industrial workforce. During the late 1960s in the heyday of the Black Power era, members of the black working class began militantly organizing in the factories of Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors for better working conditions and an end to racism. Their targets were not only the plant management, but also the union bureaucracy of the United Auto Workers (UAW). Calling each local struggle a Revolutionary Union Movement, together they formed the city-wide League of Revolutionary Black Workers. These workers were self-described Marxist-Leninists and the architects of chants such as “U-A-W means You Ain’t White” and “Put a Halter on Walter.”² Black women, like the one quoted earlier, were active participants in these organizations. They helped with mobilizing voter turnout, spearheaded

¹ Unknown speaker. Vincent Voice Library, *Finally Got the News* Collection (VVL), DB14464. 14:00. Accessed November 2015. (All subsequent references to this collection will be abbreviated to VVL.)

² VVL, DB14402. 2:00. “Walter”, referring to Walter Reuther, the then president of the UAW-International Union.

efforts to organize non-auto workers, and faced their own particular struggles within the plant and within the community. They were also participants of and catalysts for the split that led to the disintegration of the League as a formal organization in 1971. This paper is a preliminary analysis of the role that gender played in the history of the League. It examines the role of women in the League, sexism within the League's leadership, and larger questions regarding gender and African American activism. Black women were active in the League and they were the organizers and targets of small women-centered efforts. However, the leaders of the League preferred to see women as part of a group of Black workers, rather than a distinct subgroup.

The research for this paper involved historical and sociology monographs, articles from journals and online collections, documents from the MSU Special Collections Library, and the *Finally Got the News* collection found in the Vincent Voice Library which includes hours of interviews and other materials used to make the documentary on the League. Perhaps predictably, it was quite a challenge to find sources that documented the participation and perception of Black women in the League. For those attempting to do Black women's history, the search for primary documents is somewhat hindered due to the fact that "the black woman's world has been peripheral to those most likely to keep records of any kind, men and white women."³ Even in the Vincent Voice Library collections, out of hours of recorded interviews there is only one interview with a Black woman. If more time were available to devote to this project, I would attempt to search through the archives at the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University. Perhaps more fruitfully, I would try to do an oral history project with some of the women participants who wish to share their experiences. For instance, Cleo Silvers, cited a few times later in this paper, is still alive. Despite these source limitations, this paper

³ Deborah Gray White, "Mining the Forgotten: Manuscript Sources for Black Women's History," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 74, No. 1, 1987, 237-242.

represents a point of a departure for those wishing to place the League of Revolutionary Black Workers within the discourse about gender and Black Power-era organizations.

There is still much to be written about the League. There are only two book-length studies on the League, both falling more comfortably within the discipline of sociology rather than history. They are James A. Geschwender's *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency: the League of Revolutionary Black Workers* (1977) and Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin's *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying* (1975). These two works have been extremely important in contextualizing the rise and fall of the organization as well providing revealing interviews with participants. However, the two books certainly have their shortcomings. While neither dive into polemics, sometimes they read more as contemporary primary sources because the authors were physically and politically engaged with the League (Geschwender was a Professor who talked Marxist strategy with members of the League and Georgakas was an anarchist and founding member of New York-based direct action group Up Against the Wall Mother Fuckers). Additionally, one member of the League has claimed that *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying* "grossly distorts the history and development" of the League.⁴ Also, in part a product of their time, both works hardly examine gender roles and gendered ideology within the League directly.

The Black Power Era

By the late 1960s the nonviolent dogmatism of the Civil Rights movement was waning in popularity and these changing attitudes ushered in what became known as the Black Power era. Historian William L. Van Deburg points to the thought of Malcolm X as the ideological forefather of the Black Power militants such as Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Angela

⁴ A. Muhammad Ahmad, "1968-1971: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers." libcom.org. Published online on Oct 28 2005. Accessed November 2015. <https://libcom.org/library/league-revolutionary-black-workers>

Davis, Eldridge Cleaver, and Huey Newton. Malcolm X's writings on self-defense, racial pride, and the re-evaluation of Black people by themselves were very influential on the next crop of Black activists.⁵ However, one could just as easily point to Robert F. Williams (*Negroes with Guns*) or Gloria Richardson (of the militant Civil Rights movement of Cambridge, Maryland) as other proto-Black Power era figures.⁶

Despite the inconclusiveness of a Black Power political revolution, the fact that Black Power was "essentially cultural" meant that its' ramifications were felt in much of American life. The most well known and influential "cultural nationalist" figures that emerged in this period were Maulana Ron Karenga, founder of US organization, and Amiri Baraka/ Leroi Jones. Yet even groups like the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense were not totally bereft of cultural aspects (Indeed, they had their own musical group called "The Lumpen"). The boundaries between cultural nationalism and revolutionary nationalism were certainly blurred.⁷

Much of the Black Power-era ideas about Black liberation implicitly or explicitly elevated Black masculinity and diminished women's role in the movement. Cultural nationalist Karenga is described as assigning "rigidly subordinate roles to women."⁸ Additionally, the men in the Black Power movement intertwined the notions of "liberation" with reclaiming antiquated notions of masculinity. In this way, "the black man's attempts at self-definition presumed the right to define Afro-American women as well."⁹ Historian Kimberly Springer examines the influence that white upper class values had on perceptions of what liberation could look like. She

⁵ William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 1-5.

