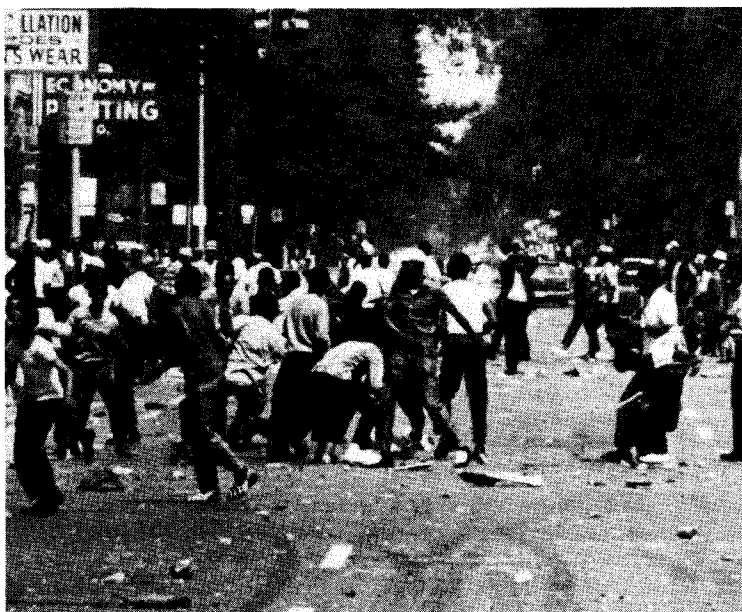


July 1967: Rebellion in Detroit



From the *Revolutionary Worker*,
voice of the Revolutionary Com-
munist Party, USA, 20 July 1987.

“The club! Those goddamn peckerwoods are going to raid the club again!”

A rowdy crowd of about 200 is gathering at 3:30 a.m. Sunday beside a police paddywagon that has just pulled up across from the United Community League for Civic Action, on Twelfth near Clairmount.

Originally a Black activist club, the UCLCA was a target of the white political machine. When the club owner was laid off from his job in the auto plants, he started using it as a “blind pig,” or after-hours drinking and gambling joint, in order to survive. The routine police raids normally netted about twenty people, just enough to cram into a single paddywagon.

But tonight, unknown to the cops, there is a party going on for two Black GIs just home from Vietnam. Inside, eight-five people celebrate their safe return.

One of the cops swings a sledgehammer through the plate glass door to get in. Curses volley back and forth between the crowd and the police. “Go home, whitey. Why don’t you go fuck with white people?”

Club patrons are being hustled into a paddywagon, their arms

twisted painfully behind their backs. The police can hardly believe the number of people inside. It will take many round trips with the wagon — about an hour — to haul them all down to the Tenth Precinct station.

With each wagonload, the crowd grows larger and more angry. Soon, some of the onlookers, outraged at how roughly the women are being arrested, are yelling at the top of their lungs. The cops line up in the middle of the street with their batons ready. “If you stay where you are, no one will get hurt.”

But Bill Scott, 19-year-old son of the club owner, climbs on top of a car. “Are we going to let these peckerwood motherfuckers come down here anytime they want and mess us around?” “Hell, no!” barks the crowd.

Someone ducks into an alley to find a bottle. He aims for a sergeant at the club door; it shatters in front of the pig’s feet. “They’re scared!” a man shouts. The cops make for a few people nearby, but the crowds merge and force them to retreat.

As the wagon and cop cars pull away, a hail of bricks and bottles smashes against them.

A litter basket is hurled through the window of a white-owned drug-

store, and then a clothing store. Slowly, people begin to enter and take what they want.

Against a background of burglar alarms and gleeful laughter, a stunned cop yells into his radio receiver, “All cars stay clear. Repeat. Stay clear of Twelfth Street area.”

By sunrise, a looted shoestore is in flames. By sundown, the gun battles will begin.

(This scenario is drawn in large part from *Hurt, Baby, Hurt*, by William Walter Scott.)

