FINALLY GOT THE NEWS
THE MAKING OF A RADICAL FILM

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FINALLY GOT THE NEWS has become a classic before its time. The organization it was designed to promote no longer exists, but its political and class perspectives are becoming increasingly relevant. What remains so distinctive and valuable about the film is its insistence on the primacy of the working class in making a revolution. The hour-long documentary gives a taste of what the masses can do. Scenes of the city of Detroit — people pouring in and out of the factory gates, the gigantic sign which records minute-by-minute car production figures standing over the expressway like a capitalist holy grail, the Diego Rivera murals in the Art Institute, the stench hanging over Ford Rouge — all fuse to give an impression of what the concept of working class revolt entails. We have learned that the Detroit Insurrection of 1967 was primarily carried out by workers and not by 'street people.' We have learned that a majority of the snipers caught by police were Appalachian whites! FINALLY GOT THE NEWS gives an insight into the fury that working people in cities feel. It is a look from the inside at what could happen all over America tomorrow.

A distinctive feature of FINALLY GOT THE NEWS is that it is the only radical film of the sixties which was made under the direct control of revolutionary working class blacks with the specific purpose of radicalizing other black workers. The film was not at first conceived in those terms, however. Originally a group of people in Newsreel imagined making a film about Detroit in much the same style as the ones done on the Black Panthers. The Newsreel filmmakers had read about DRUM (Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement), a group of revolutionary black workers in the main Dodge factory in Detroit. DRUM had carried out several successful strikes and given birth to similar groups in other factories. Eventually the different factory units had merged with community, student, and support groups to form a League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

Most of the people involved in Newsreel in 1968-69 supported the Black Panther/Weatherman thesis that the revolution would be led by a relatively small group of elite professional revolutionaries with a following made up primarily of lumpen. The group that wanted to do the film on Detroit had a more working class orientation and wished to report on what was going on among revolutionary industrial workers. In June of 1969, Jim Morrison headed a small Newsreel delegation to Detroit where League documents and 22 hours of taped conversations were gathered. This raw material was favorably received by New York Newsreel, but there was some hesitation about providing funds for an actual film. An exasperated Morrison took fund-raising matters into his own hands in an ill-fated hash smuggling scheme that netted him a ten-year sentence when he was caught at the Canadian border.1

Shortly after Morrison was arrested, the main body of Newsreel came up with funds and a Newsreel unit was sent to Detroit. From the beginning, the

1 Morrison served over three years before escaping from an honor farm when he realized he was not going to be paroled. He remains at large as of this writing. Among the screen credits to the film is: Jim Morrison, political prisoner.
group had two de facto factions. Stu Bird, Rene Lichtman and Peter Gessner saw their task as one of making a film which accurately presented the strategy and activities of the League. The others had a grander task: They felt that both the white and black movements in Detroit needed to be updated by an injection of Weatherman and Panther thinking. Rather than making films, this faction set about making ideological intervention into the local political structure.

One of the first problems faced by the film-makers was the attitude of the League itself. A majority of the leadership wanted to maintain a low public profile. Many of them did not want any film-makers, much less white film-makers, covering meetings, demonstrations and factory agitation. They thought workers who were moving toward them would be frightened off. They also feared the film would ultimately be useful to the company, police, and union in gathering intelligence about their activities. John Watson, consistently one of the most imaginative and flexible leaders of the League, prevailed against this view by taking personal responsibility for the film. He understood the tremendous outreach such a film might provide for organizing workers and he was confident his presence in the cutting room would eliminate any potentially dangerous footage.

The division over the film was a precursor of the issues that would cause a split within the League in 1971. Those who were most dubious about the film were the forces who were concerned about a premature national presence, about coalition with whites, and about the general role of the media. They would express their uneasiness about the film in many ways. They would not stop nationalistic oriented workers from running off white camera crews and they often failed to inform the film-makers about key public events. Many of the League components under their personal control never appeared in the film. This attitude tended to ease as the film-making proceeded, but it was never totally resolved. The lack of footage showing violent action of the usual 'by any means necessary' rhetoric was a conscious decision especially influenced by this group which also tended to be the group primarily engaged in day-to-day factory organizing.

