In the shadow of civil rights legislation, as the children of Southern-born parents came of age in Northern cities and assumed new roles in the manufacturing and public service sectors, groups founded upon revolutionary and black nationalist discourses reached extraordinary levels of visibility. Major unions soon confronted workers organized around Black Power’s self-determination principle in Chicago’s Black Federation of Labor, Newark’s United Black Workers, and Black Panther–led caucuses in the East Bay. After the July 1967 Detroit riot, a small group of Wayne State University students organized black autoworkers at Chrysler’s Hamtramck Assembly plant, or Dodge Main, as the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM). Founders General Gordon Baker, Luke Tripp, John Watson, Mike Hamlin, and Kenneth Cockrel synthesized the socialist and separatist strains at the core of Black Power ideology to ground DRUM’s political platform. The movement they launched remains the most substantive attempt to put revolutionary nationalism, long theorized by black radical intellectuals, into action.

An examination of DRUM during its first year offers a crucial lens on the ways in which major transnational corporations and labor unions responded to Black Power. From rifle clubs to Marxist study groups, DRUM founders participated in a range of political organizations during the 1960s that eventually lead them to theorize, in Watson’s words, “How to build a party, a black Bolshevik Party? How to organize black workers, coordinate the activities of black students, how to break away from the old radical organizations?” DRUM held rallies with neighborhood groups; picketed United Auto Workers (UAW) locals and Chrysler headquarters; sanctioned nonunion-sponsored strikes, or “wildcats”; ran candidates in UAW elections; and taught political education classes. After ten
months of agitation at Dodge Main, frustrated attempts on the corporate picket line and at the local ballot box convinced Hamlin, Watson, and Cockrel that shop conditions and union alienation did not inevitably result in mass militancy. Even without a committed worker base, however, leaders chose to expand the movement at other Detroit-area plants and formed the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in June 1969. The League operated as an umbrella organization for independent caucuses and other revolutionary union movements (RUMs) scattered mainly throughout the northeastern United States until it disbanded 1973. While the founders created the League as a workers’ movement, it quickly evolved into a bureaucratic organization with a newspaper, a host of RUMs, and an internationally distributed film. Instead of supporting and encouraging worker-directed action, the League entrusted founders to make “democratic decisions” in the name of Detroit’s black work force.

The first DRUM-authorized wildcat at Dodge Main in July 1968 marked the highest level of direct shop-floor support for the RUM movement in its history. How, then, could DRUM and the League function from 1968 to 1973 as a workers’ movement without adequately sustaining an in-plant following? Detroit autoworkers attended DRUM’s meetings and educational workshops, but the organization did not recruit the UAW and Chrysler’s rank and file on a mass scale. Instead, activists’ educational privilege often compromised political ends. Like the constituency they petitioned, the founders grew up in working-class Detroit neighborhoods. But by asking potential members to jeopardize coveted production jobs and to embrace socialist politics, the type of political education and revolutionary action DRUM founders championed isolated them from the workers they sought to organize. As a group of activist-intellectuals and students without a committed base on the shop floor, DRUM could not effectively motivate their prospective vanguard in the face of rapid, organized, and punitive resistance from Chrysler management.

In order to raise funds and awareness, leadership overstated the League’s constituency among the rank and file, and the small body of existing literature on RUMs has generally reinforced their claims. When the founders spoke to journalists and fellow activists in the international socialist sphere, they described DRUM as the organic result of the unprecedented entrance of young black workers into Detroit plants during the nascence of Black Power. However necessary for DRUM and the League’s survival, this propaganda exaggerated the extent of black workers’ commitment to the organization. More than any other consideration of RUMs, Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin’s Detroit, I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution has shaped our understanding of the League as an “effort by working people to gain control of their lives.” Published just two years after the organization disbanded, Georgakas and Surkin brought the League into the Black Power pantheon and added a new dimension to Detroit’s political history. Yet the authors did not fully evaluate leadership’s struggle to build a dedicated base of black industrial employees. While admitting that the RUM movement began with “a small core of black revolutionaries,” the authors contended that the movement itself was “led by black workers.” Georgakas and Surkin based their account on interviews with Watson, Hamlin, and Cockrel less than a year