

General Gordon Baker Jr.: Evolution of a Revolutionary

General Gordon Baker Jr. of Detroit is one of the most significant 20th century revolutionaries. On Sunday May 18, 2014 he passed away. As a founding member of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the Communist Labor Party, and the League of Revolutionaries for a New America, General was loved and respected across the ideological spectrum. An intellectual of immense gravity, General understood the practical demands of the fighting section of the working class. His life covered 60 years of activity. General inspired a generation of revolutionaries in his advocacy for social and political revolution.

General is remembered as a family man with a broad grin, witty sense of humor, and an electrifying personality. As a propagandist he had the ability to unravel and describe the social process in a logical and universally understandable manner, describing historical events in colorful, thought-provoking imagery.

He worked 40 years in the auto industry, took part in the survival movement of the 1990s and was at the forefront of the water wars beginning in the early 2000s. General was a powerful orator and acknowledged pillar of the international working class movement. Filled with legendary patience, he pushed for greater organization of the fighting section of the masses and offered them the promise and vision of a better tomorrow.

IN HISTORY'S HANDS

General was born on September 6, 1941 shortly after his family moved from Augusta, Georgia to Detroit, Michigan. His family was part of the last wave of migrants from America's agricultural South to the industrial North. The first migration began in 1863, when Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Hundreds of thousands of slaves fled the plantations. The next migration (1910-1930), numbered about 1.6 million people.

The last migration (1940-1970) was the result of the tractor and the mechanical cotton picker, which replaced human labor in agricultural production, eventually kicking eleven million laborers off the land. Upon entering WWII, northern industries received government contracts to produce for the war effort. Labor was needed for the war effort, including Black labor.

General was delivered into this world by Dr. Ossian Sweet. Sweet was acquitted by an all-white jury of murder charges in what came to be known as the Sweet Trials. In 1925, Sweet (a Black man) purchased a home in a white neighborhood, and shot and killed a member of an angry white mob that attempted to force him out of his home. Defended by the famed attorney, Clarence Darrow, Dr. Sweet, his family and friends who had helped defend his home (eleven in total), were acquitted on April 19, 1926 of all murder charges. To be guided into this world by such a man was a portent of General's life to come.

HISTORY SHAPES THE MAN

The Baker family settled into Detroit's "Black Bottom" on the lower east side and later moved into a home in southwest Detroit. General's father worked for Midland-Ross Steel in the 1940s, and later took a job with Chrysler. General grew up in a household whose morality was church based, and founded on the concept of the equality of humanity. General graduated from Southwestern High School in 1958 at the age of 16. He would later attend Highland Park Junior College and Wayne State University, developing the learning ethic of academia. General was profoundly disturbed by the exclusion of Black people from American history. His pursuit of history would lead him to study world history and social revolution.

As a teenager, General lived in a political environment dominated by anti-communism and McCarthyism. During the 1950s, the world was on fire with anti-colonial revolts, revolutions, and wars for national liberation. WWII had weakened Europe's imperial powers and shattered the direct colonial system. Countries of Asia, Africa, and South America fought for their liberation from imperialism. Black people in America were a part of this worldwide anti-imperial revolt. Fighting against segregation and for anti-lynching laws, the civil rights movement reached a turning point August 28, 1955, with the brutal murder of Emmett Till. On December 4th, the Montgomery, Alabama boycott became the beginning of a mass movement. General's earliest act of protest was several years later in 1959, when he picketed a Woolworth's store on Detroit's Woodward and West Grand Boulevard for their refusal to serve Negroes.

General became involved with the NAACP youth section, and frequented the Nation of Islam and the United Negro Improvement Association meetings. In 1963, the Civil Rights Movement marched under the banner "Free by '63," the one hundred year anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. The July 5, 1963 police murder of Cynthia Scott of Detroit became a rallying point of protest. On August 8, 1963 Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous, "I Have A Dream" speech in Washington DC. As if in retaliation of King's plea for justice, the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama was bombed September 15, killing four little black girls. This murder of children outraged America. Malcolm X's November speech in Detroit, "Message to the Grass Roots", further radicalized General. On November 22, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. The whole country was being radicalized.