The reluctance of the workers to have a film made about them was in marked contrast to so many radicals of the sixties who often seemed to measure their success by the number of times they appeared on the nightly news. The League rejected that approach and was very concerned with the image the Newsreel film might project. Watson was familiar with Newsreel work and knew their audiences were primarily the white college student who made up most of the ‘Movement.’ He insisted that the film be created within a teaching rather than reporting framework and that its explicit Marxist message be directed toward an audience of black workers. The typical Newsreel audience would benefit from the film, but their needs would be secondary to that of reaching black workers. Bird, Lichtman and Gessner were more pleased than upset by the new orientation, but many difficult meetings were required to hammer out specific ideas. In the beginning, Watson wanted to use a lot of heavy Marxist language and quotations. He was eventually persuaded that it would be more
effective to have different leaders speak informally in the way they would speak if talking to a group of workers. The effective montage history of American labor which opens the film was primarily the idea of Stu Bird who saw it as a way of covering a complex subject with images rather than words. The final decision about this and other sequences was worked out in joint meetings. Watson generally indicated the overall direction while the Newsreel team solved the technical problems. Both groups wished to have League personnel trained in the technical work. This did not work out as well as it might have, but toward the end of the collaboration, blacks were doing some of the actual camera work as well as the other technical tasks.

The plan of the film was to give a theoretical view of how and why the working class could make a revolution, but with most of the actual footage dealing with how the League handled specific concrete problems emerging from its Marxist perspective. The final form of the film is somewhat awkward due to deepening divisions within the League on some political questions. The first half of the film is clearly the most successful. It presents a clear exposition of the idea that black people in the United States have been and continue to be exploited primarily because they are workers. In an opening section Watson says: “You get a lot of arguments that black people are not numerous enough in America to revolt, that they will be wiped out. This neglects our economic position... There are groups that can make the whole system cease functioning. These are auto workers, bus drivers, postal workers, steel workers, and others who play a crucial role in the money flow, the flow of materials, the creation of production. By and large black people are overwhelmingly in those kinds of jobs.”

Scenes within the Detroit factories and interviews with local leaders such as Ron March and Chuck Wooten underscore the more general approach of Watson with specific experiences. These sequences emphasize the deteriorating work and safety conditions within the factory. They reach an artistic peak when an off-camera ghetto voice denounces capitalism in a long tirade that can only be described as a prose poem. Against scenes of executives ‘working’ at their desks, the voice tells us:

They give you little bullshit amounts of money — wages and so forth — and then they steal all that shit back from you in terms of the way they have their other thing set up, that old credit-stick-em-up gimmick society — consumer credit — buy shit, buy shit — on credit. He gives you a little bit of money to cool your ass and then steals it all back with shit called interest which is the price of money. They are mother-fucking, non-producing, non-existing bastards dealing with paper... He is in mining! He went to Phillips-Andover-Exeter. He went to Harvard. He went to Yale. He went to the Wharton School of Business. And he is in ‘mining’! It is these mother-fuckers who deal with intangibles who are rewarded by this society. The more abstract and intangible your service, the bigger the reward. What are stocks? A stock certificate is evidence of something which is real. A stock is evidence of ownership. He who owns and controls receives — profit! This man is fucking with shit in Bolivia. He is fucking with shit in Chile. He is Kennecott. He is Anaconda. He is United Fruit. He is in mining! He’s in what? He ain’t never produced anything his whole life. Investment banker. Stock broker. Insurance man. He don’t do nothing. We see that this whole society exists and rests upon workers and this whole mother-fucking society is controlled by this little clique which is parasitic, vulturistic, cannibalistic, and is sucking and destroying the life of workers everywhere and we must stop it because it is — evil!

Another telling sequence in this part of the film deals with two Ford executives, one black and one white. Only the black speaks, but like some two-bit actor from a vulgar Marxist playet, his white superior chews on a cigar and leers approvingly at every word. The black explains how company and union come together to work for the benefit of the ‘greater society.’ This ventriloquist act would have been farcical in a fiction film but it succeeds admirably as a real-life interview.

