Working Detroit

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 Militancy, struggle, change—these were the bywords of Black Detroit after 1967. Even among those who rejected radical confrontation, “We Shall Overcome” was the favored hymn.

“I subscribe wholeheartedly to the rhetoric of black nationalism,” said Marcellius Ivory in 1968, shortly after UAW convention delegates elected him the union’s Regional Director of West Detroit and nearby suburbs. “I disagree with their conclusions. I don’t believe in separatism. I don’t believe in not voting. . . . [But] one of the things I give the Black Nationalists credit for is that they have awakened the Black Consciousness and created pride in Blackness.”

After 1967, that black pride collided with a stubborn, institutionalized, and sometimes unconscious white prejudice. In dozens of Detroit industries, black job applicants found that despite the equal-opportunity provisions of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, whites still got a disproportionate share of the better jobs in higher paying industries. Yet many employers had repudiated, at least publicly, the discriminatory practices of past generations. Where racial imbalance occurred, managers now insisted, it was only because “objective” hiring tests and “neutral” seniority agreements favored the more qualified and experienced whites.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, such claims came under increasing attack in a wide range of companies. From the Association for the Betterment of Black Edison Employees, founded by laborers and janitors at Detroit Edison, to the Afro-American Association, formed by white-collar workers at the Automobile Club of Michigan, these groups vigorously challenged the notion that hiring exams and seniority provisions were “neutral” and color blind. How could they be, blacks argued, when centuries of racial discrimination gave whites an undeniable head start in education and job experience? Hiring exams and seniority simply institutionalized this past inequality, insuring that whites could still get first pick of jobs without using explicitly racist stereotypes.

Equal opportunity, according to civil rights advocates, could only be achieved when society took positive steps to eradicate the legacy of past discrimination. In practice, this could only be achieved, they argued, by “affirmative action” programs to hire, train and promote minority workers. Once these programs put blacks on equal footing with whites, then—and only then—could seniority and hiring exams be considered fair.

Eradicating “institutional” racism, however, would prove to be a long, hard, and bitter campaign. “We were not a militant organization,” remembered David Adams, a data processor for the Automobile Club and one-time Chairman of the Afro-American Association. “We met with management to give them recommendations on how they could improve things. Unfortunately, they didn’t change anything.” Having exhausted the options for voluntary change, Adams and 100 black co-workers sued the Automobile Club for denying them equal opportunity in promotions and pay. “The rest,” said Adams of the 11-year court battle that finally ended in victory, “is history.”
For Willie Stamps, a black janitor at Detroit Edison, history was also a slow-moving affair. Hired into the utility's Buildings and Properties Department, Stamps won election in 1968 as one of 28 Division Chairmen in Local 223 of the Utility Workers of America—making him the first black officer in the local’s 30-year existence. Because, as he later put it, “we recognized that blacks constituted only two to three percent of the Edison workforce in a city which was approximately 50 percent black,”

Stamps and his supporters soon after formed the Association for the Betterment of Black Edison Employees (ABBEE). In 1969, they asked management to inaugurate an affirmative action plan of minority hiring.

The company flatly denied there was racial discrimination in its employment and promotion policies. Recently expanded hiring of blacks into clerical positions was sufficient evidence, Edison added, that race played no part in the company’s employment decisions.

But Detroit’s courts found otherwise when Stamps and the ABBEE brought a lawsuit against Edison in 1971. “It is the conclusion of the Court,” wrote District Judge Damon Keith in 1973, “that the company is refusing to acknowledge the obvious.” Noting that, in 1966, only 300 of Edison’s 9,500 employees—and only 4 of its 1,700 managers and officials—were black, the Court ruled that the company’s discrimination “has been deliberate and by design.” With few exceptions, the Court found that Edison only hired blacks into “low-opportunity jobs such as... Building Cleaner, Janitor, Porter, Wall Washer, Elevator Operator, and Attendant,” and that once trapped in these low-wage jobs, blacks were discouraged from transferring to better-paying departments by a web of discriminatory practices.

When, for example, openings for cable splicer, fireman, brickmason, and other skilled jobs in high-wage departments were announced, Edison initially notified only the junior employees already working in those particular departments. And since those departments were exclusively or predominantly white, so too were most of the applicants who sought promotions and training. The same network of inside references gave whites an advantage when they first applied for work at Edison. Over half the white workers interviewed by federal investigators said they had been steered to Edison by word-of-mouth referrals from friends and relatives already working for the company. In the meantime, Edison failed to list job openings with the Michigan Employment Security Commission until required to do so by law in 1971.

Even when blacks knew of and applied for openings in high-wage jobs, they had to pass a battery of tests which were not, in the Court’s view, “valid predictors of job performance.” For those who passed this obstacle, personal interviews and unfavorable evaluations by white managers frequently ended their job search. The few who survived even this hurdle then confronted a bitter irony: to transfer from the top of a low-wage department like Buildings and Properties to the bottom of a high-wage department like Transmission or Maintenance, applicants usually had to accept a new "starting wage” that was lower than their previous rate. In addition, none of the seniority protection against layoffs they had accumulated in their old job could be transferred to the new department. To venture a new career, Edison’s blacks had to risk throwing away whatever wage increases and job security they had won in their old positions.