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“A spirit of carefree nihilism was taking hold. To riot and to destroy appeared more and more to become ends in themselves. Late Sunday afternoon it appeared to one observer that the young people were ‘dancing amidst the flames.’” (Kerner Commission Report)

Bill Scott would later set down on paper the elation he felt when they seized control of Twelfth Street:

“For the first time in our lives we felt free. Most important, we were right in what we did to the law.

“I felt powerful and good inside for being a part of those who finally fought back regardless of fear.... Within the aggregation of people this night there was a certain unique

madness that had taken possession of everyone's body and soul which was almost what could be called the unification of the rebellious spirit of man; a fearless spirit ordained for complete liberation of the self, combined with and supported by a community at large. Guess one could say it was like fighting and gaining your citizenship, after having given it away to obedience to the law — police law — which was a one-man judge and assassin that ruled black people." (*Hurt, Baby, Hurt*)

The police sergeant who led the raid on the "blind pig" recalls:

"The real trouble didn't start until we started to leave with the last wagonload, and we couldn't get our cars out. By the time we pulled away, more bottles and bricks were coming. A lot of the windows were broken out in one of the cars. We answered radio runs for looting, fire, shooting, curfew violations and anything else that happened.

"The sniping was real. I was in the station more than once where we were being sniped at the desk in the station. Some of the motormen tell me that in the armored personnel carriers, you'd hear a bang or a ping on the outside, and you couldn't tell for sure if somebody had thrown a rock or if somebody shot at you.

"Yes, I was scared. You're damned right I was scared. More than once I was scared." (Excerpts from a forthcoming oral history by Sidney Fine)

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To keep Detroit's Blacks "in line" was the task of the city police force, which was 93 percent white. Neighborhoods were prowled by the Big Four, the police cruisers whose four officers would "beat the hell out of you for recreation." In late June 1967, Danny Thomas, a Black 27-year-old army vet who lived only four blocks from Twelfth and Clairmount, was killed by a gang of white youths when he tried to protect his pregnant wife from their sexual advances. She later lost the baby. The police refused to arrest the gang. The incident was kept out of the major newspapers until the city's Black newspaper made it a banner headline.

Thus, although placed at the

heart of American society as urban workers, Blacks were still forcibly held in an exploited and oppressed condition relative to whites.

A sense of the anger simmering in places like Twelfth Street is typified by Bill Scott, when he recalls how he felt after weeks of searching for a job in that summer of 1967:

"[One] day I realized with complete understanding that something was wrong because there should have been a job for me somewhere in that entire city.... But then there were no jobs for a lot of people on the streets. Wait a minute now, after all I was doing the American thing by trying to pull myself up by my bootstraps; I was educating myself; there should have been some kind of work.... I had just finished submitting a job application at one of the many downtown employment offices and was on my way back to my sister's home, when something came to me like the ring of a bell which caused me to ask myself one question, 'Tell me something, Bill, why is it that you don't see any of these white cats walking around looking for a job, not to mention that they are on their lunch breaks, well-dressed, and carefree as anybody would want to be?' This was the day I decided to reject anything that was white. I could no longer tell myself that it was going to work out and I had also to get to work on my racist feelings towards my own world: Black. There was nothing in the white world that had been meant for me... nothing. I wasn't even supposed to be out there in the first place. And going to college wasn't going to change the way white people mistreated and murdered Black people in any way possible." (*Hurt, Baby, Hurt*)

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July 23, 1967

"That Sunday, my wife went to church on Twelfth Street, not too far from where the incident had occurred. And she came back, she said, you know, there's a sort of stillness that's there that I don't understand. She said, it's too calm. And I said, well, you know, there is something rather strange. And we looked outside and there was an inordinate amount of fires that were

trickling up through the air!"

