

# Part I: 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!”

Sadly, “The General” departed us on May 18, leaving behind a proud legacy of justified defiance, service, inspiring, educating and training thousands of labor activists! On February 14, 2014, as part of a UAW Local 551 delegation at “Black Men in Unions Conference”, held at the University of Michigan–Dearborn campus. There I had the opportunity to sit down with one of my longtime labor heroes, General Baker:

**GB:** I'm a retired auto worker. I spent 40 years around the auto plants of Detroit, trying to get 30 years. So I feel fortunate now to try to talk about some of that history and some of the lessons that need to be carried on and learned from my life time.

**ME:** One of the biggest things that you are recognized for is your involvement in DRUM. Could you describe what DRUM was and the purpose of DRUM?

**GB:** DRUM was the “Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement” and we named it that because we organized at the Dodge factory, where we made the Dodge car. So the indium, Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, came automatic. We knew we had to have an organization at the plant and we weren't going to be nobody's caucus. We weren't going to be caught up in caucus activity in our plant, we were going to be independent. We knew likewise, that we were going to be revolutionary, because we lived in revolutionary times and the kind of conditions that we worked under forced us to be revolutionaries. So therefore, we became the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement. A small group of people at the Hamtramck Assembly Plant, we started with 9-people in a plant that employed 10,000 (ten thousand). So you can see what a tremendous job that we had to do, as far as organizing that factory.

**ME:** What were some of the things and actions that DRUM took?

**GB:** First, we used my case. I was discharged for participating in a wildcat strike (an unauthorized workers strike) on the afternoon shift in May 1968. It was seven people discharged, five white women and two blacks, myself and Bennie Tate, and about thirty other people were disciplined. We walked out because there was speed up on the afternoon shift.

We figured that when they came back to settle the disciplines, we would get set up, and they would try to put the brunt of the wildcat strike on our (the black males) shoulders. So we were prepared. We met each other during the strike. The wildcat strike is a very important strike, because you going to work and don't know if you're going in and when you don't go in, you have all this time to hang out. So I got a chance to meet people from the other side of the plant on the seventh floor and I'm on the third floor in the front side.

So I meet a core of people and we began to talk, and all of us had different kind of opinions, but one thing that we understood quickly was that, people on the other side didn't know why we walked out on this side! We stayed over on afternoon shift and waited for day shift to come in and set up a picket line, and day shift stayed out too. So that strike went on like that for four days. You would go everyday and didn't know if you were going in or not, so you would get a good hang out time and talk. After four days, we finally went back to work. So we figured that I would get discharged, because I had a lot of community activity on me and I was high on the totem pole.

When they finally called us in for discipline, they brought the five women that were discharged, back to work and left Bennie and me out on the streets to suffer the consequences. And that's when we decided that we needed to organize DRUM! We decided to organize DRUM, on the basis that we needed to put out a weekly leaflet that would discuss the biggest problems that we had in that plant each week. We decided to do that because we found out how distorted things got from one end of the plant to the other, that we weren't all on the same issue. We decided to get organized around a flyer that we would get together every Sunday to write and distribute on Tuesdays.

**ME:** What plant was that exactly?

**GB:** That was at the Hamtramck Assembly Plant, properly known as Dodge Main.

**ME:** At one point, you had to go underground? Could you explain what that situation was?

**GB:** (laughter!) Yeah, but let me say this right away. We ended up agitating at that plant every week with our leaflet and people in the plant started demanding that since we had been talking, when are we going to take some action? So we figured that we had to

do something man. People were calling our stuff to question. So we sat down and went over the nine flyers that we had put out and talked about the serious issues that were raised in each one. Based on those issues, we wrote out a list of demands.

Our local's executive board used to meet each week, so we took about two hundred to their meeting and read off a list of demands. They looked it and said, they weren't going to do nothing about it. Arguments went on and one of our guys said, “Well, we're going to strike the plant in the morning!”, and everybody stormed out. So we're stuck now, we weren't prepared, but we're stuck. (laughter!)

So we went back to our little coffee shop, called the Ghetto Coffee Shop, on Grand River, where we used to have congo drum players and chess, and they would play drums all night. We organized the congo players and had them come to the plant that next morning and set up outside the plant. Them brothers started playing and were agitating and calling, and we looked up, we had three thousand black workers in the street and didn't know what to do with them. We didn't know what to do with them, because the State Police were on top of the plant with high powered rifles, the Hamtramck Police Department were coming from the North and the Detroit Police Department were coming from the South, kinda getting us in a pinching mode. They had double edged axe handles and we got guys in the alley breaking off beer bottles. This here fight, we're going to lose! So we quickly put these guys in cars and drove them over to Chrysler World Head Quarters and set up a picket line there. We went to Solidarity House and set up a picket line there, to defuse the situation. Then we came back to the plant and that strike went on for about four days, until they came with an injunction that forced us to go back to work the following week.

The strike was over, but right after that strike, Chrysler came out and declared the strike to be “extra-legal” not illegal, but “extra-legal”? Unprecedented, cause they didn't know what to do with us! 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!

**PART 2 of the General Baker interview** will be featured in our next issue of the 551 Informer. You can also see the entire interview on YouTube @: