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TO ALL ORGANIZERS, NC MEMBERS AND THIRD WORLD WORK DIRECTORS

Dear Comrades,

Attached is an internal report from Joel Britton and Tony Thomas on the United Front for Survival Conference held in Cairo, Illinois October 24 and 25, 1970.

Enclosed are extra copies. Please see that these are circulated among the comrades involved in this work.

Comradely,

Jack Barnes (1)

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Organization Secretary
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Norman Oliver

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REPORT ON UNITED FRONT FOR SURVIVAL CONFERENCE
HELD IN CAIRO ILLINOIS OCTOBER 24 & 25, 1970

By Joel Britton & Tony Thomas -- November, 1970

This conference was called by the Cairo, Illinois United Front, which has been leading the Black struggle there. Information on this struggle can be obtained from Militant articles by Mark Ugolini and Linda Sheppard and from Derrick Morrison's forthcoming articles.

The aims stated by the Cairo leadership at the conference were to initiate a national defense campaign for the Cairo movement through the establishment of a "national Black united front" which would organize defense activities (publicity, fund-raising, etc.). The Cairo leadership and others grouped around them at the conference projected the importance of united front actions, political defense, and organized mass armed self-defense of and by the Black community. They openly and frequently counterposed themselves to Panther-style ultraleftism.

The conference was built mainly in the Lower-Midwest area and Chicago by the Cairo United Front. They expected a turnout from Black United Fronts from Boston, New York, and Washington, but these groups sent only a few individuals. In this sense it was not a national conference as originally projected. The Black Student Union at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale took responsibility for organizing the physical arrangements. They obtained access to facilities at SIU only after a struggle -- and then without the right to charge admissions or registration fees.

Size and Composition

The size of the conference exceeded 500, mostly college age or in their late twenties and early thirties. The Cairo United Front had planned to bring down between five and six hundred people, but said they decided not to because of a flare-up in the fighting in Cairo immediately before and during the conference. Their participation was limited to at most fifty people.

The attendance came chiefly from the Lower Midwest (Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, Arkansas, Southern Illinois) and Chicago. A few individuals associated with Rev. Albert Cleage of Detroit came. Though Cleage was scheduled to deliver a major address, it was announced that after he had reached St. Louis, he became emotional upon hearing that armed attacks had been made on the Black community in Cairo, 60 miles from where he was supposed to speak.

Although there are over 3,000 Black students at SIU, and a sizable Black community located in Carbondale, according

to leaders of the SIU BSU only about two hundred attended from Carbondale and SIU. The conference was closed to whites after an initial address by Rev. Charles Koen, chairman of the Cairo United Front. About six Chicanos from Chicago and Hidalgo County, Texas attended.

Most of those attending the conference were affiliated with Black student organizations and community organizations. The only Black Panthers present were a few members of the Carbondale Black Community Information Service. There was a sprinkling of people who reflected the politics of the Republic of New Africa, the Black Muslims, and LeRoi Jones, although no one appeared directly speaking for these groups and tendencies. As far as we know no representatives from SCLC, the Communist Party, National Welfare Rights Organization, or the League of Revolutionary Black Workers made their presence known.

Our Participation

Because of the political importance of the Cairo struggle and the size of the conference, the national offices of the YSA and SWP helped organize a significant participation. Our total attendance was roughly 25 (15 Black comrades: 4 from Chicago, 5 from Michigan, 1 each from Cleveland, the New York Branch, Los Angeles, the ISR staff, Militant staff, and YSA national office staff; 2 Chicano comrades, 1 from Detroit and 1 from Chicago; and eight white comrades, 1 from Carbondale, 6 from Chicago, and 1 from the SWP national office). It included statewide SWP candidates from New York, Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan and four comrades active in Black student organizations.

We didn't make specific proposals because we weren't in a position to take responsibility for actions taken by the conference, especially because we have no roots in the Cairo situation or any of the Black United Fronts around the country. And we are unsure of the viability of any national formation coming out of the conference. We concentrated on literature sales, Militant and ISR sales and subscriptions, as well as contributions to workshops dealing with "defense" and "political education." A workshop scheduled on "wars" did not take place.