This recollection on the tense calm that settled into the initial six-block riot area during the first daylight hours after the police retreat comes from a Black teacher. About 25-years-old at the time, he worked evenings as a driver and was able to observe much of the rebellion as it broke into full fury for the next few days. But on Sunday, city officials, caught off-guard and their forces vastly outnumbered in the initial outbreak, were hoping the disturbance would ebb by itself through a policy of police restraint and media blackout. He continues:

"The mayor, Jerome P. Cavanagh, said don't shoot the looters. I think part of the reason why that was the case, they said it was that the Black community had been responsible for his being elected. Well that started, I would say for the next two days or so, a sort of interracial stealing binge, in which you had Black folks and white folks hand-in-hand going into various stores, pillaging them, giving a certain amount of time for the people to get their goods, and then they would flee the area."

In a picnic-like atmosphere of tinkling glass, shouts of laughter, and Motown music blaring from transistor radios, for two days the way wealth flows in the city was reversed on a grand scale. Impoverished folk liberated basic foodstuffs from grocery stores where they'd been cheated for years, and less-needy residents could be seen rolling sofas out of exclusive stores like Charles Furniture on Olympia Street. At posh clothing outlets along Livernois, the "Avenue of Fashion," cooperative looters were heard exchanging their waist sizes with each other. Some looted with shopping lists in hand. The owner of a music shop reported losing every electric guitar, amplifier, and jazz album in the place — but the classical records were left untouched.

The burning and looting were seen as one way to strike back at the relations of distribution, the hidden "ghetto taxes" and how all of life was stacked against them, and in their forays they liked to target the most hated businesses. One auto

worker who stayed away from his job at a Ford plant on Monday told a reporter:

"People are bitter. White people gyp you all the time. I went to a gas station at Wyandotte and Michigan to get a tire changed. It was raining and the man wouldn't change it. Then he wanted to charge me \$12 to change it because I'm a Negro. That kind of stuff is wrong. I've been looking for this riot to happen for years."

As he escorted the reporter on a tour of the looted area, he stopped in front of a now-empty furniture store to say,

"You go in there to buy furniture and those people would act like they were doing you a favour. They send furniture down here that the white people wouldn't have and then they charge you double for it. It's too much."

Late that evening, a 45-year-old white man, working in a grocery-looting team of whites and Blacks, was shot to death by a market owner. It was the first fatality in the riot.

Five different banks were stormed, all to no avail. But among the more prized items taken were a total of 2,498 rifles and thirty-eight handguns. Many of these would be put to use in the days to follow.

Fully one-quarter of the looters were under 17. And the role of ghetto youth in this and other stages of the rebellion stood out clearly. Youngsters whose only image of the cops had been that of the hated Big Four could hardly believe their own sudden strength. This was not lost on city officials, who grimly concluded afterwards that 60 percent of those participating had been between 15 and 24 years old. Mayor Cavanagh showed movies of the rebellion to the members of the Kerner Commission in Washington, then said:

"Look at the faces. You will see mostly young men. These young men are the fuse. For the most part they have no experience in real productive work. For the most part, they have no stake in the social arrangements of life. For the most part, they have no foreseeable future except among the hustlers and minor racketeers. For the most part, they are cynical, hostile, frustrated,

and angry against a system they feel has included them out. At the same time, they are filled with the brava-do of youth and a code of behavior which is hostile to authority." (John Hese, *The Algiers Motel Incident*)

With neither a 9-to-5 curfew nor the presence of city police an equal match for these huge and youthful mobs, Cavanagh was forced to call in 350 state troopers and 900 Michigan National Guardsmen on the very first day of the rebellion. The guardsmen were summoned from their summer encampment in a rural area of the state. Many had never visited a large city nor seen a Black person except on television. One can imagine their thoughts when their convoy reached Grand Blanc and they saw an ominous plume of smoke rising above the unseen city forty-five miles further to the southeast. It was at that point that they were issued their ammunition.

The Guard troops were stationed at various high-school staging areas in Detroit. Undisciplined, trigger-happy, without any riot training other than a few words about "mob control," they were then dispatched down the darkened city streets where no mobs were to be found, only lots of hostile activity. By Monday there were 800 state police and over 9,000 guardsmen in the city, the latter representing 85 percent of all Guard forces statewide. This would not be enough.

