INTRODUCTION

C.L.R. James, through his persistent political activism and pioneering intellectual work, which span more than half a century, has influenced revolutionary consciousness and developments in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe and North and South America in a way that is beyond measure. His influence on the many lives he touched can be likened to that of the artists he wrote about: Cezanne, Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Picasso, Raphael, and Shakespeare.¹

To compare James’s influence to that of supreme artists at this point in time perhaps overstates the case. Generations to come will debate this matter based on an assessment of the ongoing impact of James’s writings. Without question, these constitute an important body of revolutionary ideas and thought for studying human civilization’s continuous struggle to establish a worldwide social order based on democracy, freedom and respect for cultural diversity, rather than cultural domination, imperialism, and subordination.

James was born in 1901. Unlike many legendary figures, he lived a full life. One of his personal dreams, however, was not fulfilled.

In 1978, James, who was acutely aware that in certain political activists’ circles he had become a legend in his own lifetime, shared with a few of his confidants his wish to live to the year 2000. Eleven years later James died in England.

James never exaggerated his importance and it is not our aim here to make him out to be more than he is, in terms of personality, whose intellectual work and political activities will continue to influence the course of development of revolutionary consciousness. Neither is it our intent here to exaggerate the importance of the formation of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW or “the League”), which our discussion

revolves around.

The formation of the LRBW was much more than an event. It was the ideological philosophical, and organizational high point of the movement of the 1960s, in terms of defining the Black struggle in the United States. It was an integral part of the international movement of the working class to emancipate itself and establish truly democratic societies.

The formation of the LRBW was a new sign of what was on the international horizon—the formation of Solidarity in Poland.

This is a matter of political analysis that can neither be proven or disproved. Thus, we are confronted with a difficulty of inquiry at the onset of this discussion in a twofold way.

First, how do we connect, determine and penetrate the influence of James’s personality to an unprecedented and short-lived revolutionary development like the formation of the LRBW, which took place in Detroit, Michigan in 1968, especially when that influence is mostly mediated and indirect?

Secondly, how do we probe the LRBW itself, from the standpoint that it represented much more than it appeared, when it emerged on the tails of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements?

These questions necessarily involve an unraveling of an organic complexity, not for academic reasons, but rather for analysis of certain developments and influences outside of traditional politics that have and will continue to shape the course of social movements in the United States in a revolutionary way.

To unravel something means there is an entanglement of knots that have to be penetrated and broken loose through a process of analysis. Our first knot is the man himself and the impact of his human interactions, political activism, and intellectual work. What manner of man was James? That is what we will first look at. Then we will examine at some length the social movement and political currents of the period, which engulfed both the emergence of the LRBW and James’s conscious efforts to influence the course of developments of this rather unique and youthful organization. After that we will take a close look at the LRBW and how it evolved. What did the LRBW seek to accomplish and establish? What were its central doctrines? An immediate and critical question arises. Where did it fail and succeed?

The last knot we will tackle before our summation will be an account-
ing and critical assessment of James's specific view of the LRBW, and his efforts to influence the direction the organization took in terms of bringing a wealth of practical, historical, and theoretical knowledge to the table for establishing and advancing policy, revolutionary ideas and programs. What did James specifically attempt to do? Was he successful? If not, why? Or, exactly what went wrong? These are some of the pertinent questions which we will attempt to dutifully examine, not for the sake of mere intellectualism, but rather for insights into the future as it relates to the continuous evolutionary development, self-organization and independent initiatives of Black movements in the United States.

A SPIRIT OF THE AGE

Arguably, no political personality, scholar or writer of the 20th century has put his or her stamp on so many aspects of the social sciences in relation to political movements as C.L.R. James. This is now—slowly but surely—being recognized in the United States as a result of a renewed interest in James's writings and a research blitz covering all aspects of his historical, literary, philosophical and theoretical contributions from various ideological perspectives and viewpoints.

Even though much is now known about James's character and work as a result of all the accolades he has and is receiving, he still remains an obscure figure in American history. The importance of his work is still known to only a small body of people. One reason is that his name is not connected with any major national or international celebrated event or movement in a way that grips national consciousness. He does not fall into the traditional category of "charismatic leader," or "head of state."

Nor does he fall into the traditional category of a celebrated professor. As his long time comrade and friend, Martin Glaberman is quick to point out, James was no academic. He only was a professor for a relatively short while—but never went to college.

How then do we categorize James? Why should there be an ongoing interest in his life and works?

To give him his due is not a matter of falling prey to the cult of personality. World-renowned and distinguished intellectuals in their own right like EP Thompson will never quibble about this tribute. Talk to the West Indian novelist George Lamming, the author of Natives of My Person, and he too will concur that James is the rarest of what the human intellect is
capable of conquering.²

Without James's coaching, Eric Williams would have never produced *Capitalism & Slavery* the way it was written.³ “The Doctor,” as Williams was called after Trinidad won its independence and he became head of State, obviously didn’t forget this when James arrived at the airport in 1965 in his “native land” when Williams had him immediately placed under house arrest. This was the prelude to James’s organization of the multi-racial Workers and Farmers Party for his career’s only electoral campaign.

Kwame Nkrumah, who led the “Ghana Revolution,” which produced one of the first independent African states, already seemed to forget James's influence in 1945, when the 5th Pan African Congress was held and he (Nkrumah) was singled out as the most promising young African—born to carry the torch of African liberation.⁴

Had Nkrumah, whom James called Francis, listened to his first mentor and George Padmore, “the father of the African Movement” that swept through Africa in various forms, from non-violent resistance movements to the Mau Mau, he may have been able to, at least, survive the relentless maneuver of British and U.S. Imperialism, like Fidel Castro had managed to hold on to power and chart a new future for Cuba.

During his lifetime, James not only touched the lives of artists, historians, literary figures, philosophers, politicians, social scientists, etc., but also farmers, oil field and sugar workers, students and ordinary people across the diversity of cultural backgrounds.

Needless to say, James was a prolific writer. More importantly, he was a creative, independent and revolutionary thinker who never lost sight of recording, documenting, and analyzing the self-activity, self-organization, self-movement, independent initiatives, and creativity of ordinary human beings—be they “barefoot” men and women, serfs, peasants, slaves, or modern day proletarians (industrial workers). For James, the focus of intellectual inquiry was humanity’s relentless struggle and quest for freedom and democracy as it manifested itself in the form of mass or social move-

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ments, that figuratively speaking, stripped the “Emperors” of oppression and exploitation of their clothes.

James’s most celebrated work is indisputably The Black Jacobins, a history of Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo (Haitian) Revolution.\(^5\) Fredric Warburg, the first publisher of this definitive study wrote about James in this way in his 1950 memoir, Occupation for a Gentleman: “James himself was one of the most delightful and easy going personalities I have known, colorful in more sense than one. A dark skinned West Indian Negro from Trinidad he stood six feet three inches in his socks and was noticeably good-looking. His memory was extraordinary.”\(^6\)

“He could quote, not only passages from the Marxist classics but long extracts from Shakespeare, in a soft lilting English which was a delight to hear. Immensely amiable, he loved the fleshpots of capitalism, fine cooking, fine clothes, fine furniture, and beautiful women, without a trace of the guilty remorse to be expected from a seasoned warrior of the class war. He was brave,” continued Warburg.\(^7\)

“Night after night he would address meetings in London and the provinces, denouncing the crimes of the bloodthirsty Stalin, until he was hoarse and his wonderful voice a mere croaking in the throat. The communists who heckled him would have torn him limb from limb, had it not been for the ubiquity of the police and their insensitivity to propaganda of whatever hue.” Warburg states further: “If you told him of some new communist argument, he would listen with a smile of infinite tolerance on his dark face, wag the index finger of his right hand solemnly, and announce in an understanding tone—’we know them, we know them’ —as of a man who has plumbed human wickedness to its depth and forgiven it, since man even in wickedness is pitiable.”\(^8\)

“If politics was his religion and Marx his god, if literature was his passion and Shakespeare his prince among writers, cricket was his beloved activity...” Warburg concludes.\(^9\)

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\(^7\) Ibid.