Defense Workshop

The first day of the defense and two other workshops was occupied by a trip to Cairo and participation in a demonstration and rally of about 500 in the Black community there. On the second day, the people from Cairo who had taken responsibility for the workshop did not return to Carbondale.

because of the intensification of the struggle there. The workshop then discussed chiefly the technical aspects of the use of different firearms. Though this discussion didn't take an overly ultraleft tone, and did at times discuss the need to mobilize the Black community in its own defense, it is probable that the absence of people from Cairo diverted the workshop from dealing with the need for a national defense campaign for the Cairo movement. This workshop ended early, most of the participants including our comrades going to the political education workshop.

Political Education Workshop

Most SWP and YSA Black comrades participated in the Political Education Workshop. The first day of the workshop was marked by a panel composed of minor officials in Black studies departments, university administrations, and poverty programs in the Southern Illinois and Missouri areas. This panel was organized by the director of the Black American Studies Department at SIU. The speeches given by the panelists had very little political content of any kind, and at the close of the session Rev. Horace Jones of the Peoria United Front (who along with Koen was one of the two central figures of the conference) returned from Cairo and announced correctly that this session was irrelevant "rapology" and that the next session would be open to all to participate in and would deal with "practical matters."

The second day of this workshop discussed political perspectives for organizing the Black community. Due to our participation much of the discussion was on the need for a mass, independent Black political party versus the ideas of those who said that such a party would bring Blacks "back into the system," even though a few of the same individuals had earlier talked about supporting Black Democrats as lesser evils.

After an initial discussion we shifted our emphasis to the need for united front actions, giving the defense of Cairo, antiwar action, and the struggle for Black control of schools as issues around which such mass actions can be based. We did this because it began seeming that we wanted the workshop and the conference to come out with the announcement of the formation of a Black political party.

This would have been incorrect for a number of reasons. First of all, we don't see a Black political party as the formation which will unite all elements of the Black liberation movement at this or probably at any point. We see a

Black party as a formation that can rally those who are conscious of fighting for a mass independent Black alternative to the capitalist parties -- those who understand how to use electoral and other forms of political action to organize and mobilize the community. At this point this is only a small sector of the Black community. Thus we don't agitate for the initiation of a Black political party as an immediate step for each sector of the Black movement to take now to unite the whole movement -- i.e. as a substitute for united front mass action.

Indeed, we think that united front actions will create both the subjective and objective conditions in which a Black political party can be formed.

Secondly we felt that in this conference our discussion of a Black political party must be a propagandistic rather than an agitational one. At this conference, the only force that could have made the passing of a proposal or workshop resolution on a Black party more than a ritualistic gesture was the leadership of the Cairo United Front. They however had not taken a position calling for independent electoral action, and have no plans to initiate such electoral action in Cairo.

At the Denver Conference in March 1970 where there was a leadership with authority and a base that supported the initiation of a Chicano political party, we took the policy of vigorous support for the actual initiation of a Chicano party. However at Carbondale to have taken such a strategy would have miseducated people and would not necessarily have represented any progress toward the foundation of a Black political party. We would have miseducated people by misjudging the type of base needed to successfully start a political party. Such a party can't be formed simply by the passing of a motion. Even if we had taken such a strategy and had passed such a motion, we would have only demoralized the people supporting it because no party would have flowed out of such a motion. Even in the Denver Chicano conference we were very persistent in dispelling illusions that a national La Raza Unida Party would issue from the conference.

Our ideas on the need for a defense campaign for Cairo were picked up by many in the workshop, especially Bill Hampton (Fred Hampton's brother), another figure in the conference who worked closely with the Cairo leadership.

Koen and Jones didn't participate extensively in the workshop. They intervened only to expedite discussion rather than to make concrete proposals. For instance in the last

workshop session on Sunday Jones stated that he hoped that the workshop would get down to practical proposals that could be realistically acted upon in the plenary sessions. He stressed that the different groups in the workshop couldn't resolve all of their programmatic differences and that what was needed was proposals that all groups could accept and work on.