⁶ Sharon Harley, "Chronicles of a Death Foretold." in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil-Rights Black Power Movement*, edited by Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin. (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 174-192.

⁷ Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 9-10, 171, 176-177, 175.

⁸ Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 218.

⁹ Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 297

elaborates on Van Deburg's argument, explaining that "the roots of black women's second-class citizenship are embedded in bourgeois notions of womanhood, femininity, and motherhood... An implicit, sometimes explicit, goal of the movement was the reassertion of the male breadwinner as head of household."¹⁰ The centering of the Black masculine experience during this time was not omnipresent, however. Tracye A. Matthews complicates the hegemonic perception of the Black Panther Party as hyper-masculine and sexist, arguing that media focus on "gun barrel politics" distorted the ways that the Panthers were progressive regarding gender politics.¹¹ Additionally, some members of the League at least acknowledged the fact that the single Black mother faced particular sorts of oppression because of her status and gender, pointing to how members of the League have helped "ADC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) mothers who are jammed up".¹² However, the sentiments that women's position in the Black liberation movement should be "prone" were felt throughout this period and informed the decisions of the League of Revolutionary Black workers to center racism, capitalism, and imperialism (not gender) in their analysis of oppression.

Detroit, Postwar to the 1967 Uprising

The city of Detroit in the late 1960s was home to a variety of problems that made it possible for an organization for the League to appear. The one-time "Arsenal of Democracy" had a long legacy of brutal racial housing discrimination. Thomas Sugrue explains that the exclusion of Black people from white neighborhoods was not an unforeseen consequence of capital

¹⁰ Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 23.

¹¹ Tracye A. Matthews, "No One Ever Asks What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is," in *Sisters in Struggle: African American Women in the Civil-Rights Black Power Movement*, edited Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin. (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 249-250.

¹² Kenneth Cockrel, VVL, **DB14489**.

investment, an ugly hangover from de jure Jim Crow, or a preference of Black people to live in their own neighborhood. Instead, he argues that, “private-sector discrimination was... a direct consequence of a partnership between the federal government and local bankers and real estate brokers.”¹³

The history of housing discrimination and white opposition to the integration of Black people into white neighborhoods stretched back to the 1920s. The landmark case of *Ossian Sweet* in 1926 arose when a white mob attacked a Black family moving into a white neighborhood and the Black family responded with gunfire. Victoria Wolcott highlights the gendered dynamics of this incident and the way that “Masculinity was defined, in part, by the ability of men to “protect” women in the domestic sphere.”¹⁴

Detroit was also the site of years of industrial decline and “decentralization” by the Big Three auto manufacturing companies during the 1950s. Sugrue notes how this process facilitated white workers vacating the city of Detroit and moving to the suburbs. Investments followed. This left the city without a tax base and ultimately the city became poorer and Blacker as a result of these processes.¹⁵

In the eyes of some of the Black community, deindustrialization and redlining encouraged the sense that they were betrayed by the city power structure. In 1963, the Reverend Charles W. Butler, a prominent African American minister and Civil Rights advocate, observed the effects of these political decision on the consciousness of the Black Detroiters. He asserts that, “The desire and ability to move without the right to move is refined slavery... [racial

¹³ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), Princeton Classic Edition, 43.

¹⁴ Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 142.

¹⁵ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 149.

segregation] spawned and cultivated the spirit of rebellion.”¹⁶ The Reverend would prove to be more true than he may have wished. In July of 1967 following a raid on an after-hours bar (a “blind pig”), the city exploded in a violent uprising against businesses and police with low estimates of damage beginning at \$32 million.¹⁷

These rebellions had a direct effect on the formation of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Ernie Allen, a participant in and critic of the League, asserts that “the LRBW was an organized outgrowth of the 1967 black urban rebellion of Detroit.”¹⁸ In Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin’s seminal study on the League, they deliberately begin their narrative with the “Great Rebellion of July 1967” and the impact that had on the people of Detroit.¹⁹ Certainly, the riots were had a large impact on the consciousness of Detroiters. Sylvia McClain, who was 14 years old in 1967, points to her encounter at gunpoint with the National Guard during the rebellion as the reason that she “became what I am today”. McClain later went on to join the Black Panther Party and help establish numerous student and neighborhood organizations.²⁰

In addition to affecting the general consciousness of the Black community, the rebellion was the explicit cause for the auto plants to hire many new young Black workers, some who would go on to support the League. In order to curb one of the perceived catalysts for the rebellion- Black unemployment- auto companies began purposefully hiring workers that were Black and unskilled. In 1968, Henry Ford II famously said “If they want jobs we will give them

¹⁶ Charles W. Butler, “Message to the Open Occupancy Conference”, in *City in Racial Crisis: The Case of Detroit Pre and Post the 1967 Riot*. edited by Leonard Gordon William (C Brown Publishers, 1971), quoted in Segreue page 258.

¹⁷ Sidney Fine, Violence in the *Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1989) 297.

¹⁸ Ernest Allen, “Dying From the Inside.” in *They Should Have Served that Cup of Coffee*, edited by Dick Cluster, (Boston: South End Press, 1979), 75.

¹⁹ Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study In Urban Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1975), 1-2.