\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Ibid.
James took pride in admitting this on every occasion he had the opportunity to discuss his semi-autobiographical work, *Beyond A Boundary*, in which he gave the game of cricket new meaning as an integral part of West Indians' cultural life and social development.\(^\text{10}\)

Cricket was not the only sport James took interest in. During the 1970s, while living at the Chaselton building in Washington, DC, James cultivated an interest in American baseball too. For him, that seemed the appropriate thing to do since cricket wasn’t a popular sport in the US. Vida Blue became his man. He religiously kept up with Blue’s wins and losses, earned run average, as well as other baseball statistics.

More importantly, immediately upon his return to the United States, he made it his business to keep up with every aspect of the political advances and changing realities of the Black community. And, quite often, he went beyond the “call of duty” in his efforts to establish as many contacts, as humanly possible, with all the ideological tendencies and militant forces that had emerged on the scene, advancing the cause of Black emancipation during the period of his exile.\(^\text{11}\)

On many occasions, as his doctors will attest, health-wise, James was in poor shape to travel, but his obsession with feeling the pulse of what Black activists, students and women were thinking, doing and saying would not allow him to refuse, postpone or cancel a lecture or speaking engagement, unless he was absolutely confined to bed by his doctors.

“Lord have mercy. These fellows want me to come and speak. They are going to kill me,” he would say, with a croak and a smile, bordering on a tease-type of laugh, as he crawled out of bed to prepare for whatever engagement he had committed himself. That was the kind of man James was.

He was a man that always wanted to know what ordinary working class people thought. For him, that was the class that fundamentally and ultimately mattered, the class whose movement had to be constantly and continuously studied, watched and analyzed in every industrial and peasant based society from the standpoint of human civilization’s quest for


\(^\text{11}\) James lived in the United States for two distinct periods. His first American years were during the Age of the CIO (1938-1953), before he was coerced into leaving, as an undesirable immigrant, during the McCarthy era. His second American sojourn (1969-1979) was as a mentor and colleague of the Black Power and Black Studies movements. [ed.]
freedom since the days of Antiquity.

Whenever James would come into one-on-one contact with young activists, particularly from the southern part of the United States, he would seize the opportunity to ask them, “What do your parents do? What type of foods do they eat? Do they eat grits? What about salt pig tails and smoked meats like ham hocks, and neck bones?” That was the manner of man he was. He did not divorce politics from everyday life.12

James first came to the United States in 1938 to help the Trotskyist movement, which was then a factor in American and world politics, formulate and develop a position on the “Negro Question.” He was invited by Leon Trotsky, who had based himself in Mexico in an unsuccessful effort to escape the hands of assassination by the henchmen of Joseph Stalin, for discussion.13 At that time, the Black movement in the United States had yet to arrive as the type of mass movement that this nation, and the whole world, witnessed from 1954 to 1974. James knew, however, through his observations, interactions and studies as early as 1948, when he presented a comprehensive statement to a gathering of James Cannon’s Socialist Workers Party in the United States, titled “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States,” that something was brewing below the surface, inside the African American community, that would some day explode into a mass movement like a volcanic eruption. On the heels of the United States Supreme Court ruling, Brown vs. Board of Education, outlawing racial segregation in schools, the lava of social movement flowed from the deepest pits of racial oppression in the South, as James predicted.

“The Negro struggle, the independent Negro struggle has a vitality and a validity of its own...it has an organic political perspective along which it is traveling to one degree or another, everything shows that at the present time it is traveling with great speed and vigor,” James argued.14

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12 This reveals the influence on James of Karl Marx’s *A Workers Inquiry.* (Detroit: Bewick, 1973). [ed.]


Beyond Measure

This was a warning to the traditional leftist forces, including Black radicals, who functioned under the rhetorical banner, "Black and White, Unite and Fight," but who according to James believed that the independent struggles of Black people had not much more than "an episodic value" and could "constitute a great danger" if it did not subordinate itself to the organized labor movement.

"Anyone who knows them, who knows their history is able to talk to them intimately, watches them at their theaters, watches them at their dances, watches them at their churches, reads their press with a discerning eye—he will recognize that it is necessary to have a new concept about what Black people will do in the United States," James further explained.15

Ernest Rice McKinney, a brilliant African American labor leader, and, at the time, a very influential organizer and personality inside Max Shachtman’s Workers Party, disagreed with James’s viewpoint. Neither James, nor McKinney, however allowed their ideological differences to stand in the way of teaming up to assist the agricultural workers, who initiated the Southeast Missouri Sharecroppers’ Strike of 1941.16 James never attempted to upstage his comrade in this regard. Whenever James discussed his involvement in this sharecroppers strike he always seemed to downplay his role in an effort to write McKinney’s name into the pages of history. That was the type of person he was.

When James first came to the United States he already had a number of what was to later be viewed as precedent setting accomplishments. He alone with his countryman, Alfred H Mendes, had organized and published one of the first West Indian literary journals, produced for and by native West Indian intellectuals, The Beacon. This particular accomplishment makes James one of the fathers of West Indian literature.17

To his credit was an early West Indian biography, The Life of Captain Cipriani (1933), a fragment of which was published as a pamphlet, "The

15 Ibid, 187.
Case for West Indian Self-Government.” Contrary to what some intellectuals may say, it was this particular work, not James's most celebrated and popular *The Black Jacobins*, in which he clearly had Caribbean independence on his mind. As he himself pointed out on numerous occasions, in lectures and speeches, the liberation of Africa was his foremost focus when he produced his monumental study on Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution, the first and only successful slave revolt in the New World.

C.L.R. James (JR Johnson) was always a practical politician as well as a theoretician. Around 1940, he and Raya Dunayevskaya (Freddie Forrest) and others organized an intellectual faction of some seventy people, known as the Johnson-Forest Tendency. This group was first lodged inside the Workers Party (WP), which was then headed by Max Shachtman, and it set about the task of working out independent theoretical perspectives.

In 1947, the Johnson-Forest Tendency left the WP over policy issues and joined the Socialist Workers Party. James became the second most influential leader of the Workers Party. Max Shachtman was the person at the helm, but as Grace Lee Boggs so correctly states in *Conversations in Maine*, "Shachtman was the one who held the party together by his rhetoric but C.L.R. held it together by ideas." 20

Speaking about the collaborative and independent work the Johnson-Forest Tendency undertook, as a result of James's leadership, Grace Lee Boggs further noted: “We carried on studies that were fantastic: Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Karl Marx's *Capital* in light of the development of German Classical Philosophy and English Political Economy, dialectics, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Melville, the Abolitionists, Negro History, Marcus Garvey. We did a huge intellectual work during these years because we thought it was necessary to the American Revolution, and because we saw the American working class as heirs to all this. Raya Dunayevskaya is still living on that work today. Only C.L.R. could have given us the leadership.