The first section of the film concludes with an election at Dodge Main. Rather than the lock-stepped, black-bereted, leather-jacketed Panther units of other films, FINALLY shows rather ordinary people becoming very angry with the system. Workers by the busloads arrive waving clenched fists and shouting, “DRUM-DRUM-DRUM-DRUM.” A voice belonging to General Baker, one of the key industrial organizers shouts through a megaphone, “Finally got the news how your dues are being used. Be mad, be mad, be mad, be mad. Can’t do nothing if you ain’t mad.” As the workers, young and old, men and women, enter the union hall, they have to pass other workers, many of whom are black. These men wear union caps and stare upon the DRUM forces in the way police stare at peace marchers. The class line is drawn very sharply in terms of psychological identification as well as economics. Some workers have identified with the master and some with the revolution.

DRUM wins the election but it is immediately stolen by a combination of police, union, and company corruption. What is very clear in the emotionally-charged scenes is that the struggle transcends a simple plant election. The people who are in motion by the thousands are people who work on the line every day, people who own homes, people who have families, people who drive their own cars, and people who own the proverbial color television set. These same people are very obviously and very enthusiastically supporting an anti-capitalist revolutionary organization. Workers viewing such footage can identify with the kind of people participating and with the kind of action being taken. They can see that being a radical does not mean becoming an incredible gun-slinging hero who defies the police with every breath. The election is one of the lowest levels of mass action but it is mass action nonetheless and not elite action, just as the strike and the boycott are mass actions in which the people serve themselves directly rather than relying solely upon a group of heroes.

The second half of the film never regains the sharp ideological and artistic focus which ends with the Dodge election. There is a valiant attempt to deal
with the relationship of white workers to revolutionary black workers that might have been an entire second film. Retired Appalachian-born auto workers are shown sitting on the porches of their frame houses. They drink beer and play guitars as they run a very heavy anti-company line that comes near to being revolutionary until an old man concludes: “Everyone in this country is almost in revolt. We want to get more money. Everyone else is getting their share. Certain groups are doing good—the colored and mothers on welfare.” Watson’s voice cuts in to explain the paradox that racism creates: “The white workers face the same contradictions in production and life as blacks do. If they work harder they think the enemy is ‘the nigger.’ If life is worse, the problem is ‘crime in the streets’... [George] Wallace raps the money barons and the niggers; and these white workers love to hear it... Many white workers end up being counter-revolutionary in the face of a daily oppression that should make them the staunchest of revolutionaries... We are calling for the uplifting of the working class as a whole.”

Few people would disagree with such an analysis but no solution, not even a transition strategy, is suggested. This is less a weakness of the film than of the movement it serves. Other interviews with white working class community college students are less satisfying. They speak poignantly of the alienation felt by their fathers and mothers. They argue for an alliance with groups such as the League, but it is clear they speak as individuals. The scenes are a kind of brave hope in the future that only succeeds in revealing the enormous work that remains to be done among white workers.

Similar problems surround the treatment of black working women and the role of community organizing. Hurried sequences do little more than register the film’s awareness that such topics need further analysis. The footage showing the funeral of a ten year-old black boy accidentally shot by the police is decidedly out of rhythm with the rest of the film in spite of its attempt to link the life of the factory with the violence of everyday life. In the same vein, attorney Ken Cockrel’s summation interview is less effective than it might have been because it follows these disconnected and only partially thought-out sections.

The hurried second half of the film is partly the result of problems that nearly destroyed the film completely. While the three Newsreel men already mentioned were working on making a film, the rest of Detroit Newsreel was doing politics. As part of its program of intervention, Detroit Newsreel organized a repression conference to which it invited Robert Williams, recently returned from China, Emory Douglas of the Black Panthers, and Ken Cockrel from the League. The ideological tensions between the Panthers and the League were very severe at that time, particularly over differing positions regarding inflammatory rhetoric, the lumpen, and local autonomy. At the conference, Cockrel emphasized that as of that time (January 1970) no one in the Detroit movement had been killed by the police or had lost a trial in the courts. His tone made it clear that he thought League
tactics were the major reason for this and that Panther tactics were not needed or wanted in the city of Detroit. In spite of its lack of a single black member, Detroit Newsreel continued to push the Panther line as well as maintaining pressure for a Weatherman style approach among whites. The radical forces within the city became increasingly annoyed that a small outside group with no local base and no local work continued to advocate and work on projects contrary to the wishes and safety of local activists. Sheila Murphy, a radical with a long political background in the city, led the groups seeking to curb Newsreel. The League, for its part, became indignant about the fees and expense money paid to the Panthers by a group claiming perpetual poverty when it came to funds for local issues. The mounting pressure on Newsreel caused an internal collapse and the group decided to give their equipment to a cultural group in Ann Arbor and to leave the city. The League responded by seizing all the Newsreel equipment on the legal grounds that it was in lieu of unpaid speaker fees and on the revolutionary grounds that the group had raised money for the purpose of making radical films which was what the League proposed to continue doing. Lichtman, Bird and Gessner did not approve of the manner in which the League took the equipment but they agreed to continue working on the film as individuals even though Detroit Newsreel had ceased to exist.

