

THE SPLIT IN THE LEAGUE OF REVOLUTIONARY BLACK WORKERS:  
THREE LINES AND THREE HEADQUARTERS

Introduction

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers was irreparably split by the resignation of three members of its seven-member Executive Board which occurred on June 12, 1971. These three members, Ken Cockrel, Mike Hamlin and John Watson, declared that as of that date we would work exclusively under the direction of the Black Worker's Congress.

Although many who supported the League and its activity were shocked by the materialization of the League's internal contradictions in what appeared to them a precipitous split, the facts are that the split in the leadership and the cadre base had been the source of intensive struggle throughout the organization's history from its inception three years ago until the resignations of June 12, 1971.

The decision to resign was neither easy, nor lightly arrived at, for indeed we were totally dedicated to building an organization that would carry us to the development of a party that would consummate in the building of socialism in the United States and participate in the defeat of imperialism in the world.

It was not easy to sever relationships of years duration which had been forged through years of intensive struggle.

Nonetheless, the point had been reached at which the class and ideological contradictions within the organization had produced a state of virtual paralysis and thus it was necessary to have a decisive and far-reaching action to bring about a qualitative transformation of the movement of revolutionary Black Workers, and to quicken the pace of the inevitably successful revolutionary struggle.

Since the date of the split there has been much discussion of the causes, nature, dynamics; etc. of the break. Most of it has been conjecture and speculation because of the absence of a factual analysis of the League's internal contradictions as they related to the League's social practice.

It is in the interest of aiding this discussion and putting an end to the confusion and conjecture, that this brief paper is being presented by the three former members of the Executive Board of the League who are now workers for the Black Worker's Congress.

Brief History of the League

In the early 1960's there was a large influx of new black workers into the automobile plants in and around the City of Detroit. Most of these workers were younger and had developed a high degree of national consciousness as a result of participating in and observing the sharply escalated civil rights struggle.

The ruling class auto plant owners saw in these young blacks the opportunity to reap a windfall of profits by escalating the exploitation at the point of production to levels never even considered when dealing with the previous work force, which was whiter in racial composition.

This super-exploitation resulted in a heightening of both the national and class consciousness of black workers which led to the development of increasing militancy in the plants. This fact combined with the overall deterioration of the quality of life of the Detroit black community with regard to delapidated and inadequate housing, stepped up repression and brutality by the police, inferior schools; etc. thus producing a resistance throughout the community which resulted in the July 23, 1967 rebellion in Detroit, essentially a worker's rebellion.

Early in 1967 a group of young black radical workers came together to begin a newspaper, the INNER-CITY VOICE, which put forth the line that the black working class would be the vanguard of the revolutionary struggle in this country.

The paper and its staff, which openly asserted that they were Marxist-Leninists, began to attract a group of people, among them being those who were to found the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement in May of 1968.

Included in this group were people from all classes of the City's black population and most of whom were incorporated into the League on the basis of what proved to be in a number of cases an unwarranted assumption, namely, that they had been transformed through education and practice into proletarian revolutionaries.

The objective conditions in the Dodge Main Plant resulted in spectacular success for D.R.U.M.

Nine weeks after its founding the organization called a wildcat strike of black workers which lasted for three days and effectively shut down the plant in protest against abominable and racist conditions. This spectacular success had the effect of catapulting D.R.U.M. into a position of leadership

among black workers from other auto plants, rubber, steel and service industries flocked to the weekly D.R.U.M. meetings in a search for assistance, direction and to build unity for their struggles on their jobs.

Workers from around the country began to write and call asking for unity and support for their struggles. The weekly meetings produced other Revolutionary Union Movements, including the Eldon Revolutionary Union Movement (E.L.R.U.M.) which rapidly outgrew D.R.U.M. in its mass membership.

Nine weeks after the formation of E.L.R.U.M. a wildcat strike was called asking black workers to strike against the abominable racist conditions at Chrysler's Eldon Plant. This strike was overwhelmingly supported by the black workers in this predominantly (65%) black shop, but 26 workers were fired as a result in Chrysler's attempt to crush the rapidly growing revolutionary union movement. Efforts were made to provide material support for these workers but very little help was forthcoming.

