Black History Month

UAW solidarity: with black support

"For centuries, working people have fought for economic security, empowerment and a voice in their own destiny."

Walter Reuther, 1935
President of UAW

When Rosa Parks, revered "Mother of the Civil Rights" movement sat down in the front section of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama that day in 1956, and refused to get up to protest that city's segregated public transportation she utilized a "tactic" that had proved successful with the United Automobile Workers Union, thirty years before.

It was in 1935, that Walter Reuther, a $1.25 per hour automobile foundry worker and an organizer of UAW struck "the big three" (Ford, General Motors and Chrysler) to petition for higher wages and improved working conditions for the membership.

The strategy of picketing outside the various plants proved dangerous because of the viciousness of company financed "scabs," so union members resorted to the "sit-in" strategy for their own safety, and to gain company cooperation and it worked.

The sitdown strike was strategically effective. In conventional walkouts, management could and did call on the courts, police and strikebreaking scabs to stop or limit the picketing by workers; however, with the sitdown and work stoppage, the companies were reluctant to send police or scabs into the plants for fear of damage to expensive equipment during confrontation and eviction.

In the ensuing years, with the support of black workers, UAW has gained the higher wages, seniority rights, grievance procedures, health care and life insurance benefits, vacation with pay, a greater voice in management decision-making and a stronger political influence for thousands of workers.

Political savvy also won UAW workers organizing and bargaining rights, social security benefits, health and safety laws, new forms of unemployment insurance;

Expanded worker's compensation, civil rights laws and a stronger educational system — thereby turning the objectives of the founding fathers and the "dream" of the state Rev. Martin Luther King into a reality for everyone.

Back then, James Tapps and William Oliver were in the vanguard of UAW organizers helping the union to reach its million and a half membership.

Though racism was not as rampant in the UAW as it was in other unions in the AFL-CIO federation, it was still there.

While the UAW has championed equal rights for all, blacks, women and other minorities still suffer the highest unemployment and the lowest pay.

"UAW members draw on 50 years of struggle — on wisdom gained, the fighting spirit we've nurtured, on the energy generated and the knowledge that the cause is right," says Marc Stepp, vice president, UAW, International Executive Board and the official negotiator for UAW with the Chrysler Company.

Stepp succeeded Nelson Jack Edwards, a 25-year veteran, in his vice president post.

This marked the first time that a black UAW leader will head one of the departments at the "Big Three" firms.

Stepp was elected international vice president by the Executive Board in 1974 and was reelected at a convention in Los Angeles.

UAW, AFL-CIO and the Building Trades Council formed the United Labor Coalition to help elect Coleman Young as Detroit's first black mayor.

For UAW members, challenging the status-quo is part of the normal pattern of union life. Its members are involved in making America fulfill its democratic ideals.

But not all labor saw things the same way. In 1967, the UAW broke with the AFL-CIO over a number of issues, including what Walter Reuther saw as a revitalized approach to foreign and domestic problems and disagreements over the Federation's structure.

UAW rejoined the AFL-CIO 13 years later. UAW continued to support unions struggling for justice regardless of their affiliation.

It aided the striking Charleston, South Carolina hospital workers (Black), gave funds to teachers seeking to organize and supported the boycotts of Farah, J. P. Stevens and other groups to help fight for worker's rights.

Perhaps its most famous alliance with another union has been UAW's long association with the United Farm Workers (mostly Hispanic).

Although the working conditions and pay of California field workers may seem different from life in the factories of the midwest, the UAW knew that workers' struggles are the same wherever they occur.

The plight of children laboring long hours in the hot sun to help their families earn enough for beans and rice evoked the images of urban children laboring in the 19th century industrial factories.

The UAW took action working closely with the farmworkers, the union helped press a nationwide boycott of California grapes, lettuce and wine to put pressure on growers to negotiate with the union.

During the same period the UAW also worked closely with emerging student groups seeking economic democracy, peace and a stronger national committee to education.

These movements — civil rights, student's rights, justice for farm workers, organizing and collective bargaining as a force for economic change, placed heavy demands on the resources of the union and the energy of its leadership.

