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BLACK WORKING WOMEN
DOING AND THINKING

by Mike Flug

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THE MARYLAND FREEDOM UNION

Workers Doing and Thinking

by Mike Flug

"When workers pull together,
nothing can stop them."

-- Ola Johnson, MFU member at
Lincoln Nursing Home

The idea for a Freedom Union in Baltimore was born in the offices of CORE in New York City. It seemed like a pretty wild idea to most of us on CORE's National Staff. It would be sure to have enemies, not only in Baltimore's business community, but in the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. We didn't have any money or any staff really experienced in labor. And, too, some of our big contributors would be infuriated. This was January, 1966.

The idea may have appeared wild to us; the actuality was far more exciting. On February 9, 1966, the all-female day shift at Lincoln Nursing Home in Baltimore walked out on strike, and called the Baltimore CORE office to let them know about it. The idea of a Freedom Union may have been in our heads in the office -- but it was concretely on the picket line on Carey St. The CORE staff had spread the word throughout the ghetto that any un-organized workers who wanted a union could contact us. We expected that a few might come up and discuss the idea -- and we would fit them into our plans. In the first few weeks we were in town, seven different shops approached us -- laundries, retail, hospitals, and nursing homes. The demand had overwhelmed the three staff members already, and then these nursing home workers took matters into their own hands, walking out first and then calling to tell us. That was how we found out two things very quickly: 1) the idea of organizing the unorganized workers in Baltimore was a revolutionary idea; and 2) the blueprint concocted in our office paled when compared with the workers' own self-activity.

CORE had been working in the labor field for some time, particularly in the Northeast. Chapters in Newark, Trenton, Rochester, Syracuse, and N.Y.C. had joined with Local 1199 RWDSU to organize hospital workers beginning in 1962. But the cities and the industries where unions willing to organize poverty-wage workers were limited. Most unions just weren't interested. When the Mississippi Freedom Union was organized by SNCC, and the grape workers of Delano began their struggles, both had to act independently, without the labor bureaucracy. We wanted to take their ideas to the cities.

Tony Riley, Howard Quander and I chose Baltimore as our pilot city. We picked it because it had a big black ghetto, a Jim-Crow union movement, the worst wage scales on the East Coast, and an active CORE chapter. We saw the MFU as a combination of labor and community organization. We needed support from the community for boycotts of companies we organized, and depended on them for important financial help. Our position would be that any unorganized workers, no matter what their industry, could get help from us. Certainly it was this promise that ougared the AFL-CIO right off the bat.

NURSING HOME WALKOUTS SPREAD *

The strikers at Lincoln Nursing Home were interviewed by the Baltimore Afro-American. They told the story of their 35¢ an hour wages, their 60 to 72 hour week, and the nauseating conditions for patients. The story got the whole front page. Workers from other nursing homes called CORE and said they wanted to organize. On February 14, workers at Bolton Hill Nursing Home came to work at 6:30 AM and discussed the Afro article. At 7:30 AM they walked out and called us. The City Council met that afternoon and passed a city minimum wage of \$1.00 an hour to cover Nursing Homes and retail stores with more than 11 workers, if they were not covered under State Law. The Nursing Home owners promptly fired many workers to decrease their payrolls. Workers continued to call from other nursing homes, trying to get the new law enforced. At North Charles Nursing Home, workers sat down on the job for two hours while CORE staff talked with management. They finally agreed not to fire any workers because of the wage increases.

Workers from Lincoln and Bolton met in a joint meeting and decided to work together, picketing Lincoln in the morning and Bolton in the afternoon. On the fourth day of the Lincoln strike, Ola Johnson, a 20 year old nurse's aide, tried to enter the home to negotiate with Ase Wessels, the owner. He called the police to arrest her for trespassing. She left. An emergency meeting was called by CORE staff; and the workers elected Vivian Jones from Bolton Hill as president and Ola Johnson as secretary. Again, where we had seen the unity of workers from different shops as an organizational fact, they saw it in activity. By electing officers jointly they solidified their unity.

But the workers' next decision was what stunned us. Wessels had been bringing scabs into Lincoln, although he was running the home with an illegally low number of workers. Bolton workers suggested that they volunteer to keep scabs out by sitting down on the front steps. The next morning, a committee from both homes tried to get in to negotiate. The door was locked, but that didn't stop them. They ripped the door off the hinge. Wessels locked himself in his office. The committee walked out to find the workers sitting down on the steps waiting for the scabs, along with members of Baltimore CORE and SDS volunteers from John Hopkins and Goucher. Naturally, the cops busted everybody and held the scabs hands to get them in.

WORKERS RAISE THEIR OWN FUNDS

It looked like a long fight at this point, and the bail had finished off the treasury. Jones and Johnson asked the workers to go to their churches on Sunday and get up to ask for money. Many workers were disturbed by this ("I never spoke before," etc.) but they did it and came in with \$400. We felt that the Nursing Home Owners Association would counter-attack at this point, but they kept quiet. Instead, the attack came from the Baltimore Central Labor Council. They denounced the MFU to the press as "dominated by communists and black national-

* The full story of the nursing home walkouts appears in News & Letters, which carried reports of all MFU activity from 1966 through 1968. Copies may be obtained from N&L, 415 Brainard, Detroit, Mich. 48201

ists." In particular they singled me out as a black nationalist. Now it so happens that I'm white, and when I answered them on TV they shut up. But the next day the vice-president of Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen came over to the office to sniff around. He suggested that the MFU could get AFL-CIO support if we promised to "turn over the workers we organized to the appropriate local." Miss Johnson reminded him that there was no appropriate union for nursing home workers in Baltimore, since there wasn't one organized home.

We didn't win recognition at any of the nursing homes, but we found that the MFU had another effect we hadn't counted on. Wherever the MFU went, even if all we did was talk to a few of the workers, wages got raised, hours got shortened, grievances got listened to. At Lincoln, wages went from 35c an hour to \$1.15; at Bolton from 55c to \$1.25; at North Charles from \$1.00 to \$1.35. Employers sought to stop the unrest by liberalization, very much as they had done in the IWW period. In fact, the IWW held actual bargaining rights for very few workers, but changed the conditions of millions because it represented the revolutionary feeling of American workers, while the AFL-CIO negotiated for the aristocracy of labor. Just as Gompers didn't want the unskilled, the black, or foreign-born in his union, so the Baltimore Central Labor Council didn't want them in theirs.

THE RETAIL STORE CAMPAIGN

We learned exactly that when we started the retail store campaign in April, 1966. SDS members in the Baltimore area posed as students on research assignments to get information out of retail store owners. They went up and down Pennsylvania Avenue (the main business street of the West Baltimore Ghetto), getting wage scales, hours and number of workers. CORE staff met with the Retail Clerks local to ask their support. We carefully tried to give them the idea that our retail workers might want to eventually join their union. The president of the Local told us that he didn't organize "those kinds of stores", didn't want "those kinds of workers", and would try to disrupt our campaign. It was a good lesson in diplomacy -- don't bother.

The retail store campaign was the easiest type for us to conduct, because the community boycott weapon would be used here. While we were signing up workers, we also signed up community groups in a boycott committee. We asked only one thing -- tell your members that when they see an MFU picket line, don't cross it! The first attempt at recognition came at Silverman's Department Stores. Mr. Silverman refused to meet with the worker's committee. A picket line was set up when the store opened the next morning. For two days not one sale was made -- and we got our first recognition agreement. That became the pattern on Pennsylvania Avenue -- one picket in front of any store could stop business 100 %.

Unlike the Nursing Home Association, the Pennsylvania Avenue Merchants Association organized against the MFU. They hired a "labor lawyer" and agreed to pool any losses caused by boycotts. Even so, we soon had recognition at two other stores. Trouble, however, developed from new and somewhat unexpected sources. It's no secret that one of the big contributors to CORE then was Walter Reuther (through several of his fronts). Reuther got the word all the way from the Retail Clerks that CORE was doing something in "his field" in Baltimore. He called Floyd McKissick, National Director of CORE, and told him to stop it or no more money.

McKissick, in turn, called us and asked if we wouldn't break with CORE and play independent. Soon one of Reuther's Industrial Union Department civil rights men arrived from Washington. He called us "dualists" and suggested that CORE had no business in the labor field. Naturally, he offered us all jobs if we'd organize for the IUD in Baltimore.

THE MFU AND ORGANIZED WORKERS

At this point (July, 1966) we couldn't collect money as CORE; we couldn't ask CORE for picket help -- and we were broke again. This is when you find out who your real friends are -- and we did. One of the retail workers had a friend who worked at the Bethlehem Steel plant at Sparrow's Point near Baltimore. (This is the only big CIO shop in the area.) She suggested that we go out there and ask for money as shifts got off work. CORE staff and retail workers who were off that day tried it -- and came back with \$300. Week after week those workers, black and white, supported the MFU in the most concrete way. Other workers did, too. MFU received letters of support and money from rank-and-file groups in Detroit, NYC, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles and even Ellwood City, Pennsylvania;

In Detroit, a rank-and-file caucus in the UAW carried as part of their election platform support for organizing efforts in the South, and exposed the do-nothing attitude of the AFL-CIO on this point, since the failure of "Operation Dixie" back after World War II.