As a result of these experiences, and others, it was clear that great potential for organizing black workers in Detroit

and around the country existed. This capacity to build a workers organization committed to struggle against racism, capitalism and imperialism mandated the formation of a cadre organization, uniting conscious black workers and professional revolutionaries to give direction and leadership to this struggle.

Our response to this was the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. (For more on this period read Black Star Pamphlets entitled "OUR THING IS DRUM," interview with Mike Hamlin and Ken Cockrel reprinted from the LEVIATHAN, and John Watson's interview "THE POINT OF PRODUCTION.")

Description and Analysis of the  
Three Tendencies in the League

It should be understood that the League had always represented a coalition of forces. From the beginning the leadership of the organization was divided into at least three tendencies, each with different ideological lines which ultimately reflected themselves in social practice. These differences were duplicated (triplicated) throughout the organization's



base. The result was incessant struggle over the questions of ideology, policy, programs, strategy and tactics.

Those three tendencies can best be described as follows:

A. The Proletarian Revolutionaries striving to function as socialist political leaders and workers in the struggle to build socialism and hasten the defeat of imperialism in the world.

B. The Petty Bourgeois Opportunists who, while continually parading their "knowledge and understanding" of the principles of Marxism, Leninism, practiced revolution in a way that showed their disdain for not only the working class but every other stratum of the population that did not instantly recognize their "superior theoretical virtues" and anoint them with the title of leader of the masses which they so obviously coveted. The basic fear and disdain of the people that characterized their style of practice had the organizational effect of producing carefully studied stagnation.

C. The Backward Reactionary-Nationalist Lumpen-Proletarians whose view of revolutionary struggle was one of equating such struggle to a popularity contest, in which the judges were the most reactionary, least conscious sections of

the population and the prize was to be viewed by all as a "basic brother."

The Proletarian Revolutionaries who left the L.R.B.W. held a political position that was based on a Marxist-Leninist view of the United States in particular, and the world in general.

We saw the fundamental contradiction in the world and the U.S. as existing between capital and labor, nonetheless recognizing that the color-caste nature of U.S. society gives a national character to the oppression of black within this society. Consequently, we feel that of all the forces in the U.S. proletariat, the black working class constitutes, by dint of its peculiarly acute oppression and a conscious history of relentless opposition to this oppression, the objective vanguard of the proletarian-led struggle to defeat imperialism and build socialism as a necessary step in creating a new world free of imperialist aggression and the degradation of the masses that accompanies the maintenance of the imperialist system.

The Petty Bourgeois Opportunist tendency in the L.R.B.W. had no difficulty in accepting the above stated political position, but a comparative analysis of their practice (or non-practice to be more accurate) reveals their unwillingness to



act in the way that acceptance of the position renders mandatory.

We who left the L.R.B.W. took it as our responsibility to involve ourselves in mass struggles in the community as well as the plant, since our experience clearly showed the organic connection between the plant and the community in which it was located and in which the workers lived. Therefore, we engage in struggles around the repression of the working-class community by the states military and para-military apparatus relentlessly.

We worked to defend blacks charged with ludicrous "crimes" on numerous occasions such as the New Bethel "shootout," the James Johnson case, etc. But our work did not consist of a mere defense of cases in court, but mass education and agitation through rallies, use of the media, demonstrations, legal tactics in court, the structuring of the Labor Defense Coalition to show the class nature of this system and the role of the state apparatus within it. The jury system was exposed as having excluded proletarian elements systematically, the jail in Wayne County was exposed for its inhuman disregard for blacks and proletarians of all colors, the court was used to educate the community to contradictions between capital and labor in the James Johnson case and so on. These instances are cited as

examples of the practice of mass work around repression that met the responsibility of revolutionary proletarians to expose the class nature of this system and its para-military apparatus. The work of the L.R.B.W. in this area was almost exclusively carried out by the proletarian forces including the defense of the organization itself from attack by investigatory committees and police spies, including the organization of various strata in the black and white community to combat such attacks.

The role of the other two tendencies in this work ran from negligible to non-existent with the latter describing the petty-bourgeois opportunist wing precisely.

