

# DETROIT REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT RECORDS

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SOJOURNER T RUTH  
ORGANIZATION HISTORY

## OUTLINE HISTORY OF SOJOURNER TRUTH ORGANIZATION

In November of 1969, following the splits in SDS, about ten people in Chicago began meeting together to evaluate the experiences of the past few years and discuss the next steps. Most of them had been involved to some degree in the RYM II faction of SDS and all were sympathetic to its stated aims and principles. None were students; all had taken part in the general movement - SNCC, peace activities, political defense, community organizing; a few had been members of the CP, SP or other "Marxist" organizations; a few had some experience in industry.

In the course of preparing a paper on general questions of theory and strategy for a RYM conference in Atlanta, the ten or so people involved in these discussions put forward the view that the central organizational task of the present period was the building of a Marxist-Leninist party. In that paper such a party was defined as a group that:

- (1) had a theory that answered most of the important questions of strategy in this country;
- (2) had developed, on the basis of that theory, a line which applied to the major areas of political work;
- (3) had tested and refined that line and proven that it was able to provide direction for mass struggles based on that line and not on the abilities of individual leaders;
- (4) had shown its ability to recruit workers and integrate them into its leadership;
- (5) was organized in the most important industrial centers of the country;
- (6) represented a cross-section of the general U.S. population;
- (7) had around it a fairly substantial number of people who, while not themselves wishing to join the party, were happy to see it formed.

At the beginning of 1970 the ten people arrived at the conclusion that something more formal was needed than what they had. Believing that the best contribution they could make toward a Marxist party in the U.S. was to attempt to act like one in Chicago, they decided to constitute themselves as an organization with decision-making power over its members.

Dues were decided upon, a meeting schedule was set up and a name - the Sojourner Truth Communist Organization (we were later to allow the "Communist" to fall into disuse) - was chosen.

The people who began Sojourner Truth by no means had worked out unified positions on all political questions, or even the most important, although they did know each other well enough to feel fairly close. They agreed to work toward this unity through continuing discussion of theory and evaluation of experience. In the meantime, they would make decisions, by majority vote if necessary, only on matters involving immediate steps to be taken. People joined the group based on a willingness to work in this way, with the understanding that if a decision was made which a person disagreed with and considered too important to go along with, that person would be free to leave the group.

We have followed this policy since, of refusing to impose discipline on matters of theory and fighting for discipline on matters of practice. It is one reason why we have managed to survive for almost three years without a split. We have lost members (two) who disagreed with decisions we made, but our relations with them remain friendly. (We have also lost some people who simply dropped away without major political differences.) There is no guarantee that splits will not occur in the future, but we do believe that this policy of making decisions only on practical questions increases the likelihood that, if they do occur, they will take place along principled lines comprehensible to all concerned.

For the first several months of our existence, we met all together as a group. After we felt we had gotten to know each other a bit, we elected an executive committee. Its functions at first consisted mainly of organizing general meetings and handling practical details between meetings.

Shortly afterwards, we decided to divide into branches, based on the kinds of work we were doing. There were two branches: a production work branch and a community branch.

People met regularly in their branches, every two weeks. Dues were paid there (one day's net pay per month), individual mass work was discussed there, work assignments were made and education of particular interest to the branch was held. The branches met jointly every two weeks for education on general questions of strategy.

In addition, all women in the organization met together regularly to discuss the problems of women's work in general and within Sojourner Truth.

We also organized a weekend educational on the elements of Marxist theory, with reading done in advance. This proved successful and has been repeated periodically for new members and close contacts.

At this time the organization had about 14 members.

Our first involvement in mass work was the fight against the shut-down of International Harvester Tractor Works, and the fight to win freedom for Joe Green, a black youth framed up on a murder charge. We were unsuccessful in the former, successful in the latter.

Around the summer of 1970 we decided to dissolve the community branch. This did not mean that we considered community work unimportant, but that for us, given our resources and the problems and possibilities at this time, it should not be a major concentration on an equal footing with production work. We re-organized into two production branches, based on work as well as individual strengths and weaknesses, etc.

We also continued meeting together occasionally as a whole to discuss important questions such as the branch re-organization, the decision to publish a newspaper (Bread and Roses, directed toward working class women) and education.

