

The Black Power Movement

Part 4: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers

This rich collection of manuscripts increases access to documents essential for further research and analysis of one of the most influential African American labor organizations in the 1960s and 1970s.

The modern Black Power movement has been one of the most important developments in American politics in the latter half of the Twentieth Century. The movement germinated in the 1960s and gained full force by the early 1970s. Since then it has continued to exert a significant influence on politics and culture in the African American community. Black Power emerged from several convergent (and sometimes opposing) motivations, which include:

- frustration with the pace of Black empowerment in America during the heyday of the civil rights movement, when despite impressive legal and political victories, many African Americans remained mired in poverty and second-class citizenship
- anger at waning American idealism in the late 1960s and the coalescing of white backlash in national politics
- a renewal of interest and pride in African heritage and the emergence of the black arts movement
- a feeling that traditional integrationist civil rights politics had delivered all that it could and that something newer and more militant was a natural evolution
- an interpretation of late 1960s urban race riots as expressions of revolutionary consciousness among dispossessed African Americans.
- the emergence of a generation of African post-colonial leaders who espoused Marxian socialism and suggested alternatives to Western capitalist economic systems.

Part 4: The League of Revolutionary Black Workers

Although most histories of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements give greater attention to other groups, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was in many respects the most significant expression of black radical thought and activism in the 1960s. The League took the impetus for Black Power and translated it into a fighting program focusing on industrial workers.

This microfilm project is a chronicle of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers' radical efforts to push American society toward social and economic justice. In the backdrop of the late 1960's and early 1970's, Detroit was burning in the midst of great civil unrest, and African American auto workers, like other African Americans at the time, were becoming more radical as a means to redress society's inequalities. A coalition of African American auto workers, as well as other Detroiters, aligned to form the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Dissatisfied with the UAW's response to issues like racial equity and the capitalist controlled production system, the League used the UAW's 1930's aggressive tactics, like wildcat strikes and plant takeovers, in order to make their voice heard. In addition to aggressive tactics, the League skillfully used the media, assuming editorial control of the Wayne State University daily student newspaper, *The South End*, to organize people around the organization's radical positions. As a result of its commitment to democratic ideals and Marxist economic perspectives, the League had diverse, albeit limited, support from whites and international groups. The League began to lose influence in the mid 1970's, but their legacy is noteworthy.

The League helped open the ranks of the UAW leadership to African Americans by forming an internal caucus intent on change. The League organized the grassroots and used its own newspaper to broaden the scope of coverage the conventional media allowed at the time. Perhaps, the most important accomplishment of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was to make people re-examine what opportunity and equality means within a democracy.

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Source Note: Microfilmed from the personal holdings of General Baker, Detroit, Michigan.

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