Apart from mass work in the above area the responsibility of developing an organ or newspaper to agitate, propogandize and extend the correct line of struggle is a clear task of proletarian revolutionaries which necessitates the acquisition of resources with which to print, publish and disseminate the materials to carry on the task of proletarianizing the people through education and propoganda. The leadership inside of the organization that produced the development of Black Star Printing, Publishing and Productions came almost exclusively from the revolutionary forces that left the L.R.B.W.

As a matter of fact, this line of development took place against continual opposition from the provincial reactionaries and defeatist sniping from the technocratic opportunists. An example would be the experience of the Black Economic Development Conference held in Detroit in April of 1969.

B.E.D.C. conceived by Mike Hamlin, John Watson, Jim Forman and other left elements was constantly attacked and opposed by the opportunistic and reactionary elements in the organization, even during such struggles as an investigation by a Federal Grand Jury in Detroit and even a threatened assault on some of its members by the Republic of New Africa who marched on us at the Grand Jury inquisition at the Federal Building. The response of the petty bourgeois and reactionary wings of the organization to the instances cited above was non-support antagonism, and overt subversion such as stating that B.E.D.C. was "counter-revolutionary idiocy" at the same time the United States Government was trying to frame members of its leading body, the Executive Board.

However, as time progressed the other two tendencies actually reached the point of not only seeing the importance of the resources produced by that effort led mainly by Mike,

John, and Jim Forman, but actually trying to seize them in the wake of the split.

In the same vein, the task of waging ideological struggle to combat the madness being espoused by the myriad reactionary opportunists who abound in this country was assumed almost exclusive by the proletarian revolutionaries who left the L.R.B.W.

The film, "FINALLY GOT THE NEWS," was produced by John Watson over the opposition of the anti-white reactionaries in the organization who even went so far as to chase white film crew members away from the plants where scenes were being shot for the film. The absence of the Petty Bourgeois Opportunists from the film reflects among other things the fact that they were not engaged in anything that justified the expenditure of film stock. Of course, upon the completion of the film both the reactionaries and the opportunists accepted its value as a piece of recorded history of our struggle and a material aid to our organizing. The film has been shown throughout this country and the world and is evidence of our consciousness of the duty to extend the line to every corner of the world.

It is not coincidence that most of what is known about the League outside of Detroit is known through materials such as the Leviathan interview with Ken Cockrel and Mike Hamlin (reprinted in a Black Star Pamphlet entitled "OUR THING IS DRUM) or John Watson's "POINT OF PRODUCTION" etc. The Petty Bourgeois Opportunists and the Reactionary-Nationalist Lumpen-Proletarians did not view it as being their task to write speak, or travel, indeed one of the League's leading cadres, a Petty Bourgeois Opportunist said that he did not want to do any public speaking because people would say he was on an ego trip.

A classic example of fuzzy thinking around the question of what forces were struggling to advance the L.R.B.W. is the position of the National Association of Black Students after the split. N.A.B.S. chose to view the remaining two tendencies as correct at the same time that the N.A.B.S. organ "struggle" was extolling the correctness of the L.R.B.W. with articles on the James Johnson Case (Cockrel), Black Star Productions (Watson) "OUR THING IS DRUM," (Hamlin and Cockrel). This is not to personalize the struggle but to illustrate the unprincipled postures that are assumed by elements that don't study the groups with which they make alliances.

In the area of education, as it exists in the community in which the working class lives, the development of Parents and Students for Community Control, an L.R.B.W. component was led by John Watson. This program was a response to the controversy around school decentralization that inflamed Detroit and was designed to develop among other things a political infrastructure among the community for future electoral struggle in non-partisan elections in Detroit.

In addition, the politics of the League were taken to the community undisguised during the campaign for regional school board posts. But apart from Proletarian revolutionary participation in the public education struggle the P.A.S.C.C. was also an effort at forging practical unity between black youth in the Black Student United Front (of which Mike Hamlin was the adult Executive Board Member) and working class adults throughout the community.