The MFU not only was aided by rank-and-file organized workers, but went to their aid several times in Baltimore. The CORE staff had not envisioned any relationship with organized workers at all, but as the MFU developed, we often got calls from workers dissatisfied with their union. Local 195 of the Laundry Workers was a predominately black union organized in a joint NAACP-AFL-CIO drive in 1963. Before the union they made \$1.19 an hour, and got an incentive bonus for Saturday work. After the union, they made \$1.21 an hour, got nothing extra for Saturday, and paid \$4.50 a month in union dues. Workers at Bugle Laundry wanted to switch to the MFU. We checked that law and found that they couldn't do it until the contract expired -- in 1971! One night shortly after, while the MFU was having a membership meeting, the night shift walked out at Bugle Laundry and asked for our help. After three nights of wild demonstrations in which out-of-state scabs had their cars burned by neighborhood youths, Bugle ordered an extra-contract wage increase. The Central Labor Council, blaming the trouble on the MFU, demanded that the wage increase be rescinded. It wasn't; and this victory for workers not even eligible for the MFU got us a lot of support.

By October 1966, the MFU staff, which had grown to five, decided to disband. We had two reasons for this: 1) to turn all the decision-making powers over to the shop-stewards council; and 2) to send ourselves to work in unorganized shops as colonizers. One person (Ola Johnson, one of the original strikers) was to remain as full-time staff to help out the shop-stewards with the work. This is the structure that is still in effect today. The shop-stewards met once a week and made the decisions covering not only

their shops, but financing and new organizing. Every shop had a vote, even those that weren't under contract. Even with this structure, however, the large staff and the rapid pace of events tended to put some decisions in the hands of the staff. We felt this tendency, if unchecked, would produce the kind of bureaucratic structure we had all learned to hate. I think we were right.

THE MEANING OF THE MFU

Many in the New Left today claim that the American working class has been absorbed into the "affluent society" and is no longer the revolutionary opponent of capitalism. Theories of the encirclement of developed nations by the third world revolutions are popular, as are statements on the "new working class" of students, white-collar workers, and technicians. The former denies that there is any serious opposition to capitalism in the U.S.; while the latter selects elements of society on the basis of their "radicalization", presumably college. Everyone is looking for a shortcut theory to replace Marxism, and substituting any contradiction in society for the basic contradiction. Others, closer to the actual movement among the rank-and-file see, on the contrary (and I think correctly) parallels to the other periods when new layers of the workingclass sprang up spontaneously:

The main difficulty in seeing the elements of the new society in the present is that workers repeat many of the ideas of the ruling class until the very day that an explosive break actually occurs. Take the tremendous movement which created the CIO. Who would have thought, in 1935, when John L. Lewis proposed to William Green the formation of some industrial unions, that the unskilled workers would break out in the gigantic sitdown strikes that challenged private property? Nobody, absolutely nobody. Not even the workers themselves knew the world-shaking passions and forces that lay behind their restlessness and bitterness, and that they would express themselves simply in sitting down.*

So it was in Baltimore. Who would have thought that this Southern racist anti-union city, full of new immigrants from the South anxious to get any kind of a job, would revolt the way it did with the MFU?

The MFU experience also showed us that while George Meany may have boasted of never participating in a strike, and Walter Reuther may have tried to crush our efforts, these fakers do not represent the organized workers. Why did Reuther rush to stop the MFU, just as he has tried to take over the Farm Workers Association in Delano? The answer is not only that he doesn't want to organize the unorganized. Rather, he knows that the power of that idea in the South and the ghettos will have its effects upon the rank-and-file in the AFL-CIO. The steelworkers who backed the MFU out of their own paychecks were themselves fighting the union bureaucracy on the questions of discrimination and layoffs. The caucus in Detroit that called for a new organizing drive in the South was fighting speed-up on the auto assembly lines. There is no more frightening nightmare to Henry Ford

* Raya Dunayevskaya, Marxism and Freedom, Twayne Publishers, NYC, 1964, pp. 282-283.

and Walter Reuther than that of a united movement of both the organized and unorganized.

