A spectre is haunting GM—the spectre of revolutionary black unionism. Black and Chicano workers at the General Motors plant in Fremont, California, are organizing around the Black Panther Caucus of United Auto Workers Local 1364. Over half the workers in the plant are black or Spanish-speaking, and the organization of the Black Panther Caucus has put the GM management extremely on edge—not simply because of the threat to them posed by the caucus itself, but also because of the very real possibility that white workers at Fremont will follow their example.

During the last two weeks of October, the Panther Caucus organized a campaign against the ratification of a settlement that, as usual, sold out the workers on the question of working conditions (see the Panther Caucus leaflet reprinted on this page).

The settlement was eventually ratified, in large part because the membership felt unprepared for a strike at the present time. But the Panther campaign was very favorably received nonetheless. GM was worried enough about the campaign to arrest a leader of the BPC who was handing out leaflets against the settlement.

Like the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit, the organization of militant black workers at Fremont represents an Important step forward, both for the struggle for black liberation and for working people generally. The existence of the BPC at Fremont is helping to galvanize the union as a whole, and challenges the conservatized union bureaucrats as well as the company.

As GM and the UAW both know, an alliance between the spreading organization of black workers and the newly reawakening militancy of the white rank-and-file could build a force capable of shaking even corporate giants like GM to their very foundations.

In recent weeks, a caucus of white militants and radicals has in fact been organized at the Fremont plant, and it is working together with the BPC. The GM Workers’ Committee and the BPC cosponsored a rally against the war on November 12, in conjunction with the National Moratorium demonstrations on November 4 and 15.

**FREE BOBBY SEALE**
Interview with Kenny Horsten

Black Panther Caucus at Fremont GM

The largest industrial plant in Northern California is the General Motors Assembly Plant in Fremont, located between Oakland and San Jose. In 1968 a group of black GM workers formed the Black Panther caucus. A number of the leaders of that group were members of the Black Panther Party, but the caucus also attracted large numbers of workers not in the Party. While the base of the caucus remains the GM plant, the caucus now has membership from a number of UAW plants in the San Francisco Bay Area.

KH: I talked to Kenny Horsten, founder and chairman of the Black Panther Caucus.

KH: Would you describe the general situation at the Fremont plant?

KH: When the plant moved from Oakland to Fremont in 1968, General Motors stopped hiring black workers. They didn't come out and say it, but they set a policy that they would not hire anyone who lived outside the Hayward-Fremont area. Well, at that time there were no black workers living in Hayward. They were all living in Oakland.

A group of brothers demanded that this practice be stopped. Management's statement was that they were having too many problems with black workers: they were always gambling and fighting, they never came to work on time, they never paid their bills, they were always drinking on the job, and in general, they were just unreliable workers. This was the position of GM up to about 1965. But as production increased and GM found they had to increase the work-force, they started to slowly bring in more black workers.

KH: Any black worker in any UAW plant or in any union can tell you that racism does exist. In Fremont it is so subtle that some workers do not relate to it. They've even got a vice-president who's a black guy, who stands up and says that it doesn't exist. One shop chairman and international representative took a position six years ago that there was no racism in the plant.

KH: But since the increase of black workers at Fremont, naturally the problem has come to the front. We find that the majority of newly-hired black workers are black. That's about five black workers to every two white workers. But after that sixty-day probationary period, we find that there is only one black worker left, and those same two white workers are still there.

KH: Are there any jobs that are reserved for white workers only?

KH: I think you should say 'reserved for black workers.' There are such jobs mainly in the body shop, usually referred to as the sweat shop, the dark room, or the hot house. And they call it this because the body shop is where you do the welding and the sparks fly around. You get burned, and there is no ventilation. It's so thick you're actually breathing that gas. That's where most black workers go.

KH: Or you're in the pit where the car rolls overhead, and you have to work underneat where the oil from the transmission and the gas and water drip down into the pit. About nine hours a day you have to drag around in that, and the stuff they've put on the floor that's supposed to absorb the oil. Well, after a while, they've got so much oil on the floor that you're walking on grease, and you're dragging around in all that wet grease and stuff and you're cussing all that stuff that's dripping on you. In your face, in your hair, and all over you.

KH: And then there's the spray area on the production line where you have to climb inside the cab of a car or a truck and spray paint. You know how small it is inside of a car and you have to wear a mask because when you spray it comes back on your face and gets into your nose and eyes and ears. You can hardly breathe through that mask and if you don't wear it, then you choke on the paint fumes.