The film was threatened from another quarter as well. The League leadership represented by John Watson, Ken Cockrel and Mike Hamlin wanted to expand nationally under the form of a grouping to be known as Black Workers Congress. They felt this was essential in dealing with national corporations, unions and police. The film was viewed as one of the most economically efficient and controllable forms of propaganda available. A Black Star Productions under Watson was formed to make subsequent films. The former Newsreel allies, other whites, and League blacks made up the staff. A Black Star Publications under Mike Hamlin had an all black staff to publish books, newspapers, pamphlets, posters, and other printed forms of propaganda. Some factions in the League considered these projects too ambitious and counter-productive to factory organizing. They argued for stricter development of local groups. Many people in this grouping harbored nationalist feelings that made them uneasy about working with any whites. Others were concerned with the kinds of problems the Panthers had encountered in trying to expand nationally. The unifying factor was a feeling that there should be more factory work and less media activity. These controversies were part of the split which resulted in Hamlin, Cockrel, Watson, and their supporters resigning from the League to work full-time with Black Workers Congress which became an independent group rather than a national expression of the League.

These internal problems had a disastrous effect on the ultimate distribution of FINALLY GOT THE NEWS. Many of the local leaders of the League did not want to show a film which spotlighted their political opposition. Consequently the film was never widely screened in Detroit. The forces that made up Black Workers Congress were successful in using the film throughout the country during the first months after it was completed, but a second split in which Cockrel left the Congress caused the film to be removed from circulation. Newsreel, for its part, had gone through ideological evolution and many units, especially on the West Coast, showed the film regularly. Before any of the splits became final, Watson had the foresight to take the film to Europe where segments were sold to German and Italian television. Prints were also exchanged with a cultural affiliate of the Italian Communist Party and with various extra-parliamentary groups.

The Italian history of FINALLY is a story in itself and the versions presently in circulation have more than academic interest. The version used by the Communist Party tones down the profane language of certain segments and through discreet translation filters out the more revolutionary ideology. The version used by the extra-parliamentary groups emphasizes the revolutionary perspective and finds creative Italian equivalents to ghetto slang. Italian workers who see the film express an identification with the blacks in spite of the enormous cultural differences. They comment on the similarity of working conditions, union betrayal, and the nature of capital in cities as distant from one another as Turin and Detroit. Rather than being offended by the swearing, the Italian workers laugh freely and often applaud.

FINALLY GOT THE NEWS has been able to survive the organization it was made to promote because it is ideological in the best sense: it is a film about ideas. Rather than being a puff piece for personalities or a group, FINALLY GOT THE NEWS presents a serious strategy for mass working class action. Whatever historical roles Watson, Cockrel and other League leaders may play in the future, their roles within the context of the film are complete.

Any rank-and-file member of the organization could have spoken their lines. In respect to this durability, FINALLY GOT THE NEWS is comparable to SALT OF THE EARTH, the ‘classic’ of the fifties. The struggles shown in that film were tightly related to a specific union and an ongoing organizational campaign, yet contemporary audiences remain enthusiastic about it. They can relate to the film’s sensitive probing of the contradictions between men and women active in the same movement and to the general problems facing militant organizations of Third World workers. FINALLY GOT THE NEWS has the same kind of lasting quality. It speaks of a specific time and specific experiences in terms that will remain relevant as long as working people are not able to control their own lives.

3 The text of the speech and other League documents have been collected in a “Black Labor Issue” of Radical America, Vol. 5, No. 2, March-April, 1971.

3 Sheila Murphy acted as the campaign manager for Justin Ravitz’s successful bid for a judgeship in Detroit in 1972. Ravitz ran as an avowed Marxist.