²⁰ Sylvia McClain, “Riot 101: 1967.” in *Eyes on Fire: Witnesses to the Detroit Riot of 1967*, edited by Heather Buchanan et. al. (Detroit: Aquarius Press, 2007), 27.

jobs” and President of Ford, Arjay Miller, said that the company’s purpose was nothing less than to “eliminate hard-core unemployment in the inner city.” The site of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), Chrysler received a grant on February 1st, 1968 to provide jobs for 750 “hard-core unemployed and to enroll an additional 1,295 underemployed persons in a ‘skill-improvement program.’”²¹ The Detroit auto companies’ clamoring to help build the “New Detroit” encouraged the hiring of many young Black workers who were likely to be sympathetic to shop-floor militancy.

Additionally, 1960s Detroit was host to a vibrant community of radicals. C.L.R. James and Grace Lee Boggs lived in the city and were publishing written pieces on Marxism, labor activism, and revolution. The Socialist Workers Party had active support and there was much sympathy for the Republic of New Africa in Detroit.²² The future core cadre of the League all studied Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* with Martin Glaberman in the early 1960s.²³

Black Labor and the UAW

Black industrial laborers had a long and antagonistic history within the UAW. They were originally hired en masse in Ford’s River Rouge plant as strikebreakers during the UAW’s fight to organize the auto industry.²⁴ This move encouraged the UAW to admit Black workers into the union to counter the strategy of the management.²⁵ Following this, however, Blacks continued to be sidelined within the union. Even in the late 1960s, “As a matter of principle, the UAW also

²¹ Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 442-443.

²² James A Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency: the League of Revolutionary Black Workers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78. Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til The Midnight Hour*, 186. Joseph actually credits the rise of the League to “living room chats where Jimmy and Grace Boggs and youthful militants traded war stories and plotted revolution.”

²³ Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency*, 170.

²⁴ August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 16-22.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 30-33.

placed economic issues that affected the bulk of the rank and file ahead of race-specific measures.”²⁶ Despite Walter Reuther’s very publicized support for Martin Luther King Jr., including his marching with King in the 1963 Walk to Freedom down Woodward Avenue, he opposed efforts to make the UAW more democratic and more proactive about supporting the concerns of Black UAW members. In particular Local 3 (the local at the Dodge Main plant in Hamtramck) had a longstanding reputation of union racism. Sugrue notes that, “white officials gerrymandered elections to dilute black votes and influence.”²⁷ The Black workforce was a significant portion of the auto manufacturing workforce. In 1970, in the whole Detroit metropolitan area, Black workers made up 23% of the industrial workforce in the auto industry compared to 18% of the population of Metropolitan Detroit.²⁸

Additionally, the UAW did almost nothing to stop the trend of workplace discrimination. An analysis of in-plant racism by Georgakas and Surkin demonstrate that “[Blacks] 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.”²⁹ Yet, the union did not prioritize combating these trends for fear of jeopardizing agreements with the plant management. Black workers also were excluded from seniority benefits because many of them were hired after white workers because of the long history of discriminatory hiring practices. In the 1950s, it was Black men and women who took the brunt of auto-plant firings. Jacqueline Jones describes how with technological innovation in the 1950s led to “layoffs for Black men and women who lacked the seniority rights that unions

²⁶ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 102.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 101.

²⁸ Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency*, 45. 1970 U.S. Census. Statistics for SMSA 2160. Accessed online using Social Explorer on December 19th, 2015.

<http://www.socialexplorer.com/tables/C1970/R11090099?ReportId=R11090099>

²⁹ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 35.

guaranteed to longer-term white employees.”³⁰ The UAW again did nothing to combat this injustice.

Working Class Women, the Auto Plants, and the UAW

Women in the auto industry occupied very specific positions in the plants. In 1970 Detroit, women make up 13% of the total auto-industry manufacturing workforce. Black women make up only 2% of the total workforce (5,712 individuals). That is 16.7% of the women’s workforce.³¹ During World War II, Black women predominantly worked as janitors, matrons, and government inspectors.³² In the 1960s when they began to enter more skilled positions in the plants in greater numbers, they both celebrated the new opportunities as well as encountered new struggles because of their race and gender.³³ A Black woman production line worker in 1970 experienced these struggles, saying, “I don’t have skills like a secretary or something. I went into the factory because it was the only place where I could get a job making decent money, but if you stay a lady, you don’t make it out there. They all put the pressure on you.”³⁴

The UAW was, on paper, progressive on women’s issues. In a statement written in April of 1970, they ratified a resolution that affirmed that the UAW will “insist... on the right of every woman to work” and “to be paid for her labors on the same scale as men doing the same or comparable work” and “on the rights of equal opportunity for advancement.”³⁵ Yet even by

³⁰ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Perseus Book Group, 2010), 230.

³¹ Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency*, 45.

³² Ruth Milkman. *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 55.

³³ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, 244-247.

³⁴ Carla Cook, interview quoted in Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 169.

³⁵ Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 207.