Then they have other jobs that are called water jobs, with what they call wet sand. For eight hours a day you have to stand in about two feet of water with boots on that have holes in them. You have to be either a dock or a fish in there, but that's where a lot of black workers go, those kinds of jobs. That's where management prefers to put them.

KH: It is by the degree to which management gives the black workers the hard jobs because they know they will have to stay there because they have nowhere else to go. They give the easy jobs to white workers because they know that if they give them the hard jobs, that they'll just quit and go somewhere else.

As far as getting out of the pits, the body shop, the welding area, etc., they say stay management has a provision in the contract that says they retain the right to job assignment and this means they can assign you to any job they want to. If you want to protest, you have to go through the grievance procedure, which might well take anywhere from 30 days to 7 months by that time, they might come around and take you off the job.

KH: What percentage of skilled jobs are held by blacks?

KH: There are about 300 or 400 skilled jobs and I think we have seven blacks. And they came within the last three years.

KH: You raise two issues in describing these degrading, dehumanizing conditions. First, of course, is fighting against blacks or chicanas being given systematically the dirtiest and hardest jobs. The other is fighting against the conditions themselves where no one is forced to do these jobs. Is there any general struggle over working conditions?

KH: There is a section in the contract on work standards which is the only clause we can strike over after the union goes through procedures. Say an individual is protecting a job; usually it is in the soft trim or the body shop. He files a grievance. The grievance is processed and it takes months before he gets a reply to it, or before he hears anything else about it. Then there may be a settlement which works this way; if you've got ten guys working in that body shop and all of them are breaking their arm doing a job, then one of them might write up a work standard grievance. Then, if he be the fifth man in line, after months the settlement will take the work off him and put it on the ninth man in line. Then the ninth man will have to turn around and write a grievance and management will stick the work on the first man in line.

So it's not just enough to deal with individual working conditions. We have to get rid of those give-and-take grievance procedures, written by management and the union. Only then can we begin to deal effectively with those working conditions, because these procedures disarm workers, making them think they have some kind of redress when they really don't.

KH: Have there been any wildcats strikes over working conditions?

KH: No, the last wildcat strike in the plant was 1968, in 1966 over something about wage scales and working conditions. The leaders of that are no longer there.

KH: What about some of the broader political issues? What's the feeling in the plant about inflation, repression, the Nixon administration and the war in Vietnam? What's the feeling there?

KH: The broader political issues are almost non-existent in our union. I think that these issues are almost non-existent in just about every union you have in this country, because of the bureaucracy of the union leadership, by consolidating their power the way that they have, they decide the direction in which the workers will go on the broader issues. Now when I say isolated, it's not like the guys don't know what's happening. They do know what's happening because they read their newspaper wherever they live.

If there's any position taken by the union, it is set down by Walter Reuther in Detroit in the form of a letter, and he informs the rank-and-file what position they are to take. They are not free to do this by directly and indirectly discouraging the rank-and-file members from attaining union leadership or from even actually participating in any political program other than the Democratic Party. They set up an organization called the Political Action Committee and theCOPE Committee and all these other committees. All these are political committees that are geared for the Democratic Party. Nobody else, no other direction, no other way, and there is nobody inside those organizations that is going to take it from that. If they try then they're out. Simple as that.

KH: Is there much discussion of these issues on the job or in the breaks?

KH: Well, yes, there's something that everybody will say, well, yes, inflation, it's Nixon's fault. And they forget all about it. There is a very significant distrust among the rank-and-file concerning any of the issues outside their local union.

KH: Would you say that the bulk of the workers favor the war, opposed the war, or consider themselves partly of Nixon's "silent majority"?

KH: Well, I would say that they split for and against the war. Not necessarily for it or against it, but for and against because of their patriotic feelings - that if we were to leave, we would lose face, even though some have never seen Vietnam. Then you've got the other guys who are against the war because we're spending too much money in Vietnam, that kind of thing. Our caucus held an anti-war rally November 13, and the rally was fairly good, we got a fairly good response out of it. We didn't get as many people to attend as we wanted because of the time involved. But the guys came over to hear speeches, and that is the time that something like this has ever been done outside of the structure of the union leadership.

KH: How many women work at Fremont?

KH: That's not the office sections?

KH: No, that's in production. There might not be that many women; I'm just estimating.

KH: Are there any women in the caucus?

KH: At this time we're engaging upon bringing some of the women to the caucus, but they do not want to participate because of that fear. Well, they don't know yet. Most women out there have families and are work-