

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dan Georgakas, Marvin Surkin. *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution*. Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 1998. x + 254 pp. \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89608-571-8.

Reviewed by Karen Miller (University of Michigan)
Published on H-Labor (October, 1999)

In 1998, 23 years after its original publication, South End Press reissued Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin's *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying, A Study in Urban Revolution*. Georgakas and Surkin's book focuses on black labor radicalism in Detroit from 1967-1974, examining the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the cadre of black revolutionaries that worked at its core. *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying* remains one of the few monographs to take black labor radicalism seriously. Having been out of print for a number of years, its republication adds immeasurably to the literature on Black Power, Detroit history, labor history and the history of the Left. At the same time, and perhaps more importantly, the insights offered by the League—and discussed by Georgakas and Surkin—about capitalism, labor organizing, racism, solidarity and working class power remain as urgent and relevant today as they were in the 1970s.

This "updated" edition includes a new forward by Manning Marable, a new preface by the authors and two new chapters at the end of the book. Otherwise, the authors only revised typos and technical mistakes that were in the original. Thus, as Georgakas and Surkin observe, the power of the new edition lies in its preservation of the tone, perspective and tempo of the 1975 study, not in new analyses, or a new historical perspective.

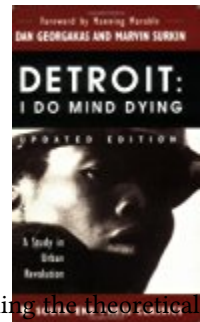
Detroit: I Do Mind Dying examines the activities, perspectives and changing formations of the cadre of black revolutionaries that worked at the core of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. It describes their experiences in the League, leading up to the League's formation and proceeding its disillusion. Georgakas and Surkin move back and forth between projects and organizations that members of the League participated in or spearheaded, discussing the relevance of each project

to the larger organization and examining the theoretical and political underpinnings of League activities and decisions.

The first project that they examine is the *Inner City Voice* (ICV), a black revolutionary paper inspired by Detroit's 1967 "rebellion." Where other underground papers offered readers the kind of yellow journalism that exposed injustice, the authors argue, the *ICV* provided its audience with an agenda for revolutionary action that was connected to mass political education. At the same time, the *ICV* used its resources to organize workers. They hosted activist meetings in their offices, maintained contacts and organizers inside plants, and educated workers about the relationship between their struggles and racism in the rest of the city.

Soon after the *ICV* was established, one member of the informal action/study group that produced the *ICV*, John Watson, became the editor of the *South End*, Wayne State University's daily student newspaper. Watson turned the *South End* into "the voice of the de facto radical united front" on campus and used the paper itself as an organizing tool for struggles all over the city. Often, Watson sent the majority of the 10,000-copy print run to his comrades to distribute at schools, hospitals or factories.

A number of *ICV* activists were also key players in the formation of DRUM, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement at the Hamtramck Assembly plant. Organized by black activists in and outside the plant, DRUM confronted Chrysler about unsafe working conditions, mandatory overtime, and racist practices, concerns that the United Auto Workers had channeled into its bureaucratic and ineffective grievance procedure. Thus, at the same time that DRUM activists organized against



the company, they also fought against an unresponsive union that prioritized peaceful relations with management over its members' needs. DRUM was more than just "an angry caucus of rank-and-file workers;" it was an organization that offered black workers a critique of white corporate power at the same time that it confronted management. Further, and perhaps more importantly, DRUM connected black workers' experiences with racism in the city to their grievances inside of the plant, inspiring black workers to participate in militant action and develop a larger critique of American society.

DRUM's demands, the authors suggest, were more challenging to the status quo than concerns about guaranteed pensions or annual cost-of-living adjustments—preoccupations of the mainstream union movement. In fact, DRUM was unsatisfied with the "labor peace" the UAW regularly brokered with the Big Three—an implicit agreement that the union would manage the workforce as long as workers received incremental improvements in their wages, benefits and job security. DRUM activists were not interested in managing workers for capitalists. They were interested in revolution.

In May, 1968, in response to a speed-up, 4,000 black and white workers shut down the Hamtramck Assembly Plant in a massive wildcat strike organized by DRUM members. This action was the culmination of months of organizing and also represented the high point of DRUM activity. DRUM's successes encouraged black workers in other factories to create their own RUM organizations and also inspired the formation of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, designed to organize and support these dissident black labor organizations.