1974, “in the sewing divisions of auto industries... women and black men have the hard, heavy, lower-paid jobs involved in sewing and lifting upholstery [while] white men have the light, high-paid jobs.”³⁶ Women were also often relegated to clerical work because of notions of gender-appropriate work. Furthermore, in the 1970s blue-collar women had a higher rate of unemployment than blue-collar men.³⁷

The UAW did make some inroads into women’s issues, notably their dedication to the organizing of Technical, Office, and Professional (TOP) Workers. Yet Sugrue holds them accountable for other grievous errors, saying that, “In the case of women workers, however, the seniority system failed altogether. Union and company officials viewed women’s work as temporary, and refused to defend women’s seniority rights during the wartime reconversion. Women were invariably assigned to separate seniority lines, with separate pay schedules, reflecting and hardening the gendered division of labor that prevailed in auto work.”³⁸ Union and company collusion to marginalize women was felt especially hard on black women workers. Because of “the [Black] husband’s poor economic position in the labor force, the black family is more dependent on the black woman’s wages.”³⁹ Black women are more likely to work at jobs with less prestige than black men, and in a less diverse pool of jobs. Black women are also more likely to have inferior jobs even within the same occupations as white women.

Rise and Fall of the League

³⁶ Pamela A. Roby, *The Conditions of Women in Blue Collar, Industrial, and Service Jobs: A Review of Research and Proposals for Research Action and Policy* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1974), 25, quoted in Mary Frank Fox and Sharlene Hesse-Biber, *Women at Work* (Mayfield Publishing Company, 1984), 119.

³⁷ Fox and Hesse-Biber, *Women at Work*, 120.

³⁸ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 104.

³⁹ Fox and Hesse-Biber, *Women at Work*, 158.

In May of 1968, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) was formed. It followed on the heels of a wildcat strike protesting the speedup of the assembly line.⁴⁰ This first wildcat saw 4,000 workers leave the plant and was the first strike to happen at the Dodge Main plant in fourteen years.⁴¹ The demands issued by DRUM included the immediate hiring of 50 Black foremen, 10 Black general foremen, 3 Black superintendents, and a Black plant manager. They also demanded all Black doctors and 50% Black nurses in the medical centers at Dodge Main and that “all Black workers immediately stop paying union dues” and those funds instead “be levied to the Black community to aid in self-determination for Black people.”⁴²

A series of additional wildcats inspired the formation of affiliate organizations at other plants. These included the Eldon Avenue Revolutionary Union Movement (ELRUM) and the Ford Revolutionary Union Movement (FRUM) at the River Rouge plant.⁴³ To coordinate the activities of the various local Revolutionary Unions, the League was formed in 1969 and opened its office in October.⁴⁴ The groups staged wildcats, boycotts, and in UAW elections ran their own slate of candidates against the union bureaucracy.

The heads of the League described it as “the only avowedly Marxist-Leninist approach to organizing Blacks”. They were critical of other revolutionary groups, such as the Black Panther Party for not organizing factory workers. They were also critical of nationalist groups like the Nation of Islam.⁴⁵ In an interview, one time Executive Board member Mike Hamlin explains that the League believed in the “revolutionary potential [of] the Black working class at the point of

⁴⁰ Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency*, 89.

⁴¹ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 24.

⁴² A. Muhammad Ahmad, “1968-1971: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers.”

⁴³ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying*, 106, 85.

⁴⁴ Ahmad, “1968-1971: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers.”

⁴⁵ Kenneth Cockrell, VVL, DB14397.

production.”⁴⁶ However, the ideology of the League was never as clear cut as some of their spokespeople may have implied.

There was tension between the leadership regarding questions of nationalism, focusing on only plant organizing, cross-racial alliances, and gender. Some of these tensions led to the collapse of the League. One participant observed that “problems with structure became so thoroughly intertwined with those of negative personal behavior on the part of leaders and followers alike.”⁴⁷ Geschwender points to ideological differences within the leadership cadre about how to deal with dual oppressions of race and class.⁴⁸ Another strain on the League was the fact that they were perpetually short on funds and this made it difficult for them to sustain all the necessary operations to keep the organization intact.⁴⁹

Women in the League

An overview of the League and its affiliates may give the impression that the organization was completely made up of men. However, this outwardly masculine presentation merely obscures the existence of women and the roles that they played within the organization. As discussed above, women had jobs in the auto plants, albeit jobs that were segregated on the basis of sex and jobs that seemed to be on a “last-hired, first-fired” basis. Black women are seen walking into the plants alongside men in the *Finally Got the News* documentary. There are also women handing out the DRUM newsletter to their fellow workers at the plant gates.⁵⁰ Women voices are heard loud and clear during days when DRUM was getting the plant workers to go

⁴⁶ Mike Hamlin, “Revolution at the Point of Production: An Interview with Mike Hamlin of DRUM and The League of Revolutionary Black Workers.” Interviewed by Jack Taylor. *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men*. 2:1, Autumn 2013.

⁴⁷ Allen, “Dying from the Inside,” 105.

⁴⁸ Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency*, 182.

⁴⁹ John Watson, VVL, DB14408.

⁵⁰ *Finally Got the News*, Documentary, Copyright 1970. 16:30. Accessed online in November 2015 at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgJd_MvJVzg

vote for the DRUM candidates in a union election. Women in the crowd can be heard stopping workers and asking ““have you voted brother?” and “have you voted lady?” and responding with an enthusiastic “right on!” if they have.⁵¹

Militant activity led by women turns up throughout the history of DRUM and the League. In a detail that was often “forgotten” by League leaders in their later recollection of the May 1968 wildcat, the strike that spurred the creation of DRUM was actually instigated by Polish women who were doing clerical work in the Dodge plant.⁵² Women were also forgotten in their role in the proto-League organization. Uhuru was a small militant student organization centered around high schools and Wayne State University and later its’ members became half of the Executive Board of the League. Uhuru leaders included women, notably Gwendlyn Kemp.⁵³ Gwendlyn was arrested along with Luke S. Tripp Jr., John Williams, John Watson, and General Baker in a 1963 protest for the killing of sex worker Cynthia Scott at the hands of the Detroit Police.⁵⁴ The four men went on to be leaders in the League. Yet Gwen Kemp’s leadership in Uhuru did not translate over into later League activities.