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in this..."\(^{21}\)

Under James's leadership the Johnson-Forest Tendency undertook some "colossal" intellectual tasks. They did a thorough study of the Russian Question which has yet to be fully appreciated and surpassed. They also translated and published parts of Karl Marx's *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 from the original German text.\(^{22}\) The climax of James and his colleagues' theoretical work was in no uncertain terms the production of *State Capitalism & World Revolution* in which they made clear that however great the differences may be between the economy of the United States and Russia, the fundamental laws of capitalism were operative and prevailed in both countries.\(^{23}\)

"What the American workers are revolting against since 1936 and holding at bay, this and nothing else but this has overwhelmed the Russian proletariat," wrote James in collaboration with two other moving spirits and workhorses of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee (later married to James Boggs). "The rulers of Russia performed the same functions as are performed by Ford, General Motors, the coal operators and their bureaucratic staffs," they declared. "Not inefficiency of bureaucrats, not consumption but capital accumulation in its specifically capitalist manner, this is the analysis of the Russian economy" James and his associates pointed out.\(^{24}\)

*State Capitalism & World Revolution* was first published almost a half-century ago. If we look closely at what is happening in Russia today we will see James and his colleagues were absolutely correct when they stated: "To think that the struggle in Russia is over consumption not only strikes at the whole theory of the relationship of the superstructure to the productive mechanism. In practice, today, the crisis in Russia is manifestly the crisis in production."\(^{25}\)


In 1953 James’s work in the United States came to a temporary halt when he was shipped off to Ellis Island by Federal authorities to await deportation like so many other foreign born persons who were branded communists, and undesirables, and denied U.S. citizenship during the McCarthy era—the period of the “Red Scare.”

While incarcerated on Ellis Island, James wrote *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, a critical analysis of Herman Melville’s classic Moby Dick and submitted it, figuratively, to the United States government as his application for citizenship.26 “Anyone who understands Herman Melville’s Moby Dick cannot be considered un-American,” James would wittingly tell his audiences whenever he had an occasion to talk about his work on Melville. That was the manner of man he was and never ceased to be.

**THE GENERAL AND SPECIFIC SITUATION**

When James was allowed to return to the United States in 1968 as a visiting lecturer, he found the political climate and situation radically different from what it was in 1953 when he was forced to leave. First, radical thinkers were no longer being treated as outcast lepers. They were in demand. Second, and infinitely more important, the Black movement, in no uncertain terms, had become the revolutionary consciousness and vanguard of social movement in the United States. The League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW) was just emerging. The slogan “Black Power” already had become, as James would readily say, “the political banner of the Black movement” on all fronts. It was indeed a new day.

There was a general recognition crossing ethnic, race, sex, creed, regional and class lines that the long drawn out Civil Rights struggle from 1954 to 1964 had been a necessary phase in the development of the Black movement in the United States, but it was not sufficient in terms of transforming American society. It’s aim and accomplishment as a movement was primarily limited to dethroning segregation. Something more was needed and a new militancy was on the horizon.

Unexpectedly with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, a symbolic and significant victory, came the urban rebellions anointing James

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Baldwin's work *The Fire Next Time.* These spontaneous political explo-
sions shook the foundations of American society. Harlem, Cleveland, New-
ark, Watts, etc. went up in flames. The most devastating to property and
threatening to the political apparatus was to be the precursor of the LRBW—
the 1967 Detroit Rebellion. To use an expression James loved, these rebellions came "like a thief in the night." The following is an exten-
sive selection from James's Facing Reality group pamphlet, published in 1967, in response to the Detroit rebellion:

The Detroit revolt of July 1967 and the battles that were taking place at the same time all across the country, mark a new stage in the Negro struggle. These are not just a repetition of what has been happening since Watts.

Detroit has been called an integrated riot. If integrated looting and sniping are supposed to mean it is not a question of race, then it is false. Detroit was a racial explosion, initiated and carried through predominantly by Negroes. But it was also a question of class. Except for minor inci-
dents, blacks and whites did not battle each other. Both battled businessmen and police.

What is important in this for the future of the Negro movement is not that there was any united effort between blacks and whites or that there was any lessening of race hatred and tensions among whites. There was not. What is important is that Detroit showed that substantial sections of the white working class (the Southern whites of Corktown, for example), have no interest in defending the existing society and are ready to work to overthrow it.

These things could come out in Detroit because of the nature of the Detroit ghetto and how it differs from Watts and Harlem. In Detroit the ghetto is continuous and it dominates the whole central city and extends into almost all its corners. It includes within itself and borders on significant integrated areas with varied class character from working class to upper class.

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WORKERS WERE WRITTEN OFF

The liberals thought that this would have the effect of preventing major uprisings because the better-off sections of the Negro community would have a restraining effort. They were proved wrong because the total Negro ghetto provided strength, not restraint. The militant sectarians share with liberals the idea that money can bribe the oppressed. They wrote off the Negro industrial workers, thousands upon thousands of whom have good seniority in the three dollar and hour auto industry.

It is a peculiar idea that because a man has won in bitter struggle an income that gives him a house, a car, a refrigerator, and a television set, that he will therefore accept more easily being treated as less than a man. This idea was proved wrong in Detroit. Workers at Ford, Chrysler and General Motors took part.

REFORMS REACH DEAD END

Also proved wrong in Detroit was the idea that a liberal, dedicated Negro Democrat like young Congressman John Conyers is in some way better than a Machine politician like the old hack, Dawson of Chicago. The total lack of contact between men like Conyers and the people of 12th Street, of Linwood Ave, of Dexter Blvd., he is supposed to represent demonstrated what it means to be a part of the two-party machine that runs this segregated society. In his complete surprise and ignorance he was joined by Buddy Battle, Nelson “Jack” Edwards, Horace Sheffield, and the other Negro porkchoppers of the Trade Union Leadership Council. The masses of the Negro people cannot be bribed by a few Congressional seats that are incorporated into the Establishment. And Negro workers cannot be bribed by a few posts to Negro porkchoppers who administer the union contract against them.
The incorporation of a small section of the Negro population into the power structure does not lessen the revolutionary capacity of the overwhelming majority who are left out.

The power structure itself showed signs of cracking under the pressure of the events. Public disputes between politicians, indecision and conflict among themselves, were part of the response to the revolt that swept across the nation at the end of July 1967.

In France, students and workers also had taken to the streets with mass mobilization campaigns. President De Gaulle of France was so frightened by the mass mobilization of students and workers that he left the country to consult with his generals to see whether they would support him and his government if they were overthrown or forced into exile by what appeared then to be the encroaching French Revolution of the twentieth century.

Earlier in the 1960s the Algerian Revolution was in full progress challenging French colonial rule and imperialism. The African liberation movements in Angola, Namibia, South Africa (Azania) and Zimbabwe were also in full gear.

Without question all of these events were fueling and reinforcing the new black militancy in the United States with international consciousness.28

TOWARDS A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

By 1964 the Black movement already had begun to internationalize itself and move towards a more class conscious and worldwide perspective. The success of the Cuban Revolution and the Ghana Revolution and the Vietnam War were significant contributing factors along with the rise of the notion of the "Third World." This was embodied in the formation and activities of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and the publication of a forgotten magazine called Black America.29

Two years after the formation of RAM, the words “Black Power” were to flow out of the mouth of Willie Ricks, one of the many unsung heroes of the Civil Rights movement during a protest demonstration in Albany, Georgia. Almost simultaneously, the Black Panther Party was born in Oakland, California declaring the right of the Black community to arm itself for self-defense, under the banner “All Power to the People! All Power to Black People!”