Conference Decisions

The final plenary of the conference consisted of workshop reports which were given by people associated with the Cairo United Front, a speech by Fred Johnson of the Kansas City Nine, and a proposal for the establishment of a national Black united front linking Black united fronts in Peoria, Cairo, Kansas, New York, Boston, Washington, D.C. and other areas. It is to be based in Cairo with Koen and Jones as the central officers. Representatives from different united fronts and figures like Fred Johnson and Bill Hampton were placed on a national steering committee.

All the reports and the proposal for the national united front and the proposals for its officers were voted on and open discussion was urged by the leadership. The workshops were marked by general discussion from almost everyone who attended -- for instance all comrades in the political workshop spoke. While both pro and con discussion was taken during the final plenary, there was no real open opposition to the basic line of the projections of the workshops and the united front proposal. Those few objections that were raised in the plenary were on minor points.

The workshops projected building a national defense for the Cairo movement. A national speaking tour by Koen was announced. Proposals for fund-raising for the Cairo movement and extending the Cairo boycott to other areas were also raised. The basic task of the national united front was to publicize the lessons of Cairo and to defend that movement.

At the close of the conference a meeting of representatives of Black student organizations took place at which Koen announced the formation of a new -- as yet unnamed -- national Black student organization to be affiliated with his national united front and independent of the National Association of Black Students (NABS). He stated that the issue of support for the Cairo movement would be central to this organization and that he would actively oppose Black student organizations that didn't take sufficient action on the Cairo defense.

Estimation

All in all the conference and the emergence of the Cairo leadership represented a contradictory situation. On the one

hand it represented the crystalization of a section of the leadership of the Black struggle in the Lower Midwest that had absorbed some of the lessons of the Black Panther Party experience, and of various community and campus struggles, especially those of the Cairo United Front. They generalized from these experiences the need for mass self-defense, Black control of the Black community and defensive formulations. However, they lack the national apparatus and contacts necessary to form the type of truly national movement they are projecting.

Just as in the case of the Raza Unida parties and the Chicano Moratorium, how this movement will face the pressures of ruling class co-optation and repression, and of political action, will determine its development. Positions on many questions are yet to be openly developed, especially electoral action. They took no clear position on the Democratic and Republican parties during the conference. Bill Hampton and several others in the political workshop raised the question of whether or not to support Sammy Rayner, a Black Democratic alderman in Chicago.

While the Cairo United Front and others in the Lower Midwest are involved in a militant mass struggle, other united fronts, especially on the East Coast, tend to be isolated, reformist and/or ultraleft groups using the "united front" gimmick to claim to speak for the whole Black community. They played very little role in the conference even though Koen and Jones seemed to place a lot of hope on them in the establishment of a "national united front." It is doubtful that the Cairo leadership can bring in sufficient forces to make this a real national organization at this time. The attitude of groups and trends within the Black movement not represented at Carbondale such as the Communist Party, the Black Panther Party, NABS, the National Welfare Rights Organization, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and LeRoi Jones' United Brothers -- to name a few -- remains to be seen. Koen and Jones and other elements of the Cairo leadership tend to overestimate the authority of the Cairo struggle within the Black movement nationally and to underestimate the current leadership crisis of the Black liberation struggle.

Also it is important to note that the layer of leadership in the conference was very small. It was largely the political authority of the leadership of the Cairo struggle, rather than a thorough political discussion that produced the apparent unanimity of the final plenary session. The Koen-Jones leadership took conscious steps to build up a number of figures who later became officers or members of the steering committee of their "national united front." People like Bill Hampton or Fred Johnson were introduced

during the first plenary on Saturday October 24, or during the final plenary and asked to give speeches. Although the political workshop didn't elect a chairman or chairwoman, a Black student who later became student affairs director for the National United Front wound up giving the report which was slanted in a positive direction as opposed to the actual workshop discussion.