On the question of contact with the black community the Reactionary-Nationalist Lumpen-Proletarians and the Petty Bourgeois Opportunists despite their professed concern had little if any real structural contact with the masses of black people. All of the contacts with the black middle-class were



essentially had by the proletarian revolutionary forces in the L.R.B.W., indeed the other two groups wrote them off as jive "Uncle Toms" and related to them in an essentially exploitative way more reminiscent of piracy than principled relations with that stratum by revolutionary forces. It is ironic that those forces charging non-contact with black groups in the face of such facts as; 14 months spent working on the R.N.A. defense and educating the community about it, the relationship with the Malcolm X Cultural Center in Inkster, Michigan (a black working-class community outside of Detroit) in which political education classes are given by the left forces as well as other material help, i.e., legal, etc.

The relationships we had with organizations such as the Inner-City Business Improvement Forum, the Ad-Hoc Construction Coalition, shows the isolationist character of the practical elitists who cloaked their non-practice with insubstantial attacks on their comrades.

On the question of principled relations with whites--a question answered by the policy statement of the L.R.B.W.--the practice of the left forces was to engage in practice with/whos<sup>whites</sup> revolutionary dedication and acceptance of the concept of the bl

vanguard simply could not be questioned.

Our view was, and is, that revolutionaries must manifest an awareness of the fact that it will take millions of people under proletarian leadership to build socialism and defeat imperialism and that to fail to promote the extension of proletarian consciousness among the masses of whites in the United States will be fatal to our struggle.

Consistently with this view we developed such programs as the Control, Conflict and Change Book Club, which involves 700 persons, 98% of whom are white, in a program of education involving monthly meetings at which books are read and discussed in light of a clear Marxist-Leninist approach. This program serves a two-fold purpose; one, the development of an organizational structure of whites committed to increasing their understanding of Marxism-Leninism so as to function as discussion leaders and staff for the book club, and two, the establishment of a forum wherein less highly developed whites can make contact with Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries and their programs free of the condescension so often characteristic of such meetings between "revolutionaries" and the people.

Moreover, the emergence of such organizations as the Motor City Labor League and the Labor Defense Coalition out of the experiences of principled relations with white proletarians gives concrete validation to the correctness of such a practice. The work done by these forces and others in support of our struggle has aided our advance materially and causes us to feel that to reject struggle on that front is tragically incorrect.

The practice of the other two tendencies in this area was either grudging acceptance of the necessity of such contact or outright hostility accompanied by the usual shrill cries of "honkies," "devils," etc.

In discussing the reactionary nationalist section of the organization, it must be observed that it was present from the beginning of the League. The history of the leadership of this tendency was well known at the time, but this section "agreed" that Marxist-Leninist ideology and practice were correct, and expressed a willingness to struggle against bourgeois and cultural nationalist tendencies.

Moreover, we observe that the history of reactionary nationalism, which precedes the history of the League, is a history

of bankrupt politics and policies, laced with such idealistic perversities as astrology, mysticism, infantile militarism and adventurism. For years past such elements around the country and locally were continually involved in "clandestine plots" to "get it on" or to start the revolution through some dramatic act of violence.

In most of these instances, the schemes were secrets to everyone except the police (for example, the "plot to blow up the Statute of Liberty in New York) and numerous persons were jailed, faced trials, were forced to flee the city and country or were compromised into the status of probationers as consequence of the failures of such adventures.

The record of disaster flowing from such elements is much too long to chronicle in this paper.

The nationalist elements attempted to disguise their reactionary line while using the organization as a "front" for various kinds of clandestine activity.

Nationalism was injected into the workers organizations through gossip and behind the back conversation rather than through the vehicle of open political discussion. In those instances when the question was openly discussed the left

position was always accepted by the general membership of the organization.

Hence, the nationalist section clandestinely carried forward its attack on our section even "derisively" referring to us as "black bolsheviks."

The primary characteristic of this section was that it attached itself to the League as so many barnacles to a ship. They did minimal organizational work, they refused to study, complaining that the material used in political education was too hard, too abstract, boring etc.

They refused to seriously push the newspaper, the official organ of the League.

They lived in League facilities, but maintained them in a way that was not consistent with the minimum standards of a serious organization.

Non-black persons who were cooperating with the League were insulted and alienated by non-serious reactionary elements repeatedly.

The low standards of discipline resulted in numerous instances of petty offenses that drained legal and material resources from the struggle.