SELF-ACTIVITY MAKES "A NEW KIND OF UNION"

When the CORE staff came to Baltimore we saw our project as radicalizing workers, teaching them how to organize. We discovered that these workers had been thinking their own thoughts. They had some very definite ideas on the kind of union they wanted, on the method of activity to fight their bosses. Ola Johnson and Vivian Jones, nursing home workers, came out of their shops on strike and stayed on as the main organizers of the MFU. They could organize workers as no one else because they came out of their own ranks. Workers who had never met before talked to each other and found that their un-spoken thoughts were the same. MFU members had that confidence in each other that comes from a common struggle. No propaganda or radical education can duplicate it.

MFU workers were not only opposed to the conditions that enslave them. They transformed the MFU into that new form which had previously existed only in their heads. Self-activity and self-development marked the activity of the MFU. This has been true of all workers' revolts since the French Revolution:

There is a double rhythm in destroying the old and creating the new which bears the unmistakable stamp of self-activity which is the truly working class way of knowing. This, in fact, was the greatest of all the achievements of the great French Revolution -- the workers' discovery of their own way of knowing.*

I felt this especially strongly when the ghettos of Baltimore, for the first time in the postwar period in a southern city, rose in a massive revolt under the impact of the assassination of Martin Luther King. I am sure that the emergence of black consciousness and the consciousness of their own power had a lot to do with it. This is what the expression, "it's in the air" means. The biggest demand of the workers, often beautifully spoken, was the right to think for themselves. They carried that demand not only to the bosses, but to the CORE office -- and not only to the whole white power elite, but back to their own community where it reverberated in the streets in 1968.

Opposites jam up, and out of them come that new form which leads to a higher stage of development. "The 35¢ and hour workers of Baltimore were on a level of understanding too low for self-organization" -- that's what CORE thought in January of 1966. But the truth was that their level was infinitely higher than our own. Marx, as usual, expressed it best when he pointed out that the more oppressed the worker is, the greater is "his quest for universality."

* * * * *

*Ibid. pp 30-31

STORIES FROM THE MARYLAND FREEDOM UNION STRUGGLE

Below are articles which originally appeared in News and Letters during the fight to form MFU locals at ghetto stores. They were written by Ray Ford, a black organizer for the union.

First Victory For Maryland Freedom Union

Baltimore, Md. -- In three months, the Maryland Freedom Union has taken on dimensions that even those who formed it never expected. Requests have come into the office from all over the city of Baltimore from workers asking to be organized--far more than we can yet handle.

At present the union is involved in a drive to organize the retail stores in two of the main business areas of the ghetto. Both areas were surveyed for a month by members of the local SDS chapter, who formed a Student Committee to support the MFU. After all reports were in, we decided to start with one chain of two stores in the ghetto and two in lily-white neighborhoods.

Two weeks ago we started talking to the workers in the two ghetto stores. These workers made only 70 cents an hour, have no days off or any other benefits, and were receptive to the things the union offered them. We gave them authorization cards to sign, which recognized the MFU as their bargaining agent. After a majority of the workers had signed up, they presented their demands at noon on Friday, April 22, to the owner, Mr. Silverman, and gave him until noon Monday to answer them.

At the same time, organization of a different type was going on, to get community support. The Student Committee made up a list of churches and organizations in the target area, and the job of contacting them was begun. It entailed meetings with them at all times of the day and night, explaining the MFU and telling them what they could do to help the Freedom Labor Movement. A boycott council representing at least 60 churches and organizations resulted.

On Monday, Mr. Silverman answered with a strong and emotional: NO! The rest of the day was spent contacting the boycott council and ghetto people for the picket lines. Promptly at 8 o'clock Tuesday morning, there was 30 pickets outside his larger store on Pennsylvania Ave., singing and shouting for freedom.

The cops arrived promptly, their riot squad emblems displayed proudly for all to see. They recited well-practiced ordinances to the pickets--who ignored them completely except to include them in the next round of songs and chants.

At noon, half the picket line went to the other store on Gay St. When a small fire accidentally occurred next to Silverman's store, one member of the line saw an opportunity to use it and shouted, loud enough for both the cops and press to hear, "If you don't let us earn, then we burn." The cops went into action to harass the line, but we kept on marching while our picket captain recited the Constitution of both the country and the state to show we had the right to picket.

Around 5 p.m., Mr. Silverman contacted us to say that he would like to open negotiations--after a futile attempt to buy off the workers with more money. The

line quit at 6 p.m. and negotiations began. They lasted far into the night before they broke down.