At the level of dialectical imagination, the impact on consciousness seemed to re-echo, in some small way, Lenin and the 1917 Russian Revolution slogan “All Power to the Soviets.” The contrast between these urban explosions in the North (twenty to thirty in less than twelve months) as compared to demonstrations, protest marches, sit-ins, wade-ins, etc. in the largely rural South could not be more sharp. The Southern voting and other desegregation issues could be coped with by the introduction and enactment of legislation. But there were no legislative remedies for resolving the crisis posed by the urban uprisings that followed in the North after the passage of new civil rights laws. The authorities were so caught off guard that they even complained of not knowing who to negotiate with in an effort to stabilize the situation. This is an indication that the leadership of the Black movement was being produced spontaneously, and on the spot, by the movement below, and that there were many unidentifiable leaders, most of whom still remain unknown.

Not only were local, state, and federal authorities caught off guard but also the traditional Civil Rights leadership, and the “Old” and “New” leftist forces that claimed to be in the “know” of analyzing social movements. We are mentioning this strictly from the standpoint of the preparedness and unpreparedness of organized intellectual forces to, if nothing else, assist in properly analyzing the 1967 Detroit Rebellion, and to speculate about the future.

James would definitely appreciate this point because as early as 1963, writing from London, he had encouraged his colleagues in Detroit to prepare a comprehensive new internal statement on the historical and current development of the Black movement with an eye to what was to come in the future. At the time, the Hegelian Doctrine of Essence was governing
his thinking.\footnote{See C.L.R. James, \textit{Notes on Dialectics}. (Detroit: Facing Reality, 1971) 74-125. [ed.]}  

"The Essence of a thing is that it has to move." The Civil Rights movement had to move from the largely rural South to the urban centers of the North. This was more a factual matter for James than a matter of speculative thought. That is to say, when he began pressing his colleagues in the United States to prepare a new statement on the development of the Black movement in the United States he clearly recognized that the movement was no longer Southern but national, and the nation and race had become intertwined.

When nation and race are almost totally intertwined, events move with a rapidity in a variety of directions on issues which have been separated for almost a hundred years. For example, the Kennedy assassination and Malcolm X's infamous response "Chickens come home to roost," split the Nation of Islam and further propelled Malcolm into the spotlight of being the most influential potential opponent of Martin Luther King's advocacy of non-violent resistance, and the Southern Christian Leadership Council's domination of the Civil Rights movement.

Another concrete example of what happens when a nation and race are almost totally intertwined is what occurred with the birth of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), as a new force on the American Left in general. SDS produced the forcible confrontation of white students with the police, culminating in the Kent State Massacre which the Ohio National Guard carried out in the name of "law and order" against unarmed college students.

It is against this backdrop that the League of Revolutionary Black Workers emerges on the scene as a radical political force to be reckoned with.

**THE BIRTH OF THE LEAGUE REVISITED**

The League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW) grew out of the self-movement and self-organization of Black workers in the automobile plants of Detroit. It was no historical accident that the birth of the LRBW took place in a Chrysler plant. As early as the 1950s, James and his colleagues speculated in their collaborative work on American civilization that the opportunity to work out independent methods of struggle were
most favorable at the Chrysler plants on the East side of Detroit.

From the beginning, the Chrysler plants always had the smallest contract. These plants were originally organized one-by-one by the workers themselves. As compared to General Motors and Ford, in the original sit-downs there were a relatively small number of professional leaders in the labor movement.

The auto plants were not isolated but surrounded by the homes of the workers. James and his colleagues documented that, during the second World War, new layers of Black workers entered these plants and have remained there until today. Further, the Correspondence group recorded that the speed of these Blacks in taking united action independently of the union apparatus to fight any specific grievances was the envy of white workers. Black workers were fully mobilized at all times to respond to any suspicion of discrimination. Supervisors lived in continual fear that they would offend a single person of color and thereby precipitate a work stoppage. In this way, the sensitivity of Blacks to all infractions of their rights placed them in the vanguard of the workers in fighting management on the job. This came to fruition with the formation of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

The origins of the League itself can be traced back to May of 1967, when a small group of Black activists in Detroit—Mike Hamlin, John Watson, Luke Trip, Ken Cockrel, John Williams, General Baker, and others decided to begin publishing a Black community newspaper called the Inner City Voice. The first issue of the Voice was published in October, 1967, approximately three months after Detroit went up in flames. The League itself had not yet been conceived as an organization.

The actual birth of the League began with the spontaneous protest and walkout of Black workers at Chrysler's Hamtramck Assembly Plant on May 2, 1968 and the formation of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) which occurred in the immediate aftermath of what was a long overdue "wildcat strike." Some 4,000 workers walked away from Chrysler's assembly line—defying union leadership as well as management—in protest against the terrible working conditions they encoun-

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The Dodge workers' movement quickly spread to other plants and industries. More specifically, DRUM served as the catalyst for the Eldon Axle Revolutionary Union Movement (ELRUM) and the Ford Revolutionary Union Movements and other similar formations. Health workers even got into the act by organizing themselves under the "revolutionary union" banner too. The closest federation of Black workers resembling anything comparable to the League was the Industrial Trade Advisory Council (ITAC) of Jamaica, which, unlike the League, defined itself and functioned as a trade union movement.

The League was radically different from a trade union in that its emphasis was on totally transforming the community. Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin point this out in Detroit: I Do Mind Dying (A Study in Urban Revolution).

The League was also radically different from any civil rights or Black political organization of the period in that it grew directly out of the antagonistic and contradictory relations between labor and capital at the point of production. Even though it was a local organization, its tentacles extended, as we shall see later, throughout the United States in embryonic form and internationally.

The formation of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers scared the daylights out of the United Auto Workers (UAW), and the management of the auto industry as a whole, as well as politicians and police authorities. The UAW itself was so scared that it circulated a letter denouncing the League as a racist organization.

What made the League as an organization so threatening? As we attempt to answer this question, we must keep in mind that the League did not control a single local union, and even though they did run slates for union positions, that was definitely not the primary function of the organization. The League was a propaganda, education, and agitation organization.

It is important to note here that when the League emerged, Detroit

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was the "industrial capital of America" and the home of the United Auto Workers (UAW) which had the reputation of inarguably being the most progressive and unsegregated union in the nation. Many of the local UAW unions were under Black leadership. This would indicate that the dominant issue could no longer be and was not that of dethroning segregation.

To understand what made the League so threatening we must again look at the general setting in which the organization bloomed. The inner-city population of Detroit was sixty percent Black. In some automobile plants Black workers represented more than seventy percent of the workforce, and by all yardsticks of political analysis they were the most rebellious section of the workforce in Detroit. The white student movement had concentrated their activities against the Vietnam War, etc. The attempt to reform the Democratic Party in 1968 had failed. The cultural radicalism of the youth of that period could be, to some extent, smiled at by the authorities. But what the urban uprisings had posed was the imponderable and seemingly insoluble question of the period. What would the Black urban people do next? It was this particular question which riveted academicians, culturalists, public policy advisors, politicians, and police authorities.

It was because of what has been described, coming to a head, in the midst of various sources that the League's birth became so threatening to the economic and political power structure, most notably the labor bureaucracy.