Women were certainly attracted to the League. Cleo Silvers, a Black woman from New York City, was recruited to come to Detroit to help organize the League. She began her organizing experience in New York in the DRUM-inspired Health Revolutionary Unity Movement (HRUM) which was trying to organize hospital workers in New York City. She was hired into the Dodge Truck plant in Warren where she began her organizing efforts. In her time spent in the plant she was witness to the women-specific oppressions that existed on the shop floor. She shares that “I had been harassed by foremen. You know, foremen’s thing with women,

⁵¹ Unknown Speakers, VVL, DB14402

⁵² Martin Glaberman, “The Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement.” April/May 1969. Accessed online November 2015 at <https://libcom.org/library/dodge-revolutionary-union-movement-martin-glaberman>

⁵³ Ahmad, “1968-1971: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers.”

⁵⁴ *Detroit News*, October 14th 1963.

that's another issue. There weren't a lot of women in the plant, and those that were there were always being harassed, whether you were black or white or whatever. It was not unexpected for a foreman to come up to you and say, if you sleep with me I'll give you a better job." These conditions helped to convince Stivers that a revolutionary union movement was necessary to change the working conditions of the plant.⁵⁵ It is worth noting that Stivers made the transition to organizing for the League from a more stereotypically "feminine" organizing effort: she was heavily involved in tenant's rights organizing in New York City prior to her experience with HRUM and the League.⁵⁶

Women were also included in the election slates that DRUM ran against the official UAW candidates. Although none won their race (only 2 of DRUM's 35 candidates were elected⁵⁷) the inclusion of them on the ballot at all is significant in the face of DRUM's all-men leadership.⁵⁸ Additionally, women like Helen Jones and Mabel Turner were instrumental in the operations of the League's Black Star Publishing and Black Star Productions.⁵⁹

Despite the focus on exclusively men for the duration of the documentary, the filmmakers of *Finally Got the News* include a very interesting interview with a League woman at the end of the film. She shares the anecdote of a Black women worker, saying, "Like the majority of her black sisters, Mrs. Smith has to work, not for any kind of fulfillment but because of sheer bread and butter need." She goes on to explain the situation of working class women, saying. "We, more than anyone else in the workforce, know what it means to be laid off. We, more than anyone else in the workforce, know what it means to be looking, always looking, for work. We

⁵⁵ Cleo Silvers, "When the union's the enemy: an interview with Cleo Silvers." interviewed by Andrew Elrod. Accessed online November 2015 at <https://libcom.org/history/when-unions-enemy-interview-cleo-silvers>

⁵⁶ Roberta Gold, "I Had Not Seen Women like That Before': Intergenerational Feminism in New York City's Tenant Movement," in *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Summer 2009), 387-415.

⁵⁷ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 50.

⁵⁸ Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency*, 115.

⁵⁹ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 171.

have the highest unemployment rate and the lowest wage scales. In spite of our need to work, we are the last hired, the first fired.” The clips that play during this voice-over include Black women marching down the street holding a sign that says “Cops Kill”, Black women caring for small children, and grocery shopping. The selection of these scenes could have been influenced by the filmmakers themselves or by the League members advising the film. Either way, these clips reveal something about the perception of women in the League. They were not the Panther-style leather-jacket-wearing gun-toting revolutionaries. Instead, they appear as working class mothers and community members concerned both with police brutality and feeding their families.⁶⁰

This association of working class women as being primarily responsible for feeding the family shows up again in the blues song that *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying* takes its name from. In the second verse of his “Please Mr. Foreman,” Joe Lee Hooker wails that “My wife’s been very sickly, she can’t help me by takin’ on a job....and we got 5 little children to feed, tell me, why you wanna make my life so hard?”⁶¹ In this way, the working conditions in the plant were perceived as affecting women and families who did not work in the plant but relied on and supported men that did.

In later League newsletters there are selections that focus on how the oppressive and dangerous conditions in the plant hurt the women and families that rely on industrial workers for survival. An article following the death of a few workers due to an unsafe workplace highlights the experience that plant violence had on those not working directly in the plants.

“What is the nature of your "concern", Harry [the plant manager]? Are you "concerned" about the family of Rose Logan, now motherless because of one of your brakeless high-lows? Are you "concerned" about the family of Mamie Williams, Harry? The same Mamie Williams whom you made leave a hospital bed and a doctor's care so she could return to the death pit of Eldon Avenue? Are you "concerned", Harry, about the pregnant

⁶⁰ Unknown Speaker, VVL, DB14464. *Finally Got the News*, 50:00.

⁶¹ Joe Lee Carter, “Please Mr. Foreman” 1965. Accessed December 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYcecsNc-GI>

wife whose husband you killed, or about the 19-month-old son whose father you murdered ? Gary Thompson was only 22 years old, Harry; he survived 18 months in Vietnam, yet he could not survive a mere five months in your plant. But of course your "concern" will remove this huge burden of sorrow that rests on the families of those whose loved ones you murdered."