It was while travelling to UAW's mammoth educational center at Black Lake, Michigan that Reuther and his wife, May, were killed in a tragic airplane crash in 1970.

Reuther's death left a great void in UAW's policy and program activities as they related to upward mobility and leadership for blacks in UAW's top hierarchy, which is slowly changing for the better under Owen Bieber, the union's seventh president, elected to office in 1983.

As of early 1986, UAW had 1,030,000 U.S. members. The union's membership peaked in 1979 (1,546,000 counting Canada).

SUPPORTER—The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., conferred with UAW President Walter Reuther in Detroit, prior to a radio address to the nation.

What does the "X" in Malcolm X stand for?

Malcolm X was a leader, a preacher, a human rights activist and a seeker of truth. The "X" in Malcolm X symbolizes the true African name he could never know.

One of the only regrets Malcolm X had was not getting a formal academic education. Instead, he taught himself.

Through reading and, later on, travel, he learned about the vast, rich, complex culture and heritage of which he was a part. The more he learned, the more he developed that sense of pride, confidence and identity that comes from knowing one's roots.

Malcolm X had learned that being smart is not enough. Knowledge is what enables people to make daring strides and new discoveries.

That's why Miller Brewing Company is a founding sponsor of the Thurgood Marshall Black Education Fund. It's a fund developed to supply scholarship money to *public* Black colleges, because they don't get the same backing private colleges do. Now, with this fund, more kids will have a chance to attend public Black colleges.

Miller believes that education is the fuel that powers the mind. With that kind of power, Black youth will provide future Black History Months with plenty of success stories. Without it, you may as well turn back the clock.

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Income and the working poor

Poverty hits both black and white—about 32 million Americans and seven million families in 1987. But nearly one out of every three black families is in poverty compared to one of nine families in the general population.

The updated poverty line for a family of four in mid 1988 was $12,000 a year. It takes a minimum of $5.75 an hour on a full year fulltime job to keep a family of four out of poverty.

A full year, fulltime job at the federal minimum wage of $3.35 an hour produces an annual income of less than $7,000;

This means that one out of every 15 black families was in poverty in 1987 even with a family householder working fulltime, all year.

Increase in the minimum wage helped somewhat for the working poor, however, if the black family has a working household head who does not have a fulltime, year round job, the odds on the family being in poverty goes up to one in three.

Racial discrimination in various forms makes a significant contribution to the disproportionate number of Blacks in America's poverty underclass.

Efforts to overcome discrimination must be included in the nation's attack on poverty.

FAMILY INCOME

Black families in aggregate have made little or no progress in real family income since 1978 and in many instances are worse off now than they were in 1978.

Black median family income in constant buying power (1986 dollars was $18,300 in 1978 and $17,600 in 1986, the most recent year for such available information.

Even married couples with both husband and wife in the labor force suffered income declines during the Reagan years.

As real median family income generally went down in 1978 to 1986, black family median income went from 62 percent of the overall median to 60 percent.

The situation reflects the negative effects of the Reagan Administration's tax and spending policies—the Administration's attack on social programs that help the poor and needy.

AFL-CIO Civil Rights and Economic Research Departments

Black History Month

Labor's 21st Century 'Randolph': William Lucy

Dedicated Dynamo and Doer

William Lucy, Labor's 21st Century "Randolph"

"If the government of the United States can guarantee loans to rich and mighty corporations, if the government of the United States can guarantee continued prosperity for tyrants in countries spread around the earth, then the government of the United States ought to be able to guarantee that the individual citizens of this country can expect; a minimum, basic fairness, basic justice and certainty of and the opportunity to work. This too, is a part of Dr. Martin Luther King's dream."

William Lucy
JOBS, PEACE, FREEDOM MARCH, Washington, D.C., August, 1983

William Lucy has inherited the mantle of leadership of the black pioneers in organized labor, and he wears it well.

Lucy is secretary-treasurer of organized labor's largest and still growing, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO and also the president of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists and a co-founder.