Detroit specifically had a young, liberal, new fresh face, Mayor Cavanaugh, who had a cash pipeline directly to Washington, which pumped millions of federal dollars into the city to curtail the new Black militancy. What was happening in Detroit was obviously not civil rights demands but a whole rejection of welfare state capitalism.

Let it be remembered that there were sources of the Civil Rights movement: Brown vs. Board of Education, the literacy campaigns in the thirteen southern states which were led by Septima Clark, a new young president John F. Kennedy, the formation of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), etc.

The point we are driving at is the League represented something new. No one anticipated or thought about the formation of a principled Black working class organization and the impact it might have. At the time, the eyes of more people in and around Detroit were on the activities of the ris-
ing white folk hero John Sinclair and his Guitar Army than were on the self-movement and self-organization of the Black proletariat there.

Few people paid attention to the little mimeographed tabloid newspaper General Baker and Chuck Wooten published in the name of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement.

The formation of the League was, thus, a shocker to the imagination on a host of practical and theoretical fronts. First, it was not a Civil Rights organization, a traditional trade union or leftist party. Second, unlike the Black Panthers, it was not a "street people" organization. Rather it was a Black worker-intellectual combination, whose legitimacy did not spring from or depend on the involvement of Black religious leaders, prominent middle class Black professionals or liberal whites. Third, the League was not dependent on an external or radical intelligentsia like the Communist Party, Progressive Labor Party, or the Socialist Workers Party.

Unlike most Black community organizations it did not seek government funding. Perhaps most important for analysis is the recognition that the League did not depend on unions as unions. As a matter of fact the League called for what no working class organization had ever called for: community control not only of schools, neighborhoods, city government, and the police, but also community control of the labor bureaucracy.

THE HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Let's look back in history for a moment. The Black movement in the United States from slavery to the present has had a certain rhythm and various forms of revolts have maintained cultural continuity. There was the Underground Railroad and the formation of Freedom's Journal. There was David Walker's Appeal calling for a massive slave insurrection. There was the intervention of the slaves in the Civil War which took the form of what W.E.B. Du Bois correctly characterized and described as a general strike, in his unsurpassed work, Black Reconstruction in America.

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, as early as 1866 to be more precise, there was the self-organization and self-mobilization of Black longshoreman, which took the form of labor unions and protective associations. Such organizations came in existence in all of the seaport towns along the Southeastern Atlantic coast: Charleston, South Carolina; Jacksonville, Florida; Savanna, Georgia; Wilmington, North Carolina; etc.

The self-organization and self-mobilization of the Black working class continued throughout the Reconstruction periods. In the late 1880s and the early 1890s the Colored Farmers Alliance, which claimed a membership of more than a million persons, rose to be a significant force in the Populist Movement. During this period Black workers also rose to the forefront of general strikes in New Orleans and Savannah through their own independent labor organization. It’s worth noting for informational and research purposes that a body of Black workers in Savannah created the Labour Recorder, a newspaper whose policy was to only allow workers to contribute to its pages. That was an historical, precedent-setting event.

The “Back to Africa” question resurfaced repeatedly throughout the 19th century. By the beginning of the 20th century, however, there was a general consensus among Black people that mass emigration to Africa was a totally unrealistic proposition.

As we entered the most tortured century—the 20th century—with respect to the development of unleashing of the most devastating technological and scientific instruments of mass destruction, the Niagara Movement under the leadership of W.E.B. Du Bois gave rise to the formation of the NAACP. The next historical precedent is the Marcus Garvey Movement of the 1920s and the Universal Negro Improvement Association which spearheaded the first mass movement of Blacks in mostly urban areas. Of course, the next mass movement of Black people was the Civil Rights Movement.

38 See Tony Martin, Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association. (Dover: The Majority
Rights movement.

Until the emergence of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the only Black working class organization in recorded history to attempt to put its stamp on any aspect of civil rights was the Black Pullman Porters under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph.39

Thus, there is no historical precedent we can reference to account for the League. It was a new form of organization, which by its very nature, integrated race and class issues. Most, if not all, of the prominent leadership figures were or had been auto workers.

This is significant in that the Civil Rights movement did not produce any prominent Black proletarian figures in any communities to which we can point.

Whereas the Black Panthers believed that only the “street people” could take on the establishment, the League believed, and correctly so, that only the “plant people” (proletarians), workers at the point of production, could take on the establishment.40

This ideological clash between the League and the Panthers remained

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40 The author is addressing a political dilemma. There was concern that the militant “street people” would be encouraged by the Black Panthers to pick up the gun in a premature and disorganized suicidal insurrection. Mohammed’s critique of the Panthers was not “vanguard” minded merely because he was concerned with the relation of discipline to spontaneity in terms of armed struggle.

The point was to think about the type of direct self-government and reorganization of society, particularly of the economy, that could be achieved by taking over industrial workplaces. Narrowly defining this as “the point of production” can lead to undervaluation of initiatives for social reproduction the Panthers achieved in the realm of judicial affairs, copwatch programs, and community survival programs such as providing healthcare and breakfast for children. All of these tasks are part of a program of popular self-management when done in a disciplined fashion. [ed.]
an unsettled interaction between the two organizations because it was a question that never had to be settled on the spot—just clarified.

**PRINCIPLED CLASS LINE POLITICS**

The League was the only organization in the whole Black movement that evolved from the point of production and consistently adhered to the notion of class struggle and attempted to formulate a praxis on the interplay between race and class in a concrete way. In this regard, there is one unique example of political activity that we can point to, without challenge, that illustrates and illuminates the distinct quality of the League's natural orientation versus other Black radical organizations.

The first and perhaps most significant is the community-wide legal defense campaign the League mounted to free James Johnson, a Black worker at the Eldon Axle Plant, who went momentarily berserk, took a gun into the plant and shot his supervisor, and two other people. The legal case, handled by Ken Cockrel, was based on the claim of “temporary insanity,” caused by working conditions. The trial culminated when the jury was taken on a tour of the plant, for research purposes, and emerged believing that toiling in that workplace would try anyone’s mental health. Cockrel, who sat on the Executive Board of the League, and the organization’s leadership, were not satisfied with this extraordinary legal victory. On the basis of the verdict, Johnson, they proposed, should be entitled to workmen’s compensation, just as any other worker who was injured on the job, even though he had been committed to a mental institution after the verdict, which was not guilty by reason of insanity.

The League’s defense campaign to have Johnson compensated for the mental anguish, pain and sufferings he underwent as a result of the dehumanizing working conditions he with which he had to cope, in the Eldon Plant was successful. They established a precedent in law and legal theory. This case was qualitatively different from the legal defense funds to free Ben Chavis and the “Wilmington Ten,” Bobby Seale, Huey P. Newton, Angela Davis, Rap Brown, George Jackson and hundreds of lesser known people, whom the Black movement defined as political prisoners.

James was aware of this and all the other distinct qualities of the League we have mentioned. He was aware of much more. He knew he was the “link between the Old World and the New,” a source of information and knowledge. During the life of the LRBW, he received regular brief-
ings from various sources on the dynamics of the League, and what it was confronted with, internally and externally, as it attempted to consolidate its influence and power as an authentic and genuine Black working class organization.