DRUM activism and the push to establish RUMs in other plants were projects of the in-plant-organizing arm of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. The League was also involved in organizing outside of factories—in schools, neighborhoods, and recreation centers. While some members pushed for the League to focus its energy on in-plant organizing, others saw workplace-based activism as one component of a larger organizing drive toward revolution and worked to expand the League's support of neighborhood-based organizing.

Georgakas and Surkin clearly take sides in their discussion of the internal politics of the League, suggesting that those members who wanted to broaden the scope of the organization to include non-labor activism had the right idea. By the middle of 1971, the tensions between those members of the League who prioritized in-plant or-

ganizing, and those who wanted to broaden the scope of the organization came to a head and the League split in two: members of the in-plant-organizing faction formed the Communist League and the others created the Black Workers' Congress.

The book includes many more rich accounts of League activism, layering a series of interlocking stories in loosely chronological chapters. Every so often it is difficult to follow the chain of events, but this confusion rarely detracts from the power of the unfolding story. Georgakas and Surkin tend to focus more attention on the theoretical debates and conversations held by League members than they do discussing the intricacies of organizing. Sometimes this seems ironic, since they clearly respect and frequently reiterate the League's ideological and organizational commitment to activism on the ground. Furthermore, the authors' prioritization of the theoretical debates and the most prominent voices means that the book offers an almost exclusively male picture of the League. While the authors do criticize the gender politics of the League—pointing out that the organization never supported strong women leaders—they also reproduce the minimization of women's roles by focusing exclusively on the work done by men. In fact, few women are discussed in the book at all. Those who are mentioned are often identified as wives of their activist husbands and seldom receive more than a sentence describing their work.

The authors are also interested in clarifying the differences between reformism and revolutionary activism and they hold up the League as their model of a truly revolutionary organization. They wonder aloud about what defines a revolutionary and about how we, as scholars and activists, can tell the difference between reformist actions that may look similar on the surface but share few theoretical underpinnings. However, Georgakas and Surkin's distinctions between reformism and revolution remain somewhat unclear. For example, they argue that the *ICV*'s "consistent anti-capitalist analysis transformed articles from simple expressions of grievances capable of reform to a critique of the entire social order" (17). But, they do not explain how this worked. At the same time, while their treatment of this sticky and recurrent question remains murky, they definitely push the question further than most historians, raising a series of provocative issues.

The tone of the original book contrasts sharply with the two new chapters the authors added on to the end. The introduction to the first edition most clearly posi-

tions the authors' original study in mid-1970s radicalism. Their conclusions that "the capitalist work ethic has been discredited," and that "popular doubt about the ability of the dominant class to govern effectively has become wide spread" reveal their belief at the time that mass disillusionment with the contradictions of capitalism was both probable and imminent (6). More specifically, their tone suggests that they saw the militancy of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers as part of a larger trajectory toward a potentially massive, if as yet unorganized, working-class revolt. Clearly, the economic and social transformations that the authors imagined in the mid-1970s remain unrealized today. Instead of fragile or tattered, many working class Americans see global capitalism as inevitable and overpowering. Rather than appearing naive, however, the authors' hopeful tone is a refreshing optimism, derived from their assessment of the power of grassroots organizing conducted by the League and predictions about its legacy.

In their second-to-last chapter, "Thirty Years Later," the authors discuss the current state of American capitalism, economic injustice and the legacy of the League. "What should disturb all Americans," they write, "is that the analysis the League's founders offered now applies increasingly to the nation as a whole." The tone of this

chapter is different than the original study, since the authors' focus on national trends instead of local struggles and since their enthusiasm about the possibilities for change has been muted. In this section, Detroit serves as more of a metaphor for urban decline, it is no longer a vibrant city full of the struggle and activism like the one they describe in their book. However, the authors clearly still believe in the power of organizing.

For the final chapter, "The Legacy of DRUM: Four Histories," Georgakas and Surkin invited four Detroiters to write about their experiences and observations since the heyday of the League. These activists meditate on their relationship to the League and on its legacy, both in their lives and in their city. The inclusion of two women in this group of commentators seems like an effort to correct the male-dominated narrative that the authors presented in their book. Ultimately, the authors give one of their commentators the last word, ending their book with a note of hope: "never before have there been so many Americans who ought to be natural political allies. This is a great time to be a revolutionary."

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-labor>

Citation: Karen Miller. Review of Georgakas, Dan; Surkin, Marvin, *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution*. H-Labor, H-Net Reviews. October, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3527>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.