The evidence, concluded the Court, made it clear that “a substantial number of black employees held low-opportunity jobs had qualifications... superior to a substantial number of whites who had been selected for skilled trades jobs.” Judge Keith therefore ordered Edison to increase minority hiring and promotions until 30 percent of the company’s overall workforce and 25 percent of its skilled trades were minority workers. Though a subsequent Appeals Court ruling in 1975 reduced the back-pay damages assessed by Detroit’s District Court, Judge Keith’s ruling was upheld in its basic conclu-
Among the 81 apprenticeship graduates (60 pictured here) who began their four-year training program with Electrical Workers Local 58 in 1975, 15 were minorities—nearly equal to the number called for under the affirmative action guidelines of the Detroit Plan. In Detroit's depressed economy, however, there was no guarantee they could find steady work.

The Court also found that Local 223 of the Utility Workers, together with Local 17 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (representing linemen), had “negotiated and acquiesced in procedures which lock blacks into low opportunity jobs.” Both unions had therefore neglected their legal duty to fully represent all their members, though Local 17 had not, in the Court’s view, “acted with the requisite malice of the Company or Local 223.”

Local 223 was not the only union in Detroit that acquiesced in, or actively promoted, the discriminatory policies of employers. The Edison local simply did it more consistently and, after the ABBEE court suit, more publicly than most. According to court testimony, the union negotiated job-bidding procedures and seniority restrictions with the deliberate aim of deterring black promotion. As management then enforced these restrictions, white union officers discouraged black members from pressing grievances against the discriminatory results of such practices. The Utility Workers union did question Edison’s use of testing procedures on union members as a whole, but Local 223 never questioned the blatantly discriminatory impact of these tests on black applicants for hiring and promotion.

Local 223, no less so than Detroit Edison, was under tremendous pressure to change after 1971. As the Court moved to implement its affirmative-action ruling, the local’s President, who cast the only vote on the union’s national executive board opposing a Human Rights Committee, lost his post to more tolerant leadership. As the number of black Edison workers rose above 1,500 under the Court’s affirmative-action order, the union also had to respond to the numbers—and the votes—of this growing black membership.

So too did the labor movement in general. Black workers were the fastest growing constituency in many Detroit unions, and in a significant number of autoworker and public-employee locals, they achieved majority status. The trend towards black leadership in such local unions eventually worked its way to the top of the city’s labor movement. In 1968, Tom Turner, a former steelworker and the then-current President of the Detroit NAACP, became the first black President of Detroit’s AFL-CIO.

With legal backing from the 1964 Civil Rights Act—and with prodding from militant groups like DRUM—Turner, Marcellus Ivory, and other black trade-union leaders pressured employers and the labor movement to widen access to skilled and better-paying jobs. The response was usually positive, though always slow moving. In time, union and management negotiators in the auto industry substantially overhauled their jointly run apprenticeship programs, reducing the number of tests and lowering the minimum cut-off scores for black and white applicants to the skilled trades. A 15-week remedial training program was also established for applicants of both races who failed the tests. And those who passed and transferred to apprenticeship programs were guaranteed their pay would not be cut to entry-level wages.

In the construction industry, it took more than three years of negotiation before a comprehensive affirmative-action program—the Detroit Plan—was implemented in 1971. Since the construction industry was one of the few where craft unions, rather than employers, controlled access to basic skills and job opportunities, the Plan hinged upon the unions’ pledge to expand their minority training and placement until each craft union had at least 15-20 percent minority membership.

Black trade-union leaders were generally pleased with the Plan’s results, at least initially. “In the life of the Detroit Plan,” recalled Tom Turner, “over 700 blacks, Latinos, and women got journeyman cards in the Building Trades unions. And the vast majority were able to get cards without going through the normal four-year apprenticeship program. That was a significant breakthrough.”

But in this and other affirmative action plans, results varied widely by craft and by company. While the electricians’ union made measurable strides in opening its ranks to minority workers, some crafts showed considerably less enthusiasm for the Detroit Plan’s ambitious goals. By 1971, 25 percent of Chrysler’s skilled-trades apprentices were minority workers, while at GM the proportion of minority apprentices rose to only 17 percent. A court suit against GM promised to force additional progress on the company, but the future of affirmative action dimmed appreciably in the mid-1970s when the federal government cut back its financial commitment to such legal challenges. Indeed, federal cutbacks in funding for affirmative action played a key role in undermining the Detroit Plan in 1975.

From its inception, however, the Plan was shadowed by an even more troublesome flaw. According to the terms of the Plan, affirmative action in the construction industry would be implemented only “when economic conditions permit.” In the boom years of the early 1970s, this condition posed little immediate problem. But if history was any kind of guide, Detroit’s economy would eventually slump into yet another recession, with layoffs and decreased job opportunities significantly narrowing the options for minority hiring. Then, and only then, would the durability of affirmative action be truly tested.