According to various accounts, it was sometime on Monday that the whole character of the rebellion took a leap. Gunfire against the authorities, which had started the preceding evening, became the favoured activity of the rioters, both Black and white. It began with Fire Department personnel drawing hostile bullets. All told, on 285 occasions firemen had to retreat from the scene of a fire. When armed officers intervened, it developed into fierce gun battles fought directly with police and National Guardsmen. It was reported that during a single hour on Monday, for example, a police dispatcher counted two precinct stations, two riot command posts, and five fire stations all under sniper attack.

On Monday afternoon, President Johnson dispatched a task force of 4,750 paratroopers, comprising the 82nd and 101st Airborne divisions, from Ft. Bragg and Ft. Campbell to Selfridge Air Force Base north of Detroit. He also sent a team of personal envoys, headed by Cyrus Vance (former Deputy Secretary of Defence under Kennedy and later Secretary of State under Carter). But there was deep division within ruling circles over the deployment of these troops, which had been requested twelve hours earlier by Governor Romney and Mayor Cavanagh....

Finally, Johnson authorized that the federal troops be deployed, and simultaneously that the Guard be federalized. With the guardsmen already stationed on the west side where the rebellion had erupted, the army soldiers were deployed on the east side, where the rebellion had only recently spread. Thus, on Tuesday some of the rebels moved away from the crack federal troops and shifted over to the west side of the city. Gunfighting continued for another two or three days.

The *Detroit News* vividly described the scene in the Wednesday edition:

"Negro snipers turned 140 square blocks north of West Grand Blvd. into a bloody battlefield for three hours last night, temporarily routing police and national guardsmen.... Tanks thundered through the streets and heavy machine guns clattered.... The scene was incredible. It was as though the Viet Cong had infiltrated the riot-blackened streets."

Some observers perceived a certain degree of organisation among the rioters. Even the small degree of organisation that people among the Black masses had built (Black vets in particular) expressed itself powerfully in various ways. One observer testified that he'd overheard an early walkie-talkie command to spread the disorder to the east side. The authorities in their fear saw things everywhere — some real, some not. The Fire Chief felt that arsonists used divide-and-conquer tactics, and that others lured his men into gun ambushes by telephoning bogus reports of fires. A survey of metro-

area residents two weeks after the rebellion found that 55.5 percent felt that it had been planned, and many were inclined to call it an insurrection or revolution.

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The sheer scale of this rebellion is impressive. Consider the portion of the city which police designated the "central civil disorder area." This area alone straddled both sides of the city, extending over some forty of the city's 140 square miles [over 350 square kilometers]. When the smoke finally cleared, some 1,300 buildings had been burned and 2,700 looted, property damage exceeded \$50 million, and 5,000 people were left homeless by wind-swept fires. There were 7,231 arrested (6,407 of them Black), 386 injured, and 43 dead (33 of them Black).

In addition, the rebellion ignited simultaneous uprisings — all of them serious enough to deploy National Guardsmen or state police — in five other cities: in Pontiac, Flint, and Saginaw to the north; in Grand Rapids, some 150 miles to the west; and in Toledo, Ohio to the south. Disturbances of varying intensity were also simultaneously occurring in more than two dozen other cities in Michigan, Ohio and other states.

After surveying the rubble, Henry Ford II, chairman of Ford Motor Company, was asked to comment. Ford emphasized that what Detroit had seen was not a race riot. It was

"a complete breakdown of law and order. But I don't think that as citizens of this country, any of us can allow these things to go on. These small minorities — these rabble-rousers, whether they be white or Black — have to be taken to task. They seem to want to take the law into their own hands. I think these people must be apprehended and tried for their respective crimes, whatever they may be, in courts of law. And I think they should then be judged on whatever they may have done.

"It is my feeling that this country may turn out to be the laughing stock of the world because of situations such as we've had in Detroit. I don't think there is much point in trying to sell the world on emulat-

ing our system and way of life if we can't even put our own house in order." (*Automotive News*)

The ruling class was deeply disturbed: this uprising in one of the chief industrial centres of the nation's heartland, quelled only by the intervention of the U.S. Army, had broadcast a message to the whole world that the American system was bankrupt — and vulnerable.

