

First Joint Bay Area Branch Discussion
on Black Panther Party Candidacies

Meeting of June 23, 1968

Presentation by Nat Weinstein

The question before us is not whether the Black Panther Party is a party that represents the aspirations and a leftward and positive move in the black community. The question before us is not whether or not we would support or whether we could give critical support to an organization like the BPP in an electoral campaign. The question before us is rather how does the electoral coalition between the Black Panther Party and the Peace and Freedom Party affect the independence or the character of the BPP campaign.

In the little thing I wrote, I indicated two extremes in order to clarify the two variations of possibility. One is the extreme where the BPP is running independently, in form as well as in substance. Then it's simply a tactical question for us whether we can use this campaign in order to project the idea of the black community breaking from capitalist politics.

The overriding aim, as Pete indicated, is our objective of building the revolutionary socialist party. If this can play a role in furthering the building of a mass socialist revolutionary party, then it can be tactically to our advantage to give critical support to an independent campaign of black people. Program is relatively unimportant. And I indicated that, too.

On the other hand, if there was a unification or coalition between the BPP and the PFP that, in addition to its form which is not independent -- the form of the BPP electoral effort is not independent -- but if in addition to this form the content of their campaign was not independent, that would be the other extreme. That is, if it were indistinguishable from the campaign of the PFP and it gave the impression throughout the city and throughout the Bay Area and throughout the country that what you're voting for in the BPP campaign is the black section of the PFP. These are the two extremes.

Now, the truth lies somewhere in between these two extremes. It's not simply that the form is not independent and the substance is independent. Or it's not simply form is not independent and substance is not independent. It's not a simple question. Why is it important for us? It's not important for us because of the political thinking that it reflects on the part of the BPP. That's not important. They could have that in their program, the perspective of an alliance with the PFP. However, if they ran independently and the substance of their campaign was independent, then we could extract that from the campaign and promote that idea and criticize their program. That's what we do in every case of critical support. The extent of the criticism varies with the particular expression.

As it stands now, it seems to be predominantly an independent campaign. On the other hand, at the same time, even though I conclude at this stage of the development that it is predominantly independent, there are many negative factors, ~~negating factors~~. There's a lot of information we don't have and we don't know. For example, I just recently heard about a poster that was widely distributed in Fillmore and other places for the Kathleen Cleaver campaign on which the two general slogans of "Peoples' Power" and "Black Power" are the central theme of the poster urging people to vote for Kathleen Cleaver.

This is one of those expressions, in addition to the speeches made by the various leaders of the BPP, in which they indicate, in effect, that a vote for the BPP is a vote for the PFP. And that helps to contribute to the image that these are two halves of the same thing.

What's important to us is not that this is a weakness in their program. That's not what is important to us. What's important to us is that in the expression of this program in this formal electoral combination, they undercut the essential progressive character of the BPP campaign which is that it is independent. Not only independent of the Democratic Party, but independent of bourgeois politics. Not bourgeois politics in the sense of their program, but in the sense of the organizational and political expression of bourgeois politics in the PFP.

How does and how will the current moves of Eldridge Cleaver to become the presidential candidate affect the question of the essential independence of the BPP campaign? I see a number of variations possible. If Eldridge Cleaver does not get the PFP nomination and decides to run independently -- again, trying to draw an extreme example -- and particularly if he emphasizes the independence of the BPP even though he doesn't necessarily run in opposition to the PFP but declares the independence of the BPP and uses his presidential candidacy as the expression of the idea of political independence of the black community from capitalist politics. If he did that, in my thinking that would strengthen the independent character of the BPP electoral effort. That would, in my opinion, give us a very favorable opportunity to project the idea of independent black political action by giving critical support to this campaign. That would tend to separate the BPP campaign from the PFP campaign.

On the other hand, there's another variation possible. And that is that Cleaver becomes the candidate of the PFP as well as the BPP. That, too, we would have to see in real life what its effect becomes. Does it tend to merge the two campaigns into one? Or, is it possible even under those circumstances that you could still have a continuation of essentially the same mixing-up of the independence and non-independence. That is, the contradictory aspects of the campaign. Then it would depend to a great extent on what the BPP candidates did and what the BPP attitude would be towards Cleaver's being the candidate of the PFP.

If he was the candidate of the PFP and that became the dominant aspect of his campaign, that will color, so color the BPP campaign that our attempt to give it critical support and thereby project the idea of independent black political action would appear to be a fraud, wouldn't it? It would appear to be an artificial construction on our part in order to try to project this idea of independent black political action. And, more than that, what we do is we undercut our principled approach to the whole question. We blur the whole question in the minds of our own comrades so that in future problems of a borderline nature such as this the tendency will be to use this as a precedent to go a little further. We've had that experience.

Now, it's not decisive what motivates the BPP leaders in their opportunistic move of making an electoral alliance with the PFP. I stress that word "opportunistic" because the other side of ultra-leftism is opportunism. So that it's an oversimplification to say that what motivates the BPP is its reaction to the opportunism prevalent in the black community.

The source for both the ultra-leftism and the opportunism is the petty bourgeois nature of the movements and the absence of the working class on the scene and the absence on the part of the leaderships in the black community of any confidence, any hope in the potential of the working class playing a role so they reject the working class. So that they tend to vacillate between the two extremes.

Now, it's important that the alliance between the BPP and the PFP is an expression of a correction of an overcorrection. It's an expression of the correction of the extremes and the polemical exaggerations connected with black nationalism and anti-whiteism and the idea of separating organizationally the black organizations from anything to do with whites. This is an attempt to make a correction of that overcorrection. That's direct; that's important. I'll come a little later to possible motivations other than the ones that have already been mentioned which are an important factor in our calculations although not decisive.