In this way ELRUM tied the household labor of reproduction to the in-plant production and highlighted the toll that the industry took on both.⁶²

Black women faced not only the sexual harassment of foreman but also the dangers of working in some of the more dangerous jobs on the shop floor. A Black woman named Rose Logan at the Eldon Ave plant was severely injured in an accident with a forklift (or, according to ELRUM, was run down by "a honkie driving a forklift"), and when ordered by the plant infirmary to return to work, died from her injuries. Her death became a rallying cry in the publications of ELRUM.⁶³ However, these publications, in indicting management and union for placing profits ahead of safety, do not explicitly point to sexist division of labor as the reason that many Black women end up in janitorial positions or other service work on the shop floor. This is in keeping with the primary focus on race and class that the leadership espoused.

Gendered Organizing Efforts

The League's political strategy was based around the concept that Black people possessed the greatest amount of power at the point of the production. The logic goes that the high density of Black workers on the assembly line had the capacity to shut down entire plants and potentially the whole auto industry. Indeed, the successful wildcats at the Eldon Ave plant were especially powerful because Eldon Ave was Chrysler Corporation's *only* gear and axle

⁶² DRUM, "The carrot and the stick: December 11, 1968" (from DRUM Newsletter Number 24), accessed online November 2015 at <https://libcom.org/library/carrot-stick-december-11-1968>

⁶³ ELRUM newsletter, Volume 1 number 7. 1970. Back page. In MSU Special collections.

plant.⁶⁴ Following from this theoretical framework, the League did not prioritize organizing women *as women* but rather *as workers*. Geschwender mentions that the League “recognized a special need and believed that a special program was required” in organizing workers.⁶⁵ It is not certain that this assertion holds up and it is unclear where that point came from. In some cases the leadership talked about “the women question” as merely a distraction from work to be done. Kenneth Cockrel asserts that “there are a profound number of revolutionary tasks that have to be performed and a relatively scarce number of people. But people use shit like the women question, the race question, as a pretext for not doing this work. Black organizations being subjected to pressures ‘primarily by whites’, to posture. The real thing is to relate to workers.”⁶⁶ Women were definitely not dismissed as being important to the functioning of the League, but the primary focus on class-based organizing is emphasized. Indeed, to suggest otherwise caused tension within the League as those who asserted the importance of women’s issues were charged with wishing “to elevate the problems of women on par with capitalism by calling it sexism.”⁶⁷ The message was clear: women are important members of the Black working class, but focusing specifically on women’s issues detracts from the struggle against capitalism.

Still, women within the League did what they could to organize efforts that supported women more directly. There was some effort to organize hospital workers in the city of Detroit. These efforts were publicized at least enough to encourage similar organizing efforts in New York City (under the name the Health Revolutionary Union Movement).⁶⁸ Hospitals were singled out as sites where a lot of Black women were working in large numbers. Hospitals were also targeted because of their history of brutal treatment of both Black workers and patients.

⁶⁴ Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency*, 97.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 131.

⁶⁶ Kenneth Cockrel, VVL, DB14398.

⁶⁷ Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency*, 160.

⁶⁸ Stivers interviewed by Andrew Elrod. “When the union's the enemy.”

When those identities overlapped the situation was doubly bad. One hospital worker recalled how, “Sometimes [a sick worker] has to pay the hospital to cure him of a disease that he contracted while working as an employee of the hospital.”⁶⁹ An article in DRUM’s newsletter shares some other horror stories from the hospitals, and the intersection between injuries sustained on the job in the factory and the mistreatment and racism of the hospitals. The article relates that

“Last week a black sister fell down the stairs, and her stupid Honky foreman didn't want her to go to First Aid. The Hamtramck First Aid sent her to Ford Hospital for an X-ray. When she got back she had a slightly - fractured wrist and a bruised leg and hip. The nut at the so-called hospital sent her back to work and put on her slip, doing left-hand work on a sit-down job.”

This article is very potently titled “The butcher shop: Hamtramck Hospital.”⁷⁰

It is hard to find definitive accounts of the type of organizing work that went on in the hospitals, despite it being referenced in multiple accounts and by multiple speakers. Georgakas relates that the hospital worker organizing drive was initiated early on by Edna Watson, Paula Hankins, and Rachel Bishop but were not given enough support by the rest of the organization so the project collapsed.⁷¹ This narrative is at least complicated by the experience of Cleo Stivers who was involved in HRUM in New York in the early 70s. Perhaps the lack of documentation of concrete struggles in the hospitals was aided by the very short period of existence of the League (under two years) and the fact that their base of support began in the auto plants.

There were a few select instances in which League leadership addressed specifically the place of Black women in society and their particular needs and role in revolutionary organization. Kenneth Cockrel, in one interview, explains that the League has supported “street

⁶⁹ Unknown Speaker, VVL, DB14514.

⁷⁰ Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, “The butcher shop: Hamtramck Hospital,” (DRUM Newsletter Number 21), accessed online November 2015 at <https://libcom.org/library/butcher-shop-hamtramck-hospital>

⁷¹ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 171.

brothers out there who don't work in plants, ...ADC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children] mothers who are jammed up... we try to deal concretely with all of those problems. We have represented ADC mothers, we have organized and worked with ADC mothers".⁷² This instance of reaching out to the community is noteworthy for its' acknowledgement of how gender affects who is able to work in the plants in the first place. Black women who have to raise their children on their own were most likely unable to work in the plants. Cockrel and the League's devotion of resources to supporting these women is very significant.

