

Part 2: Interview with the Late Legend and Revolutionary Autoworker General Baker

By Mike Siviwe Elliott

“They ain't never had no sh-t like this before!...”

In Part-1 of my February 2014 interview with the legendary, General Baker, I ended with him explaining that Chrysler Corp and the Hamtramck, MI city authorities were taken by surprise because, “Here's a black strike at a plant majority black. They ain't never had no sh-t like this before and didn't know how to play it!” (unfortunately General Baker, left us physically, on May 18, 2014) He continues...

GB(General Baker): Behind that, workers started coming from everywhere. The Eldon Plant said 'We need a DRUM over here'. Our attitude was that we couldn't handle stuff at your plant, but we got ink, leaflets, a mimeograph machine, we can print leaflets, we got paper and a group of high school kids that will help pass your stuff out. But I'm not going into your plant. You write, you type and we'll run and help get it out. We could not accept the editorial policies for somebody else's plant, not when we're still working at Dodge Main (Hamtramck Assembly Plant) and catching hell ourselves!

After about nine weeks of passing out leaflets, Eldon jumped and they called for a strike. But this time we decided to call for a one day strike, not a strike that's open-ended, because you can't control that. But they came at us this time, they fired 25 people. We go back to our little DRUM office after the midnight shift and Kenny Cockrel (DRUM's attorney) called and asked for me. He said, “Gen, Chrysler got the judge out of bed and they're having court at midnight and they want you!”. I said, “Well damn Ken, what should I do?”, he said, “If I were you, I wouldn't be all that available”. Sh-t, I didn't even hang up the phone, I flew my ass out of there! That's when I went underground and I lived in Cleveland for about a year. At the time, I was doing 5-years probation for carrying a concealed weapon during the 1967 Rebellion, and they knew that they could get me for violating my probation and send me up for 5-years. So that's why I had to split!

We lost a lot of ground while I was gone. We ended up going in a different kind of direction then I think we would have went, had I stayed.

ME: Describe the situation that you spoke on earlier, about you and some of your guys being in a police station when the mayor (of Hamtramck) came in?

GB: At the Dodge Main Plant, we had a trustee that died and all three of the trustees

were Polish. So we decided to run one of our guys, Ron Marsh, for trustee. We jump in the race and make big posters of Ron blowing into a bullhorn in a alley and started campaigning with that stuff all over the plant. The plant manager and them started tearing our stuff down and we would put it back up. Anyway, on election day, Ron came in first that time, with 521 votes and then they came after us. That's when they mobilized to stop us from taking it all. So when the next the election (the runoff) opened up, the (Hamtramck) police department harassed us all day long. We had a about a 440 run to the union hall from work, so we had guys jumping in the back of pick-up trucks to go vote before they started work.

When we went down to the local hall, in runs the (Hamtramck) mayor and the police chief, talking about “We're going to stop this mess you're doing and blah, blah, blah”. We look up and in comes 50 police through the door with axe handles swinging,



Revolutionary Autoworker legend General Baker teaching Activists from Local 551 Mike Elliott, Derrick Roberts & David Mells

so we in there boxing the police department! And got our asses whipped! They had a field day on us!

We couldn't understand why we would get so much static from the election of a trustee, but you know what is was? They was taking our union dues from Dodge Main Local 3 and lending it to the Hamtramck city, so they could pay for the police and fire departments when their money went low! And the reason that they could do it, was because the 3-Polish trustees were the only ones that could sign the sh-t off! That's how we came up with title of that movie, “We Finally Got The News! - how our dues being used” (a 1970 classic revolutionary autoworker documentary about Dodge Main workers!). (laughter!) So anyway, that story...

ME: So how important was Kenny

Cockrel (Attorney for DRUM and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers)?

GB: Kenny was really important, man, not just because Kenny was Kenny, but he sparked a whole group of other lawyers to stand up and start taking labor cases. So it changed the whole climate of what we could do and not, in a legal sense. So he was REALLY IMPORTANT in that sense...

ME: Finally, what lessons can workers today learn from the experiences of DRUM?

GB: I don't know what they can learn. One of the lessons that we had to learn was that, we decided to go after the factories, because after the '67 Rebellion in Detroit, people were placed on curfews, if you got sick you, couldn't go to the hospital and you got hungry, you couldn't get no food. But if you had a badge from Chrysler, Ford or GM, you could get through the Army line, the police line, the National Guard line, the State Police line and take your butt to work. So when we sat and analyzed what happened in the rebellion, the summary we made was that the only place that Black people had any value in this society, was at the point of production. So that's when we decided that we were going to organize these factories and in 9-months, DRUM was born. So we had that strategy to look forward to. That's why I can't just say, you should do this and do that there. You need to analyze your situation, see what your strong points is and they weak points are and then strike, attack and go after whatever you gotta do. So that why we went after the factories...

The fiery spirit of General Baker and his dedication to justice for all workers, has been a driving force in my personal life since I was a teenager growing up during the rebellious 1960's and 70's in Detroit. So words can't possibly express how honored I was to finally sit and record a conversation with my true hero of the labor movement. I am equally proud that 25-Local 551 Members had the opportunity to meet him during the 2014 Black Men in Unions Conference, held at the University of Michigan-Dearborn Campus in February of this year. Finally, I often communicate with General's former wife, Marian Kramer-Baker. She is a legendary Detroit activist in her own right. She Co-Chairs the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, which is fighting against the Michigan Republicans attempts to allow corporations to privatize Detroit's water supply. To grow as a labor movement, we all must continue to stand proudly on the traditions of great labor activists like, the General Baker!