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A single week of rebellion allows the oppressed to distinguish friends from enemies better than whole years of normal times.

Early on the first day of the rebellion, Hubert Locke, a Black administrative assistant to Detroit's police commissioner, called together several of the city's Responsible Negro Leaders. In pairs, they fanned out through the Tenth Precinct to plead with the crowds to disperse. One pair comprised Deputy School Superintendent Arthur Johnson and U.S. Representative John Conyers, Jr., who was quite popular among his constituents.

At one intersection, Conyers stood upon the hood of the car and shouted through a bullhorn, "We're with you! But please! This is not the way to do things! Please go back to your homes!" "No, no, no," the mob chanted, "Don't want to hear it!" "Uncle Tom!" One man in the crowd, a civil rights activist whom Conyers had once defended in a trial, was inciting the crowd and shouting at Conyers, "Why are you defending the cops and the establishment? You're just as bad as they are!" Rocks and bottles flew toward the car, one of them hitting a cop nearby. The crowd was getting "uglier." Johnson whispered into Conyers' ear, "John, let's get the hell out of here." As Conyers climbed down from the hood of the car, he remarked to a reporter in disgust, "You try to talk to those people and they'll knock you into the middle of next year."

Recently, we asked D., a Black revolutionary who was very young at the time, how much the rebellion of the "young kids" had impinged on the routine of the older Black workers, like his father. He

recalled:

"At home, that's all they talked about. Even with a lot of the older Blacks, there was mixed feelings. You had a lot of them, they finally sensed that this is the beginning of something; finally, the Black folks that rose up. A lot of that hostility and outrage toward the system is coming out, it was being actualized in Black youth. From just the young brother and sister throwing a rock through a window and grabbing something, or a old person just hollering — it affected everybody."

For two decades, the powerful forces underlying these storms had been coalescing. Prior to World War 2 the livelihood of Blacks in the U.S. had been largely characterized by sharecropping and subsistence farming in the south, together with the enforced illiteracy, Jim Crow segregation, and lynch-mob terror that bolstered this semifeudal existence. But on the basis of its dominant world position secured through the war, the U.S. set about mechanizing southern agriculture, profoundly transforming the economy and whole mode of life in the region. Millions of Blacks and others, their farm labour superfluous, were forced to leave the land and migrate to the cities. Between 1940 and 1966 some 3.7 million Blacks left the South. Indeed, by 1966 a higher proportion of Blacks (69 percent) than of whites (64 percent) lived in metropolitan areas.

Detroit was typical. The proportion of its population that was Black grew from 9 percent in 1940 to 16 percent in 1950 to 34 percent in 1965.

But this was more than just the shift of people on a map. It was a shift in the whole economic status of the masses of Black people, from peasants to proletarians. In Detroit, Black people sometimes quipped that Hitler and Tojo did more for the emancipation of their labour than did Lincoln and Roosevelt. This was because many Blacks filled positions in industry that were created by the war itself and by the generally prosperous American economy that ensued. In the early 1960s Detroit's auto industry experienced a sales boom. Employment at the Big 3 auto companies

grew from 723,556 in 1960 to 1,020,783 in 1968. The proportion of Blacks employed in these companies, which in 1940 had been less than 2 percent, climbed from 9.1 percent in 1960 to 13.6 percent in 1966.

At the same time, Black auto-workers were concentrated in the worst and most hazardous of the plant jobs, jobs that were strenuous, grimy, noisy and noxious and required little skill. Although 13.6 percent of the overall workforce was Black, among labourers and operatives it was 26.6 percent and among craftsmen it was only 3.0 percent. In one typical factory, the Dodge Main assembly plant, whites comprised 90 percent of all skilled tradesmen, 95 percent of all foremen, 99 percent of all general foremen, and 100 percent of all superintendents. On top of this, the United Auto Workers (UAW), which for decades had outright excluded Blacks from its union rolls, continued to be blatantly racist.