They received free legal service and medical service, and used their positions in the League as a basis for arrogant condescending parade inside the black community.

Such conditions are obviously intolerable inside a serious political organization guided by Marxist-Leninist principles.

It must be stated that we were guilty of gross liberalism in not pressing more vigorously for a re-education of such problems in a forward way. However, it must be stated that this kind of conduct was protected by the right wing of the leadership.

Hence, given the reality of a coalition, pretending to be a democratic centralist organization, it was impossible to impose discipline in any way other than the most flagrant instances of violation of the organization's rules, without splitting the organization. A few concrete instances will illustrate the backward effect of co-existence with such tendencies:

1. Following the E.L.R.U.M. strike mentioned earlier, the leadership agreed to engage in a legal struggle to get the workers their job back and to document and expose



the barbaric conditions and the lack of democratic rights inside the plant.

After recruiting a team of white lawyers to assist this effort, we encountered covert opposition to the presence of whites hence demoralizing those who were attempting to carry out that agreed upon struggle.

As a result, the League was unable to effectively expose the conditions that gave rise to that strike, or to sustain a mobilization around the question of the firings.

2. Workers in the plants and community were virtually pleading for the establishment of a political education program in the League. The response of the nationalist wing was as stated above, to reject it as too hard to understand; etc., and indeed the petit-bourgeois opportunist leaders, who were in charge of the program were constantly being attacked by the nationalists. (This phenomenon was constant, indeed the antagonism between the right wing and opportunist center was infinitely more antagonistic, than between what we call the left (us) and the right wing section.)

Moreover, in an attempt to raise the standards of writing in our organ, the Inner-City Voice, we instituted journalism

classes using sympathetic journalists as teachers. The class was attacked by the nationalists on the grounds that "white journalism" was being taught, whatever that is.

We have talked about the film, and B.E.D.C., and could go on but the points should be clear.

As regards the political education, we sternly criticize ourselves for allowing such an essential task to be mis-handled by the less advanced elements inside the leadership and the organization, and we should have been more involved in political education, whatever would have been the short term programmatic disadvantage.

One final point must be made in contrasting the practice of the left, the Khrushchev center opportunists, and the right, and that point concerns James Forman.

James Forman, who was a member of the League's Central Staff, and is presently acting Executive Secretary of the Black Workers Congress, is hated throughout this country by petit-bourgeois intellectuals, black and white.

This is particularly true of those reactionary pseudo intellectuals who call themselves "revolutionary nationalists." Forman, our comrade, has been the victim of many vicious

personal attacks by these hyenas, because of the fact that he is highly respected throughout the world for his practice. Contrast Forman's practice to that of these pseudo-intellectual nationalists, who seek refuge in ivy-covered halls of white capitalist universities from whence they periodically issue statements on the state of the struggle, pick up honoraria for flagellating masochistic whites and engage in unceasing slander of those who would leave the peaceful oases of non-struggle and work concretely for socialism and to defeat imperialism.

Such elements are cowardly jackals who are the parasites on the history of our peoples thrust for liberation and have earned through their practice (or non-practice) our undying contempt for their failure to at least be honest.

Inside of the League the petit-bourgeois opportunists and the reactionary nationalists made common cause in opposing Jim Forman, though his contributions to the League were substantial and there for all to see.

Due to the unwillingness or refusal of the right wing of the organization to struggle openly there developed inside of the organization a most distorted view of the roles of its

members. They tended to view the left proletarian forces as "bureaucratic functionaries" whose tasks were to develop resources, raise funds, project and develop the organization's political positions, administrate its affairs, defend the organization and its members, and straighten out their "personal" lives. On the other hand, they viewed themselves as "basic brothers" whose function as nearly as we can determine was to "lay in the cut" until the "real thing" broke loose, at which time the "beast" would be destroyed by their invincible Karate chops. In the interim, between the present reality and the "real thing" going down, they had only to be basic, whatever that is.

Predictably the organization's major security problems arose in this section.

Development of the Congress and  
its Relations with the League

As a result of the inability of the League to solve its internal contradictions, at a time when black workers were increasingly engaging in militant action against imperialism at the point of production, the left forces in the League were

compelled by historical necessity to try and assist in building, with other proletarian forces around the country, an organizational form to unite such forces and carry the struggle to a higher stage. The new organizational form is the Black Workers' Congress.