In 1964, General travelled to Cuba. Cuba had won its independence from U.S. imperialism in January 1959, and had become a safe haven for revolutionaries. The Cuban government granted Robert F. Williams political asylum. Robert F. Williams was author of *Negroes with Guns*, and hosted a radio program, "Radio Free Dixie." The American government imposed a travel ban and embargo against Cuba. Defying the government ban,

General and 83 other American citizens went to Cuba. The four Black students from Detroit, Charles Simmons, Luke Tripp, Charles "Mao" Johnson and General sought a meeting with Robert F. Williams, pledging to build support for his case against the American government. The meeting between General, Robert Williams and Mabel (his wife) became an enduring friendship between two families. While in Cuba, these young men played ball with Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. During lengthy discussions with Che Guevara, General was won over to a vision of socialism and began pursuing a communist-socialist orientation.

Detroit of the 1960s was a hotbed of political activism, influenced by political activists and writers James and Grace Boggs, Martin Glaberman, and the historian and theoretician C.L.R. James. Detroit's concentration of black industrial workers made it a center of the Civil Rights Movement, a focal point of radical politics, and the epicenter of a vibrant anti-capitalist ideological movement. Radical activity occurred daily with newly formed black radical organizations, meetings at Detroit's Debs (Eugene Debs) Hall, and a proliferation of Black Nationalist, anti-racist, anti-war groups and study circles. General attended various study groups, which included those studying the revolutionary doctrines of Lenin on organization and insurrection, and the writings of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels.

General's evolution took further shape during the August 9, 1966, Kercheval Street mini-revolt. The Kercheval incident was police instigated for the purpose of arresting Revolution Action Movement (RAM) and East Side Voice of Independent Detroit (ESVID) members who congregated on street corners, spreading propaganda. General, Glanton Dowdell and Rufus Griffin (a local activist) were "picked up" by the police, charged with carrying concealed weapons, convicted and placed on a five-year probation. Glanton Dowdell was the famed painter of Detroit's Black Madonna. General held the ladder used by Glanton during this painting.

THE MAN SHAPES HISTORY

General was the first person to publicly defy the draft during the Vietnam War. He received his draft notice June 1965 and protested, penning an open letter to the U.S. government and organizing the September 10 movement, to protest against his induction. General's letter to the draft board, "My Fight Is for Freedom," remains a powerful indictment against Yankee (North American) imperialism.

The 1965 Watts Rebellion and the 1967 Detroit rebellion changed politics in America.

On July 23, 1967 the largest uprising since the Civil War took place in Detroit. A day later, on July 24, Baker's apartment was invaded by the police. He was not home. Once located, General was arrested, put on a bus with a shotgun placed to his head and driven to Michigan's Jackson State

Penitentiary, the largest walled prison in the world. Also arrested and jailed was Glanton Dowdell. He and General were later released on a \$50,000 bond. Detroit after 1967 was a changed city.

Following the Great Rebellion, General was one of a core group of people (John Williams, John Watson and Mike Hamlin) to publish the newspaper *The Inner City Voice* beginning in September 1967. This effort was supported by a segment of Detroit's radical community including Dan Georgakas, who would later author the book, *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying*.

General entered the auto industry in the early 1960s, first with Ford Motor Company and in 1965 at Chrysler's Hamtramck Assembly — Dodge Main. On May 2, 1968 a walkout of 4,000 occurred at the Dodge Main plant. The walkout was over speed-up of the assembly line. No one could keep up. Seven picketers were fired — five whites and two Blacks. The five white workers were eventually brought back to work and the two Black workers (General Baker and another striker Bennie Tate) were permanently discharged. The response to this injustice was organized as the response of Black labor and crowned with forming DRUM — Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, formed to do battle against discrimination and segregation within the company and union. DRUM was the foundation for forming the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW) in 1969.

The LRBW was a federation of organizations and individuals fighting to shape a desegregated Detroit based on various socialist and communal visions of a society of equal individuals.

The 1968 Dodge Main strike began America's last industrial strike wave. This strike wave peaked in 1973, with strikes at three Chrysler plants. In 1971, during the increasing tempo of the strike wave, the LRBW split into warring factions and dissolved. The faction led by General and John Williams joined the Communist League. Shortly thereafter, Detroit's Motor City Labor League became part of the Communist League's initiated efforts to form a new political party. The Communist Labor Party (CLP) was founded in Chicago, Illinois September 1974, the year Detroit's first Black mayor, Coleman A. Young, took office.

In 1976, the CLP launched its "Vote Communist Campaign," fielding General Baker Jr. as its candidate for Michigan State Representative. In 1978, he challenged the Democratic Party candidate in the Michigan Democratic Party primary for State representative. By the 1980s the advance of the electronic revolution began changing social relations in America. General changed in correspondence to this new world. At every phase of the social process General further evolved into the revolutionary he would become.

Part two of this article will be published in the November/December 2014 issue of *Rally, Comrades!*