A product of the University of California, Berkeley, Lucy was formerly a civil engineer for the Contra Costa County government. He became president of AFSCME local representing Contra Costa County employees in 1965.

After a variety of positions with national union, Lucy was elected secretary-treasurer of AFSCME in 1972.

Lucy also serves as a vice president of the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Department and the AFL-CIO's Department of Professional Employees.

He is a vice president of the Americans for Democratic Action and is on the boards of the National Commission on Working Women and the African-American Institute.

Because of its national membership, 1.1 million members and its broad array of resources, AFSCME is recognized as the foremost leader on public employee issues.

In Washington, D.C. and in dozens of state legislatures, the union has a fulltime lobbying staff to represent the interest of state and local government workers.

In addition AFSCME plays a key role in the AFL-CIO's Public Employee Department, the labor federation's official voice for public employees in policy matters.

Over 600,000 of AFSCME members are women, consequently today's thrust by the union is on comparable worth and child care issues.

AFSCME members are truly representative of the American workforce. More than half are under the age of 40. Over half have taken at least some college courses, nearly two-thirds are married and more than 15 percent are black.

Members work in literally thousands of diversified occupations — from architects to psychiatric technicians to doctors and correctional personnel.

There are also divers, meteorologists zoo keepers, but most are in some facet of office work.

AFSCME membership includes 200,000 clericals, 100,000 professionals, 65,000 technicians, 75,000 in skilled trades and 60,000 paraprofessionals. During the past two years, union membership has been increased by 100,000.

Over 50 public employee associations with some 400,000 members have chosen to affiliate with AFSCME.

For decades AFSCME has been fighting for promotions, better wages, and working conditions, childcare, an end to sexual harassment and discrimination.

It is also the leading union in the nation fighting for pay equity. In fact, AFSCME believes pay equity and child care are the issues of the 90s.

According to Lucy, pay equity is basic to real progress for the working woman. "Battleground for women's pay equity is really the workplace," he says. "Pay equity is not 'equal pay for equal work.' It is equal pay for work of comparable value."

"That means female dominated jobs — secretary, nurse, Librarian, for example — should be paid comparably to male dominated jobs that the employer has deemed to be of comparable worth."

How does an employer determine that. "It is not complicated," Lucy points out. "A pay equity study involves grading those job descriptions according to skill, effort and responsibility required, the education required, the hazards involved and other factors.

The union is a leader in fighting for a national child care policy. In New York State, Springfield, Illinois, Hawaii, Denver and Toleda, Ohio, the union has negotiated breakthrough child care advances for state and local government employees.

The following are other areas of activity that have proven to be beneficial for AFSCME members and their families. They are as follows:

CONTRACTING OUT

Many state and local government officials are looking at "contracting out or privatization' as the cure-all for tight fiscal situations.

AFSCME opposes such action and has documented proof of that private delivery of public services usually results in higher costs, poorer services, deceased accountability and corruption.

AFSCME has worked in such cities as Providence, New York, San Antonio and Milwaukee to avoid contracting out by working with management to create better service delivery systems.

OFFICE TECHNOLOGY

With more than 250,000 office workers as members, AFSCME has a big stake in the future of office technology.

In the District of Columbia, Milwaukee, New York and other cities and states the union has negotiate contract language to protect them from the hazards of video display terminals, to protect them from losing their jobs to automation, and to fairly compensate them for more difficult or technical work.

WORKPLACE SAFETY

Since public employees, many of them black and minority, do some of the most dangerous and dirty work, the union has worked diligently to pass and enforce Chemical Right-to-Know legislation,

This is so that AFSCME members who work with chemicals are properly trained, informed and provided with the necessary safety equipment for their protection and safety.

Has petitioned OSHA to issue a standard that assures that health care and correctional employees are provided with protection against AIDS, hepatitis B and other infectious diseases;

Also worked to pass federal and state laws that will require employers to clean up asbestos in the nation's workplaces.