Initially, it was projected that the League, by dint of its experience, would be a key foundation stone in the new form.

The Congress was initially projected through the Black Workers' Congress Manifesto, which called for the uniting of black workers across the country under a revolutionary anti-imperialist program. The Manifesto, with its thirty-two objectives concluding with a commitment to build a Revolutionary Workers' Party, was widely circulated, carefully studied and discussed throughout the country, and it succeeded in recruiting workers to the movement from cities from coast to coast.

The initial reaction of both the reactionary nationalists and the petit-bourgeois opportunists groups was one of hostility and opposition.

The nationalist group refused to deal with participation in building the Congress contending that in essence all League activity should be focused upon the Dodge Main and Eldon Plants, clearly parochialism and provincial sectarianism at its heights.

Everything in the experience of the League teaches us that isolated workers' struggles are regularly defeated by the concentrated, united repressive action of the ruling class and that broad unity solidarity coupled with the support of the masses of people, is essential for short or long range success.

The role of the petit-bourgeois opportunist group in the Congress was to create confusion through the exposition of positions which can only be defined as the ejaculations of "academic string-savers" wholly out of touch with historical and present reality.

For example, at a national Congress meeting, held in Baltimore, Maryland, after the split, the League's present "man on horseback" contended that "there can be no such thing as a Congress until the workers hold state power, and therefore the B.W.C. is not really a Congress." Surely Mao, Ho, Lenin and others who held congresses long before they had state power had, fortunately, not learned this lesson well.

To add to this madness he then proposed a reformist, economist program that opposed the anti-imperialist line of the B.W.C. with a mass line of "Black Workers Unite."



Further the position was taken that workers could not understand dialectical materialism and that, therefore, the Congress Political Education Program should reflect his view that workers could not understand the reality of their existence. The Congress members present rejected this position of the League presented by their spokesman, viewing it as a move designed to prevent the development of a politically developed cadre so as to maximize the potential manipulation through the device of verbal gymnastics by the pseudo-intellectual opportunists.

This position was rejected and the Congress took the position that its development should proceed unhampered by the inclusion in its ranks of such cancerous infections as those represented by the League's "What is a Congress?" line.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to make it very clear that we exhausted every reasonable means to rectify the organization's problems within the structure prior to leaving.

Two days before the resignation, the three of us proposed that some steps be taken to take us in the direction of becoming a disciplined serious cadre committed to functioning, at/levels, as socialist political leaders.

The three of us proposed the following:

1. The expulsion of three League members, one whose position was a flat refusal to study Marxism-Leninism, the other two being members whose conduct as regards other human beings, especially women, was on a level wholly inconsistent with continuance in the ranks of a revolutionary organization.

2. That all members of the League be examined by his or her comrades as to their acceptance of the program and policy statement of the League, an avowedly Marxist-Leninist program, further to be examined on his or her social practice in relation to same.

The opportunist center response was "no, that would cause chaos," to inquire of cadres in a revolutionary organization whether or not they accepted the organization's programs.

3. That a thorough going program of Marxist-Leninist political education be introduced on a mandatory basis

inside the organization to address the problem of unequal development inside the League.

4. The expansion of the League's Executive Board to include three people, each from the League and the B.W.C. to break the deadlock on the board caused by the then paralyzed coalition of forces sitting at the time.

The left forces on the board could not secure the support necessary to institute the program of recitification and the formation of a new coalition between the reactionary nationalists and the petty-bourgeois opportunists was born.

The liberalism of which we had been guilty for the past four years had to cease. Thus we resigned.

We believe that the history of the League is a profoundly important part of the history of the black struggle in this country that merits study by all serious revolutionaries who would avoid our mistakes and benefit from our experiences in that form.

We pledge our continued support to the People of the World, to Revolutionaries everywhere in the fight against imperialism and to our comrades in the Black Workers Congress.

KEN COCKREL

MIKE HAMLIN

JOHN WATSON

Note: We are deeply grateful to Annabelle Feggins, who rushed into the breach at the eleventh hour and typed this paper under conditions of duress.

KVC, MH, JW.