There were two sources James relied on most heavily and religiously for information about the League: (1) The Marcus Garvey Institute based in Lansing, Michigan and (2) the Caribbean Unity Conference which was housed on 14th Street in Washington, DC. These two organizations were not only one in spirit but also in actuality. James forged a unity between these groups that provided him with a reliable organizational base and pipeline to penetrate and influence most, if not all, the political tendencies and new social forces that he, in his wisdom, deemed important.

James was a founding member and honorary chairperson of the Caribbean Unity Conference. Under his directive, Tony Ferguson and Valerie Andrew were charged with the responsibility of doing research on the League and disseminating information about the organization's activities to political groupings in Antigua, Guyana, Grenada, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and to other organizations in the non-English speaking islands and territories that they were in touch with.

At James's request, the Garvey Institute sent him regular reports on the League's activities and arranged private meetings between him and various members of the League who were in the ranks of leadership, like Modibo Kadalie, the head of the Highland Park component of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

The Garvey Institute was an ideal pipeline to the League for James because one of the organization's components, the Pan African Institute housed in Pontiac, Michigan was composed of young activists who were largely children of Detroit's Black working class community and "die-hard" members of the League, like Kofi Natambu (Michael Ray). They not only kept James informed about the League's activities but also looked to him for guidance.

All of the initial organizers and leadership cadres of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers had been exposed, if not influenced to some degree or another, to James's writings and view through the activities of the

Facing Reality Publishing Committee. Some of the leadership forces had taken classes conducted by George Rawick, a close friend and colleague of James, who taught at Wayne State University. Some of them also had taken classes on Marxism conducted by Martin Glaberman, who along with his wife Jessie, established Bewick Publications to insure among other things, that the work of James and the Johnson-Forest Tendency stayed in print.

“When the League was born you couldn’t be in the center of radical politics in Detroit and not at least know of C.L.R. James,” Norman Richmond stated emphatically in an interview in 1993. Richmond was one of the League members who wrote regular columns on the African liberation movements for the *Inner City Voice* and a Canadian based tabloid called *Contrast.*

James’s *A History of Pan African Revolt* was one of Richmond’s bibles; and, even today, though he still disagrees with James on certain aspects of political analysis, he doesn’t hesitate to pay homage to James for having broadened his and other League members’ thinking. “He moved some of us away from the narrow limits of Black Nationalism,” said Richmond, while recalling that James autographed a copy of his book for him and then proceeded to engage him in a discussion on the music genius of Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Max Roach, Bob Marley, etc.

Whenever James met privately with any members of the League he expressed deep concerns, not about various Black Nationalist tendencies that were sprouting inside the League, but about the organization’s executive leadership becoming too absorbed into the treacherous waters of Marxist-Leninism, and Maoism. James knew the ideological and theoretical pitfalls of these waters well; and, he was always quick to remind

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44 James obviously had a unique brand of revolutionary libertarian Marxism that, while at his best advocated direct democracy and workers self-management, was uncritically fond of Lenin. He generally was not fond of Maoism, though later in life his opposition became less strident. See the chapter on James and China in Matthew Quest. *In The Shadow of State Power: C.L.R. James, Direct Democracy and National Liberation Struggles.* (Atlanta: On Our Own Authority! Publishing, 2013). [ed.]
young upstarts in the movement that he had studied Hegel, Marx, Lenin and every aspect of the Russian Revolution for more than forty years.

In July 1970, the executive leadership published a document titled *The Overall Program of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers* in which they stated: “It is clear to us that the development of our struggle based on concrete realities dictates the need for a Black people’s liberation political party. We state unequivocally that this must be a Black Marxist-Leninist party…” This pronouncement, which was circulated as an official redefining statement of the direction in which the League was headed as an organization, rather than as an internal discussion paper for debate, led to a fierce ideological struggle inside and outside the League, over the applicability of Marxism-Leninism as a tool of analysis and a method of thought that should be embraced by the Black movement in the United States.

By this time, the activities of the League were noticeably beginning to move further and further away from the shop floors of the auto plants, and the everyday concerns, language and struggles of the men and women on the assembly lines, the most important section of mass organization, in terms of where the organization’s power lay as a political force to be reckoned with. Also, very noticeable was the bureaucratic and authoritarian behavior the executive leadership began to increasingly display through what turned out to be unenforceable directives to the central staff and other components of the organization. What was rapidly developing at the executive leadership level was a move away from the concept of participatory democracy, the mainstay of any mass organization, and was becoming dominated by intellectuals and bureaucratic type professionals.

The nationalist tendencies inside the League, in particular, severely criticized and attacked the executive leadership of the organization for its retrogression. *Every Cook Can Govern: A Study Of Democracy in Ancient Greece* and Its Meaning for Today, the widely circulated pamphlet by James was often invoked to state the nationalist tendencies’ case.

With respect to policy-making all of the various components of the League felt that they should have a “say-so,” and most of the cadres themselves functioned under the principles that everyone who showed up at any given meeting not only were entitled to voice their opinion during deliberations, but also vote on any matters if no general consensus could

be reached and a vote was necessary, to either resolve or clarify policy questions relative to the League's political activities. The League was not a "membership card" organization like the NAACP and political parties. Anyone who participated in any activities of the League could define himself or herself as a member, and would be treated as such, without any obligations being imposed upon them to pay dues, attend meetings, on a regular or set basis. In this regard, the League was not a unique organization, because most community based organizations functioned as "open-to-all" participatory organizations in which a person could "fit-in" where he or she desired or chose in terms of contributing to the development of the organization.

Being apprised of developments with respect to the internal problems the League was faced with, James, characteristically, mapped out a simple strategy during his meeting with key members of the Garvey Institute for exposing and reintroducing various political tendencies within the League to his historical, literary, philosophical and theoretical works. What James specifically proposed is that the Garvey Institute reprint Facing Reality with a new introduction aimed primarily at stimulating the Black Nationalist tendencies inside the League, that were hostile to anything branded Marxism, to read and study his works for the purpose of broadening their perspective, and thinking on the tasks that faced the Black Revolution in the United States.

He also proposed that the Garvey Institute enter into a collaboration with Friends of Facing Reality to jointly reprint Basic Documents on the Black Struggle and Notes on Dialectics. James deemed these two documents key for (1) countering radical forces inside and outside the League that attacked Black Nationalism on the grounds that from the standpoint of Marxism-Leninism it was reactionary and (2) steering the League forces towards a proper understanding of what dialectics as a method of thought was all about and how to correctly apply it as a tool of analysis.

James further proposed that the Marcus Garvey Institute prepare an internal discussion paper on Organization and Spontaneity: The Theory of the Vanguard Party and Its Application to the Black Movement in the U.S.


Today. This document was sent to radical Black organizations of all political persuasions for critical comment and debate. Modibo Kadalie, volunteered to undertake this task; and, to everyone's surprise, circulation of this document produced a general consensus throughout the Black movement that the "organizational question" should be debated widely within the context of the applicability or non-applicability of Lenin's theory of the vanguard party, clarifying issues in simple and understandable language, relative to the self-organization of the Black movement in the U.S.

Kadalie did more than just circulate the Garvey Institute's document and poll Black political activists throughout the country. He and Malcolm 2X (Greg Kelley), the person who paid the lion's share of the publication costs, turned the task into an international campaign for a debate, not on Lenin's theory of the vanguard party but on the "dialectical relation of spontaneity and organization." This activity set the stage for a series of lectures James gave in Detroit, Pontiac, Lansing and East Lansing, Michigan.