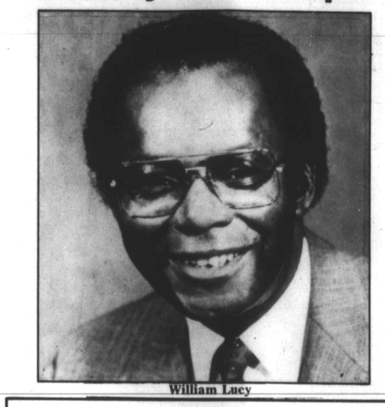
DEINSTITUTIONALIZATION

In 1975, AFSCME published the first national report about the "dumping" of the mentally ill on the nation's streets.

Entitled "Out of their Beds and Into the Streets," the report documented the scandalous conditions in boarding homes, nursing homes and flop-houses across the country, following the were congressional hearings, a report by the U.S. Senate Committee on Aging and a massive study by the General Accounting Office, each confirming AFSCME's findings.

Since then, AFSCME has helped prevent or delay hospital closings in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri, Illinois and Ohio.

AFSCME has developed training and career development guidelines for correctional officers; issued a comprehensive report on state and local pension reform advocating federal legislation which could set minimum reporting, disclosure and fiduciary standards for state and local pension plans.



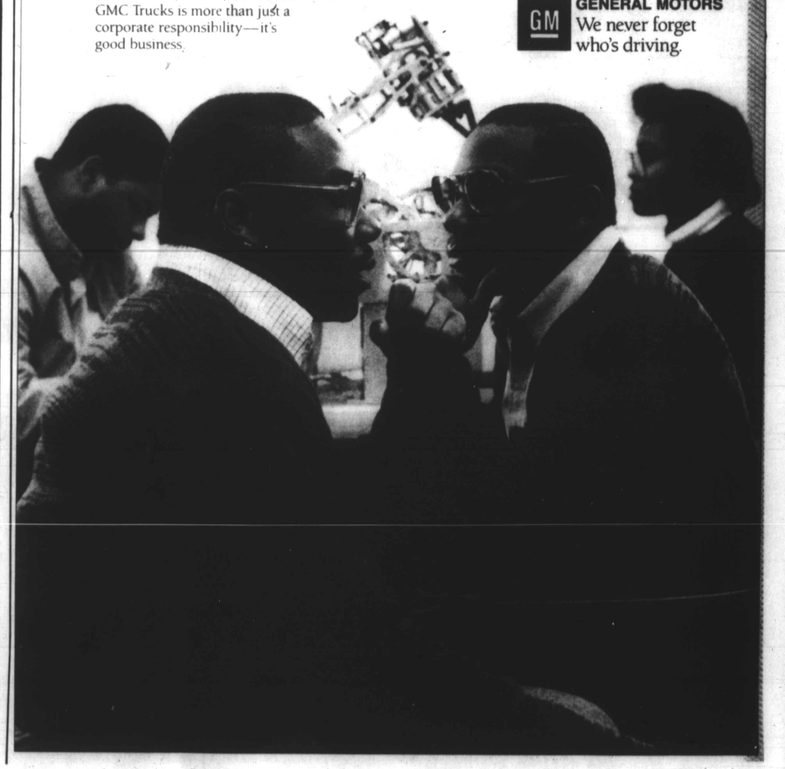
William Lucy

How the Lyons twins engineer their own reality.

Early on Mamie Lyons taught her twins, Vincent and Elliot, a very important lesson: Life only gives you what you have the courage to demand. So they demanded excellence.

And they got it, from themselves and from others. That's why they were able to graduate from a small town high school in Wynne, Arkansas to a full scholarship in engineering at Southern University, in Baton Rouge, LA. It's also why General Motors is paying for that scholarship and providing them with challenging summer jobs through the GM internship program.

Looking toward the future, General Motors has made a commitment to community development. It's the reason we invest in promising young people like Vincent and Elliot by establishing scholarships at minority colleges and universities across the country. It's also the reason why we have 12.3 billion dollars in property damage insurance managed by minority insurance brokers.

At General Motors we realize that standing behind the people who buy our Chevrolets, Pontiacs, Oldsmobiles, Buicks, Cadillacs and GMC Trucks is more than just a corporate responsibility—it's good business.

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