In some ways, the situation inside the auto plants was a microcosm of the general situation in the northern cities facing Black people who remained overwhelmingly at the bottom of a society where the white middle class was enjoying new post-war privileges and the trickle-down treats of U.S. world domination....

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One of the most distinctive aspects of the Detroit rebellion, even when placed beside other urban rebellions of the decade, was the mass participation by members of the working class, including basic industrial workers. In this regard, the rebellion was a sort of "weather vane" that pointed to the revolutionary potential of the urban proletariat, and it was the reference point for a revolutionary movement that grew in the auto plants during the next few years.

Participation in the rebellion was highest among the most deprived strata of the Black working class, but it also extended broadly to Black and white strata above (as well as below) that point of concentration. In Detroit, Black and other people who could be classified "lower middle class" rioted side-by-side with those on the bottom of so-

ciety. A survey of 1,200 men being held at Jackson prison after their arrest in the rebellion found that 40 percent were employed by the Big 3 auto companies, and an additional 40 percent by other large, mostly unionized employers. Also, 80 percent received wages of at least \$6,000 (in 1967 dollars), which was only slightly below the citywide family income average of \$6,400 for Blacks and \$6,800 for whites. (Poverty level was \$3,335 for an urban family of four.)

In the auto plants themselves, absenteeism was so high during the rebellion that many assembly operations ground to a halt for two days. The afternoon and evening shifts were cancelled off the bat due to the curfew, even though the curfew was not enforced against persons commuting to and from work. But even on the day shift, with no curfew in effect, many plants in both Detroit and Pontiac experienced absenteeism levels as high as 80 to 85 percent. Fortunately for Mr. Ford and his ilk, assembly operations were already down by more than half for model-year changeover; nevertheless, absenteeism due to the rebellion caused production losses exceeding 3,000 vehicles worth many millions of dollars.

While large numbers of autoworkers were in the thick of the rebellion, within the auto plants themselves the atmosphere, although tense, did not erupt into violence or walkouts as the companies feared. The *Automotive News* commented, "the automotive industry almost miraculously escaped the fury."

But the rebellion upped the ante in the already racially polarized factories. One worker, who commuted from the Black suburb of Inkster to work in Detroit, recently recalled for us the atmosphere inside one of the Big 3. During the week of the rebellion, some white foremen locked themselves in the foremen's office at shift-end until all the Black workers had left, afraid that they might get hurt. In the immediate wake of the rebellion, workers who had been involved were circumspect about their activity, "they didn't talk much about it. Some stole more

than the kids." Nevertheless, due to the liberated climate overall, the political balance had shifted on the factory floors. For example, previously "you had Black Uncle Toms who didn't want to sit with Blacks. But when the riots happened, they left the whites and came to sit with the Blacks. I told them, 'Go back where you came from.'"

Alongside the participation of workers, the role of Vietnam veterans stood out in the rebellion and was reflected in the gun battles. The occupying soldiers of the U.S. Army and Michigan National Guard weren't the only ones who could put their combat experience in the rice paddies and rain forests of Southeast Asia to use in the alleys and boulevards of a modern city. Once again, America's reactionary marauding overseas had come back to haunt it....

There are some lessons learned young which stubbornly linger. One who was ten-years-old in 1967 had this to say in 1987:

"What it showed, actually, is that revolution is possible in the United States. Looking back, that it's possible. The fact that the riots had a significant impact on everybody, not only Blacks but Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, and even the progressive whites, it had radicalized everybody. Not only that, it had an impact on people all over the world, that something like this could take place right here in the United States. Before 1967, Blacks thought it was impossible to really rise up against the system that way. And it showed, too, the potentialities of the masses of Blacks, if the energies and hostilities are directed at the oppressor. That's how I look back on '67. It's been so much written about it, it's so much to actually learn about it and consciously relearn about the '60s. But really it symbolized revolution is ripe and can happen right here in the citadel of imperialism." □