On Wednesday morning, promptly at 8, the lines were back at both stores, and this time with even more people from the community participating. The day happened to be delivery day for supplies, and every truck that came to make a delivery was turned back.

At 2 p.m., we pulled a trump card by putting up a third picket line at one of his stores in the white community. There was reaction to this line at 36th St. as soon as it was formed. One fine citizen started spitting on our cars and letting air out of the tires. The police assigned to patrol us were very hostile. They threatened us with arrest, even joined the whites in jeering. Around 7 o'clock the mob started throwing rocks, bottles and other objects at the line, and the cops did nothing to stop them. Fortunately, Mr. Silverman gave in before anyone was injured badly.

After only two days of picketing, a 100 per cent effective boycott, and the beginning of a third line, the Maryland Freedom Union won its first agreement.

-- from News and Letters, May, 1961

MFU Wins at Tommy Tuckers

Baltimore, Md. -- Nineteen workers at Tommy Tucker's Store in West Baltimore walked out Aug. 4 in disgust over contract proposals advanced by management. The walkout came after three days of worthless talks in which the owner, Samuelson, and his lawyer offered only a six cent an hour increase in wages, no union shop, and no guaranteed hours. On the night of Aug. 3, the negotiators explained the situation to the rest of the workers.

The two negotiators, Leifer Washington, a saleslady, and Beulah Little, a marking clerk, recommended "that the management offers be rejected and that some kind of action be taken to show Samuelson how we feel."

The workers' meeting debated several possible courses of action and decided to call a walkout for 12 noon the next day. Workers and Maryland Freedom Union staff members worked through the night to prepare leaflets, posters and to inform workers not scheduled to work that day to come to the picket line.

Workers at Silverman's down the street (who had already won a Maryland Freedom Union contract) also were asked to join the line on their lunch hour. Some people were worried that a strike couldn't be pulled off in the middle of the day, when workers would have to leave the job while already working.

By noon Aug. 4, nine workers had come down to the store from home, even though they didn't have to work. In addition, about 50 members of COPE and the Civil Interest Group were waiting outside. Leifer Washington walked off her post and went to the back of the store to tell Samuelson that the workers were walking out because the management offers were ridiculous. She disappeared into the office and everyone waited for her to come right back out. But it was 12:05 and then 12:10, and she still didn't appear.

People got nervous. Finally she came down the steps and waved to everybody, "Let's go!" Everyone, except a few of the old women who were loyal to Samuelson, walked straight for the front door. As soon as they were all outside, Mrs. Washington explained that the reason she was held up was because Samuelson was standing in front of the office door and refused to let her out while he tried to threaten her to call off the walkout. She finally pushed by him and came out to start the strike.

All the workers took signs and began to picket the store, and they were quickly joined by the people from CORE and C.I.G. Soon they had swelled the line to almost 100 people and the customers quickly stopped entering the store. As in all other MFU pickets, the boycott effectiveness was nearly 100 per cent. Workers sang "No slave wages over me, and before I'll be a slave, I'll see Samuelson in his grave..." and chanted "Dollar an hour must go!"

At 2 p.m. the walkout was to have ended. But a sidewalk meeting of the workers voted to keep the line going until reasonable negotiations were begun. Workers from Silvermen's joined the workers from Tommy Tucker's in keeping the line going. People watching across the street took up a collection to buy lunch for the strikers.

Finally, at 4 p.m. the lawyer for Samuelson offered to negotiate, with "new and serious proposals." The workers voted to return to work only on the condition that they would strike the next day if progress was not made.

While negotiations are still in progress, it appears that we will win average wage increases of 22c - 30c and hour, a guaranteed 40-hour week for the full-time workers, and the union shop.

-- from News and Letters, Aug.-Sept., 1966

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R. YA DUNAYEVSKAYA is the Chairwoman of the National Editorial Board of NEWS & LETTERS COMMITTEES, an organization of Marxist-Humanists, which practices the unity of theory and action, and the unity of worker and intellectual. NEWS & LETTERS is edited by a Black production worker, CHARLES DENBY. It was born in 1955, the year of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, on the one hand, and the wildcats against Automation, on the other. It is a monthly publication, which does not separate reports of the activities of workers, Blacks, women and youth against working conditions, racism, sexism, and war, from the activity of thinking and working out theory for our age. Participation in the freedom struggles and publication of the paper, pamphlets and book are both forms of activities we invite you to join in working out with us.

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