By the autumn of 1970, the organization had set up the essentials of its present structure. At a general meeting we agreed that the main achievements of our first year of existence were that we had established internal discipline, shown the ability to agree upon a line, carry it out and collectively evaluate the results, conducted some good internal education and accumulated some experience in mass work. Branches were re-organized to allow for new recruits and job changes, and a new executive committee was elected.

For the first year of our existence we followed a policy of deliberate self-isolation from the left. We were sick of the manner in which political battles were habitually fought. We thought we had some useful and important things to teach and learn, but we believed that until we had accomplished something as an organization no one would listen and that the impact on us of inner-left exchanges would be negative. By the beginning of 1971 we felt we had accumulated enough collective experience and built enough internal cohesion to permit us to take the first tentative steps toward other movement groups and individuals.

We achieved a number of things during 1971. Some of these were: the publication of four issues of a newspaper (Bread & Roses, two numbers of the Insurgent Worker and a special number on the steel industry which we prepared together with comrades in Detroit and Buffalo); the accumulation of much broader experience in mass work, including a few successes; the continuation of internal education, the writing and initial circulation of two papers on strategic questions; the beginning of relations with other groups and individuals; and a general rise in our prestige and status in the city.

In the autumn of 1971 we met together as a whole to review our work for the previous year. The executive committee made a written report with its evaluation of our strengths and weaknesses. A discussion was held, in which our achievements were noted and various problems were pointed out and discussed. It was agreed that the main problem was that the executive committee had tended to become an administrative rather than a leading body, and that this led to a lack of timely political discussion in the organization and passivity on the part of members. We discussed how to correct this and other problems, set ourselves goals for the coming year (the first time we had done this) and elected a new executive committee. At this meeting we also established a committee structure, which will be explained later.

Since we have not yet collectively reviewed the work of the past year, we cannot review the goals we set for ourselves. Suffice it to say that we have met some, fallen short of others, and plan to discuss which failures were due to our setting unrealistic goals and which were due to shortcomings in our work.

One of the goals we did set ourselves was to double our membership, which had remained at 10-15 since the beginning. We felt that conditions in Chicago previously did not permit our growth, but that now, both as a result of our work and changes in the general movement, we were in a position to recruit.

This goal was accomplished in a short time. Several months ago, we decided to stop recruiting for a while, except for individuals who were in a position to immediately work collectively in one of our concentration areas. This was done so that we could assimilate the new members, even out the political level of our members and adapt organizationally to larger numbers.

At present our membership stands about 30. Of these, three are Latin, all the rest are white. Slightly less than half are female. The median age is about 26, with a low of 20 and a high of 40+. About 80% had at least one year of movement experience prior to contact with Sojourner Truth. About 90% have had some education beyond high school. About two-thirds are working in an industrial-type situation. There are seven people left from the group that began in 1969.

Our structure consists of three branches, each organized around an industry or group of factories in the same area. Each branch is responsible for the work in its production concentration, as well as community and student work in its area. Thus, for example, the Calumet branch has several people working in the steel industry, one unemployed housewife, one area social worker and one person who works in a hospital in the area. (This is a peculiar branch in that all of the workers in the major industry are male.) The branch discusses all of their individual situations in turn, and tries to develop activities which involve them all together. Members are assigned to branches based on how their work ties in, although that is not the only consideration. Also, some individuals are involved in work that is not directly related to any one particular branch, such as GI organizing or a free divorce clinic. That work is discussed in the branch they belong to. Dues are collected in the branches, new members are recruited through them and some education is held in them. Although we have had difficulties in the past, the branches are functioning pretty well now.

We also have several committees, which cut across branch lines and are responsible for various aspects of our internal life, for example, education, fund-raising, literature, the Insurgent Worker, etc. Some of the committees have not been functioning well lately.

The women's group within the organization continues to meet and function, discussing strategic and political questions. There is some overlap between its work and that of the branches, which does not seem to cause any problem.

The executive committee, elected at large at our annual review of work meeting, has six members, of whom three are female. (This is not a statutory requirement.) Three were not previously members of the executive committee. It is the leading body of the organization between general meetings. It tries to lead, not primarily by making decisions but by discovering what are the most important political questions that come up in the work, clarifying the various alternatives and finding ways that these questions can be discussed in the organization. (Each branch has an executive committee which attempts to function in the same way.) The executive committee prints and circulates written minutes of its meetings. Whenever a point is to be discussed which is of special concern to someone not on the executive committee, that person is invited to the meeting.

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