Both the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the Black Panther Party, independent of each other, invited James to come to Detroit to speak on dialectics. There is no record of what occurred or what he said in his discussions with the Panthers, except that he met them at the home of Martin and Jessie Glaberman. There are, however, unpublished transcriptions of two taped lectures James gave in Detroit in 1971 on June 12 and 13. About fifty people attended the first lecture and some seventy people were in attendance for James's second lecture.

Willie Gorman, who chaired the lectures, recalled that James told his audience, "You people did not really invite me here to hear me talk on dialectics. You want to know something else. What is it?" This was James's way of providing the League members an opportunity to seek his counsel and guidance with respect to what they needed to work out and do to stay the course of a genuine Black working class organization. There was no response to James's diplomatic and subtle offer to assist the League, in its struggle to formulate something theoretically that could be integrated into the program of the organization to possibly help prevent its collapse.

James was there for the League, but the executive leadership of the organization was not in tune with him, particularly on the question of the vanguard party and how to embrace and apply Marxist-Leninist thought correctly. Even though he was well aware that the executive leadership of the organization had misguidedly moved to an advocacy of the formation
of a vanguard party, he did not fall prey to criticizing or condemning them or the organization publicly, when he was asked during the question and answer period of his second lecture on *Notes on Dialectics* what his view was in respect to the League.

His response was that: "The League of Revolutionary Black Workers does not say: ‘We are a vanguard party. The revolution will be led by us and nobody else. And until you join us and we have sufficient force there will be no revolution or the revolution will fail.’ If they say that," James said, "I would be their mortal enemy, but they don’t say that."

Some of the members of the audience viewed James’s response as an avoidance in terms of taking on the executive leadership of the League in a head-on confrontational way. It was and it was not. The positive and negative was simply lodged together in content and form. That is all.

James’s belief was that everyone present could easily read between the lines of his methodical effort to coach the League forces toward an understanding of how to properly study and apply dialectical thought correctly to any given question.

One handicap James had in his attempt to impact the thinking of the League was that he was, without question, the elder statesman of the Black movement as a whole, but he was considered and treated as an outsider when it came to developing policies inside the League and an overall program inside the organizational matrix of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Grace Lee and James Boggs, two very well known and respected collaborators of James, who had split with him around 1962, however, were not viewed as such, and wielded considerably more influence in all of the Black radical circles in Detroit. The Boggs were local community activists and organizers. Unlike James, they both were proponents of the formation of a Black vanguard party organization. The pamphlet, *A Manifesto for a Black Revolutionary Party* by James Boggs was one of the most widely read documents by the radical circles of Detroit, and, undoubtedly, it reinforced the thinking of the executive leadership of the League, as it did other wings of the Black movement, that drifted into the waters of the vanguard party.

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Another obstacle James was confronted within his efforts to influence the direction in which the League was headed was the entrenchment of sectarian politics, characteristic and almost completely unique to Detroit. There were the Trotskyists, the Progressive Labor Party, News and Letters, the Maoists, the Stalinists, the All African People’s Party, the Republic of New Africa, The Nation of Islam... This list of organizations and political tendencies can go on and on.

Detroit had become the Mecca of small-group radical politics by the time the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was born. All of these tendencies mentioned tried or did “bore within” the organization, to some degree or another, in an effort to influence its course of development, and, for the historical record, it is imperative to note that each of these tendencies had a minute pull, but very insignificant success, in comparison to James’s efforts to steer the League forces into what has and still is continuing to prove to be the correct method of thought.

Ironically, James had more influence over the nationalists and Pan African forces within the League, who were naturally prone to reject his views on the grounds that they were not “black” enough, that they represented “old line white leftist politics.”

Actually, there is no irony. None of the nationalist tendencies could dismiss him on any ideological grounds of Black Nationalism because, besides being one of the fathers of the Pan African movement, he, through his intellectual work and political activism, had shaped the grounds for a defense of Black radicalism as living Marxism.

To the point: The nationalist tendencies within the League were generally hostile to anything considered Marxist, on the grounds that it was a white European ideology. James was fundamentally a Marxist in that his method, analysis and thought always upheld the view that the class that really mattered in any society is the working class and peasantry. Many young Black political activists thus perceived him as an exponent of “old white leftist” class line politics. They were wrong! Eighty percent of perception is not reality. Oftentimes, James’s political and philosophical point of view were readily accepted as coming from others, who failed to attribute these ideas to James.

The nationalist tendencies were struggling to work themselves out of a Pandora’s box, as evidence by Ernie Mkalimoto’s thesis on Revolutionary
Nationalism and Class Struggle,\textsuperscript{50} which advances the position that, for the Black captive nation, "race" exploitation has always superseded class exploitation as a general rule, therefore, within the first stage of struggle, the nation's struggle must supersede the class struggle and all efforts directed internally should be geared towards the building of a vanguard party.

Mkalimoto and his wife were head of the League's bookstore. Both fell prey to the 1971 "Easter Purges," along with Modibo Kadalie, his wife, and others whom the executive board of the League viewed as intellectual threats to their leadership.

Even though James was not a proponent of the captive nation thesis, political activists like Mkalimoto, who subscribed to the tenets of "revolutionary nationalism," had no place to go but to James's writings to be a solid ground when it came to participating in the ideological debates over the question of dialectics.

They had to move away from their narrow perspectives of Black cultural nationalism and radicalism, in all its diverse forms, to continue to be looked upon as an important and necessary militant factor helping shape the politics of the day.

The study of dialectics had become part of the politics of the day in terms of a new, spreading mode of inescapable rhetoric inside the Black movement as a whole. This was a significant and welcome development from the standpoint of the broadening consciousness and thought beyond the incontestable spectacles of race as a legitimate tool of analysis—"a way of seeing"—to a much larger and untapped body of universal knowledge.

When James came to Detroit to specifically deal with this subject, he explained his intervention and the overall intellectual situation that had taken root inside the Black movement in the United States this way:

\begin{quote}
Now it is important to study dialectic for this reason. I have been here in Detroit many times. I have spoken on the Black struggle in the USA, I have spoken on Pan-Africanism, I have spoken on the French Revolution, I have spoken in Black Studies. But despite the fact that I have spoken on so many things I have never yet spoken on the method by
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\textsuperscript{50} Ernie Mkalimoto. Revolutionary Nationalism and the Class Struggle. (Detroit: Black Star, 1970). [ed.]
which we can approach these subjects and the method by which I approach them. I think the time has come for me to do that. And it has come to me that it is time to do that first of all because it is time to say things that other people seem to be interested in, and secondly because dialectics has become a topic of the day in the United States.

James cited three examples to press his point. "Stokely [Carmichael] constantly talks about dialectics," he said. "When I ask people what he means by that they say quite often, 'We don't know;' Or some say, 'The dialectic means contradiction.' When I try to get them to explain further it is clear that they do not understand [the] contradiction either. Secondly, there is Angela Davis, who is a well-known expert in dialectics and Hegelianism Kant, and so forth." James further explained: "It is certain that as she makes more of an appeal to the general public, the dialectics is going to become a subject of debate. Furthermore, Huey Newton is constantly talking about the unity of opposites negation of negation—he is constantly using the dialectical terms. That means, as usual, it is not surprising that it is among Black people" continued James, "that this process of finding a way of thinking that is separate from the way the bourgeoisie think, or even the liberals think, is taking place among those who are leading the Black movement, the most advanced movement in the United States today.