Additionally, one white women auto worker interviewed as part of the *Finally Got the News* material collection shares how she is helping to organize auto worker's wives. She is helping to do this because they have a tendency to encourage their husbands *not* to go out on strike, and apparently this was a huge problem in the Sterling Stamping plant strike where white workers wildcatted over working conditions.⁷³ The woman interviewed asserts that the wives of the workers were the ones putting pressure on them to stay on the job so they could bring home a decent wage to their family.⁷⁴ This is because in the classic nuclear family it was often the burden of the women to "economize at home" when money was tight.⁷⁵ Although this is a white women talking about issues with white workers, the interview was conducted while gathering material for a documentary on the League. It is not a stretch to imagine these same ideas being brought up in League meetings.

⁷² Kenneth Cockrel, VVL, DB14489. For a discussion on the racist discrimination of ADC, see Cynthia Edmonds-Cady, "The Boundaries of Sisterhood: Race, Class, Gender, and Participation in Michigan's Welfare Rights Movement and Response to Welfare Policy, 1964-1972," (PhD, Michigan State University, 2006), 45-47.

⁷³ Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 2001), accessed online November 2015 at https://books.google.com/books?id=MgbhCQAAQBAJ&pg=PT255&lpg=PT255&dq=sterling+stamping+strike+detroit+1968&source=bl&ots=3CB66UwXNh&sig=8cR_NTKQ1p47A_kEXULPmJfk6jE&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjKibuk4dzJAhUo7YMKHUCWBg4Q6AEIPjAF#v=onepage&q&f=false

⁷⁴ Unknown Speaker, VVL, DB14514.

⁷⁵ I am thankful to Dr. Lisa Fine for the term and for discussing this topic with me which helped me to develop some of these ideas.

Gender Oppression in the League

In order to persuade white workers to support the League, John Watson was fond of espousing that “the things the Black movement is doing inside of industry is basically in their [white workers] interest.”⁷⁶ However, parallel claims were never made regarding *women’s* interests. The Executive Board of the League’s only engagement with the contemporary feminist movement was dismissing it as the “*white women’s* liberation movement”.⁷⁷ The treatment of women within the League was sometimes just as dismissive. The decisions and the individual behavior of some League members were very harmful to women in the movement and disrespectful of their concerns.

In some cases this behavior exhibited itself as abuse. The office of Chuck Wooten and General Baker in Highland Park was described as “often in filthy condition and the scene of abusive treatment of women and generally uncomradely behavior.”⁷⁸ Another account charges that “male chauvinism was rampant in the League” and that “sisters would be asked to give it up sometimes when coming to the Cortland [Highland Park] office.”⁷⁹ Georgakas also posits that physically abusive behavior towards women existed in some groups of the League.⁸⁰

An interesting development in intra-League gender politics was the controversies that arose about members of the Executive Board dating and marrying white women. There arose a “double standard [that] allowed League males to seek relationships outside the organization even where ‘competing’ political groups were concerned; similar action on the part of League females

⁷⁶ John Watson, VVL, DB14432.

⁷⁷ In a transcript of an interview conducted by David Wellman and Jim Jacobs. Untitled. MSU special collections.

⁷⁸ Allen, “Dying From the Inside,” 101.

⁷⁹ Ahmad, “1968-1971: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers.”

⁸⁰ Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 171.

was often viewed as a ‘security risk’.” This caused women within the League to become furious with these leaders. Some of the men attempted to deflect criticism away from their personal lives by turning it into a critique of cultural nationalism in general.⁸¹ Even later critics of the League (especially those with cultural-nationalist leanings) continue to accuse some of the Executive Board as “chasing white women” instead of solving the contradictions that were emerging within the League.⁸²

Some women in the League took a moderate approach to the misogyny in the League. Cleo Stivers, League and Black Panther veteran, in a 2012 panel entitled "16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence" hosted at the Guillermo Morales Assata Shakur Community and Student Center in New York City said that “Men engage in violence as a response to pain.”⁸³ Although certainly not reflective of *all* League women, this perspective articulates a woman’s support of the goals of the League while momentarily de-emphasizing women-specific issues.

The Limits of Marxism-Leninism and the Potential for Revolutionary Working-Class Feminism

I was originally interested in this project because of those classic inquiries of the social historian: What was the experience like of women in the League? What did they think about the movement that they were participants in? What did it feel like, as women, to support an organization led by men that often refused to address women’s issues?

⁸¹ Allen, “Dying From the Inside,” 86-87.

⁸² Ahmad, “1968-1971: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers.”

⁸³ Amber Tafari Laraque, “Original Panther Cleo Silvers spreads knowledge at City College,” New York Amsterdam News, New York, N.Y., 13 Dec 2012: 42.