Before delivering these explanatory remarks, James made it absolutely clear that he had not come to Detroit to teach anyone dialectics. "Nobody could do that in twenty years," James said. "I am trying to introduce you to a book in which the subject is taken up in great detail... Notes on Dialectics: Hegel and Marxism, that I myself wrote."

What transpired after James came to Detroit and delivered his two mentally taxing lectures on dialectics is most interesting. The nationalist tendencies began to read and study James's work, Notes on Dialectics which at the time was only available in mimeograph form. This had an impact on changing the course of consciousness because it produced a sound intellectual rejection of Stalin's writings on dialectics, which had been mandated, as required reading, by the executive leadership of the League.

Under the direct influence of Modibo Kadalie, some of the Black na-
tionalist forces based in the Highland Park area of Detroit formed their own study group on Notes on Dialectics and asked Willie Gorman, James's long time comrade and collaborator, to chair the study group. Something else also happened. A new and more widespread interest in James's writings were set in motion. Even members of the Boggs' study group, who were generally prone to be anti-James, began to seek out his writings and enter into friendly debates on a regular basis at the home of Berlinda and Gary Good, where what could best be described as the C.L.R. James tendency inside the League gathered regularly, to engage in political discussion and social activities which always involved cooking and eating food. On these occasions differences of opinion and ideological conflict took a back seat to working out practical approaches to implementing programs that everyone had agreed to under the framework of unity, consensus, and collaboration.

If James had been based at a university in Detroit rather than at Federal City College in Washington, DC, perhaps his influence would have been greater, with respect to steering the youthful forces of the League back to an understanding of how the organization evolved and what the central doctrines were which made the League of Revolutionary Black Workers a political force to be reckoned with.

THE NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE LESSONS

As an organization, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers expanded rapidly from the point of its conception. The organization set up a bookstore, print shop, and film-making center. John Watson, one of its leaders, became the editor of The South End, Wayne State University's student newspaper, and literally made the organ an appendage of the League, supplementing the Inner City Voice. The League also had a book club, which met monthly. Sometimes there were as many as five hundred persons in attendance, most of whom were always young white middle class professionals from suburban Detroit. All of these things, and the fleet of facilities which the League operated, had to be managed along with the other organizational departments that were set up.

The League forces dissipated in all sorts of directions. James Foreman, for example, was a member of the organization's executive board, but most of his energies went into the Black Economic Development Conference whose activities were mainly devoted to demanding that white Christian
churches and synagogues make reparations to the Black community in the form of hefty monetary contributions, which were partially funneled into components of the League to finance projects. Some of the leadership of the organization got involved in the creation of the Black Workers Congress in 1970, which advocated union reform through caucuses. Also, a number of the sub-leaders and cadres got heavily involved in all sorts of governmentally-funded community action programs. In and of themselves, these things are not negatives. What makes them negatives is that the executive leadership, and many of the cadres of the League, lost sight of what James often taught about dialectics, as he quoted Hegel's *Science of Logic*:

> The man who will do something great must learn, as Goethe says, to limit himself. The man who, on the contrary, would do everything, really would do nothing and fails. There is a host of interesting things in the world: Spanish, poetry, chemistry, politics, and music are all very interesting, and if anyone takes an interest in them we need not find fault. But for a person in a given situation to accomplish anything, he must stick to one definite point, and not dissipate his forces in many directions.

The League clearly over extended itself into too many activities which is a natural tendency of mass organization. But this in and of itself was not what brought about the demise and rapid collapse of the League. Neither did the internal ideological battles and debates which led to the "Easter Purges" in 1971. The ideological struggles which occurred inside the League were a necessary war of ideas over the direction in which the organization should head, in terms of working out a political agenda or


course of action to advance the movement which Black auto workers in Detroit had initiated.

The organization's leadership were indisputably first class organizers and nontraditional politicians. But, they had very little theoretical knowledge and work under their belts to guide them along the way as they attempted to embrace Marxism as a scientific method of analysis. They clearly did not understand that to attempt to transform the League into a Lenninist style vanguard party was much more than a mistake. It was an impossibility—and illogical course.

At its conception, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers had its own central doctrines, which were articulated through the organization's actions. First, only the people at the point of production could effectively take on the establishment. Second, unions had outlived their usefulness and they could not be reformed. Third, the demand for community control of neighborhoods, schools, the police, etc. must be extended to make community control of the labor bureaucracy the central focus. These were doctrines beyond civil rights and "Black Power" as an all encompassing general political banner. They were revolutionary doctrines to the core of simple insight and understanding into the contradictions of American society and capitalism. They cemented Detroit's reputation as "the heart of the Black Revolution."

For the first time, and after raising the issues of community control in accordance with the demands of the objective situation, could the Black community assert—both from inside the factory and community-wide—an intervention into that old business institution known as the trade union? No one was prepared for this critical leap in consciousness, which the formation of the LRBW signaled.

The League was put in a position to fill a particularly problematic gap with respect to labor and its traditional loyalties to the Democratic Party apparatuses, including even the ties of many Black politicians to the Democratic Party. Specifically, the American Labor Movement played no significant role in the Civil Rights movement and the student rebellions; and, it was only beginning to come out on the issue of the Vietnam War when Walter Reuther died. The League, as an independant Black working class organization calling into absolute question every American institution, thus, stood alone from the very beginning of its existance.

The League challenged the union and corporate establishment, the
political parties, and the indifference and even contempt the New Left showed towards working class people. While doing so, it established contact with the Oil Field Workers of Trinidad. This venturing out into the international arena was part of the incalculable pull of Professor James’s influence and the revolutionary currents of the time.

By 1971, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was in total disintegration from the weight of so many different responsibilities it carried on its shoulders as an organization. The uncrystallized mixture of Black Nationalism, generational revolt, determination to destroy the Black ghetto as America’s Berlin Wall and Apartheid system, the flight of individual middle class Blacks from the inner-city, all weighed like a nightmare on the shoulders of the League.

These were the magnetic forces that tended to diffuse and distract the organization from a Detroit Black working class point of view.

However short-lived and inconclusive the League was, it was an authentic and genuine Black working class organization, solid for a class solution not tied to any party or subordinate to any bureaucracy. It was not dependent on conventional results, not satisfied with the characterization of Black people as a large undifferentiated mass, etc.

The League was truly an independent outgrowth of the self-movement and self-organization of Black workers in Detroit. Many influences were upon it, none more important for analysis than the influence of Professor James.

53 See Khafra Kambon, For Bread, Justice, and Freedom: A Political Biography of George Weekes. (London: New Beacon, 1988). This is a study of the leader of the Oilfield Workers Trade Union and its central role in Caribbean radical history. The OWTU, though institutionally a trade union bureaucracy, could not fairly be evaluated in that manner from 1965 to 1977. In its newspaper The Vanguard, the union published critiques of state capitalism, defended workers’ rebellions in Russia and Eastern Europe, encouraged army mutiny, advocated insurrection against police brutality, and suggested a welfare state could be an oppressive force in contrast to workers self-management. It did all this while promoting solidarity with Africa, Asia, African Americans, and advocating Caribbean federation. In the late 1980s and early 1990s it still had a lively publication, though the union’s politics has been less insurgent for some time. The Vanguard, at its most militant, was edited by Wally Look Lai (before) and Bukka Rennie after the prominence of the New Beginning Movement (1971-1979) they led together with Franklyn Harvey. The writings of NBM were influential for both Kimathi Mohammed and Modibo Kadalie.