As was the case with many male leaders of the time, the men of the League almost totally ignored gender-specific issues of oppression. Sexism was addressed, if at all, as a subsidiary to capitalism and racism. Black women workers were certainly valued within much of the organization, but usually only as *Black* or *worker*. The League prided itself on their ability to “reinterpret Marxism in the language of the community.”⁸⁴ Yet in this way “the community” was seen as the Black community, and women were not perceived as a distinct group. This is in spite of a long history of socialist-feminism in the United States dating back at least as far as turn-of-the-century feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her challenges to the privatized home.⁸⁵ But perhaps the failures of the League are a failure of Marxism-Leninism generally and its’ ignorance of the specific role that women and unpaid household labor play in reproduction of the workforce. It was not until the 21st century that Marxist-feminist Silvia Federici asserted that “fighting for waged work or fighting to ‘join the working class in the workplace,’... cannot be a path to liberation. Wage employment may be a necessity but it cannot be a coherent political strategy. As long as reproductive work is devalued, as long as it is considered a private matter and women’s responsibility, women will always confront capital and the state with less power than men, and in conditions of extreme social and economic vulnerability.”⁸⁶

Although Federici’s observation is from 2008, she is examining trends and social conditions that began well before the time of the League. The Marxist-feminist critique of capitalism’s exploitation of women in the home is *not incompatible* with the League’s critique of exploitation of Black assembly line workers in the auto plant. Indeed, Federici even argues that

⁸⁴ cited in Robert Dudnick, “Black Workers in Revolt”. A guardian pamphlet. Feb 15, 1969. In MSU Special Collections.

⁸⁵ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “A Feminist Challenge to the Privatized Home.” in *Modern American Women: A Documentary History*, edited by Susan Ware (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 78-81.

⁸⁶ Silvia Federici, “A Feminist Critique of Marx” 2008. Updated in 2011. Accessed online in November 2015 at <http://endofcapitalism.com/2013/05/29/a-feminist-critique-of-marx-by-silvia-federici/>

the first mid-20th century women's liberation movement, the African-American led Welfare Mothers Movement, harbored the sentiments of socialist-feminism with their campaign for "wages for housework" under the guise of Aid to Dependent Children and their declaration that "welfare" is a women's right. The potential for the League to develop a revolutionary program that included gender-specific issues was there. Yet perhaps without the subsequent theoretical developments in Marxism, a feminist integration into the League's platform was not possible. Unable to draw upon the ideas of later Marxists (like Federici), the leaders of the League never articulated an applicable Marxist-feminist line. But their reference to supporting ADC mothers and ELRUM's implicit connection between factory work exploitation and household reproductive work oppression point to a tangential awareness of women's distinct oppression. Bereft of a theoretical commitment to feminism, maybe the women in the League appreciated the ways that it did articulate a revolutionary strategy that implicated women indirectly.

An alternative interpretation is that the women in the League saw their labor activism as grounded in a history of working-class feminism that did not resemble the mainstream feminist movement.⁸⁷ In her seminal work *The Other Women's Movement*, Dorothy Sue Cobble posits that "a more class-conscious feminism would define itself as about the removal of class and race injustices as well as gender, and policies that protect working class institutions such as unions would be understood as important to the progress of women. In other words, the decline of organized labor would be seen as a feminist issue." In this way, perhaps the women of the League did not prioritize *class* or *race* as primary struggles *per se*, but instead saw their activism in the factories, hospitals, and communities as part of a larger movement for women's liberation.

⁸⁷ "Labor feminists recognized multiple sources of inequality and injustice. They understood that gender equality is but one form of oppression and that it is not necessarily always the primary injustice bearing down on women. In some eras and for some people, class or race inequalities may emerge as more problematic or more in need of resolution than gender inequities." in Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*, 223.

Indeed, Cobble also points out that “The history of labor feminism makes it clear, for example, that a work and family policy for low-income women is intimately linked to increasing worker economic and political power.”⁸⁸

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers was an organization fraught with ideological, institutional, and inter-personal conflicts. It included many women in its ranks, yet rarely confronted women’s issues directly. In some ways this was the product of the masculinist Black Power-era and in other ways the product of an interpretation of Marxism that held that organizing factory workers, regardless of gender, was the primary form of revolutionary activity. Yet women played important roles in proto-League activities, helped spearhead efforts to organize outside of factories, and were included in efforts on the shop floor (sometimes at the expense of their physical safety).

Because of their gender, women faced discrimination at the hands of foreman, the UAW, and the League itself. Foreman sexually harassed them, making promises in exchange for sexual favors. Sex-discriminated jobs such as janitorial work placed them in front of forklifts where they lost their lives. They were physically abused by men within the League. Yet in spite of this, women supported the efforts of the League to better the working conditions of Black workers within the auto plants. Faced with dangerous conditions and a lack of access to the appropriate union privileges, the women of the League chose to, momentarily, put their class and race ahead of interpersonal gendered oppression with the hope that the success of the League would also be a success for Black women in the plants and the Black community as a whole. Certainly not reflective of what is remembered as “women’s liberation” in textbooks, the women of the League crafted their own liberation that reflected their lives in the plants and in the Black

⁸⁸ Cobble, *The Other Women’s Movement*, 228.

community.⁸⁹ The experience of women in the League of Revolutionary Black workers is instructive on how class, race, and gender intersect within revolutionary organizations and the necessity of embracing many different struggles in the liberation movements of today.

⁸⁹ “Too much concern with specific labels like “feminist” has led to our missing the inherent feminism of Black women’s activism on behalf of their race and their communities, say, on matters of welfare rights, community safety, police abuse, and education.” Benita Roth. *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 76. I would add to this list: “working conditions”.

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