The important thing for us in this electoral combination is not the idea of collaboration between black and white and alliances between blacks and whites. That's not what is important for us. That's not what is important about the BPP. That's not what is important about nationalism. That's not what is important about the black revolutionary tendencies in the black community. What's important to us is independence at this stage of the game, independence from bourgeois politics; that is what is important to us. So the inherent virtue in the correction of the overcorrection about alliances has nothing to do with our problem.

It has nothing to do with our problem. We could comment on that, that it's fine, it's good. And we can use that to help clarify what problems exist in the black community -- the fact that they do need alliances, the fact that they do need to find

a way to drive a wedge between white society and find antagonistic elements in white society. Or, as Malcolm X put it implicitly, to find the enemies of their enemy in order to utilize these differences to the advantage of the black community. That's important but that's not what's important in our discussion here now. What's important for us is the BPP in its electoral coalition and whether or not it will facilitate our attempt to drive home the importance and the necessity of independent black political action. That's what is important to us.

As to motivation, I could give another explanation for what motivates the BPP in their alliance with the PFP other than the one they give. It could be summarized -- and I'll go on to indicate what I mean -- in the idea that they're reacting in panic to their ultra-leftism. And, typically of a petty bourgeois current, they react by going all the way over to the right, towards opportunism. They're running for cover. They're looking for protection. That's another possible explanation.

What is the origin and how can we analyze and estimate the origin of the BPP? It's true it's a reaction against the opportunism prevalent in black leadership. That's one side. Also another side. They've oriented to a very special layer in the black community. A very important layer. Potentially a very powerful, revolutionary layer of the black community -- the young, suspicious, innocent, unsophisticated and almost thoroughly alienated youth in the black community, the unemployed youth, the youth who have no hope, who see all of society as being turned against them, not only the white society but their own community, their own people turned against them. They have no confidence in anybody and they distrust and are suspicious of everybody.

To these people, to this layer with virtually no experience and reacting to an impossibly hopeless situation in its appearance, the idea of the revolutionary alternative to the policies being carried out by their elders tends to be very oversimplified. To these layers, if you really are a revolutionist then you get yourself a gun and you go out and start shooting up the police and you do like other revolutionists that they're aware of have done throughout the world. You start fighting with guns.

The other kind of a revolutionary struggle of a kind identified with the socialist revolution is incomprehensible to them today and unrealistic. And they aren't aware of it. Now, in orienting towards this layer -- this is my estimation -- it becomes necessary to adopt a stance that will definitively differentiate this black leadership, the BPP, from any other leadership in the only way that this milieu that they're oriented towards can understand. So they adapt. They're not born yesterday; these are kids who went to college and they studied and have been in contact with all kinds of radical organizations. They know about things; they're not innocent. They have some understanding and they know the consequences of going out with a gun and starting to shoot things up so they have no intention, in my opinion, of carrying the ultra-leftism beyond a stance and beyond words.

But there's a logic to this. You start talking in terms of you gotta have guns and freedom comes out of the muzzle of a rifle; you start talking in these terms and then these black youth, you know, they're very suspicious. They say, okay, you talk - what do you do? And this, you see, is a tremendous incentive to go over and beyond the edge of mere words. Their action in Sacramento can be seen a little better in that light. Not an attempt to go beyond words. But an attempt to mollify this criticism by these suspicious and impatient youth. So they go a little further. They attempt to put a little substance into their words without going beyond the bounds of legality. That, too, has a logic.

That gives pretext to the cops in addition to the words. Then the police intervene. The Huey Newton case is a classic example. I'm convinced that it was absolutely a case of self-defense. The police saw a tremendous opportunity with these Black Panthers, with the Sacramento events, with all the things that they were saying, to drive a tremendous blow at black radicalism, to demoralize them. They were going to kill Huey Newton, I think. So he defended himself.

But everything that they said undercut the position of Huey Newton defending himself. That is no factor as far as we're concerned in the defense of these victims. And this discussion, as far as I'm concerned, is not a question of whether or not we defend ultra-lefts or even opportunists in the black community when they get involved in the claws of capitalist justice. That's not a question for us to decide. That's decided. We defend them as we have right from the beginning and will continue to. And we'll try to give the best arguments to defend them. We're not going to criticize in the pages of the Militant or our public speeches -- say well, the reason you got yourself in this bind is because you acted foolishly. We're not going to do that.

In response to the consequence of these events, this ultra-left stance, this adaptation to this layer of the youth, in response to these terrible consequences, they panicked, in my opinion. They didn't seek simply to make an alliance with whites. But they ran headlong into any kind of alliance with whatever seemed strong and powerful that could offer them protection at the sacrifice of whatever principles. The problem is how to take along these black kids with them. That's their problem. 7

Now, where can the coalition go? This is important. I don't see much hope for a continuation of this coalition. That's why I say my feeling is that if it's possible to maintain their independence, that if the BPP actually maintains the essential and substantial independence of their campaign, that's all that we would require to be in a principled position to give them critical support. Because the period is such that this alliance cannot be stable. ✓

If the BPP leaders continue to move in the direction of maintaining the coalition after the elections with PFP, they will tend

to cut themselves off even more from what beginnings of a base of support that they had in the black community. So that this gives us additional opportunity to take advantage of an independent campaign in order to project the idea of independent black political action without compromising ourselves, without so twisting the facts, without appearing to so twist the facts that we blind ourselves to the reality in order to make a point. And we'd tell falsehoods in order to get across a point.

It would be just as if, for example, we took the substantial and essential character of the Mississippi Peace & Freedom Party campaign which was, to a great extent, independent, too. If we took that and said it's essentially independent. Then we would have been lying. Further, we would be spreading confusion; we would not be projecting. Even if we tried to separate their relationship with the Democratic Party, we would not be separating the independence of their campaign from its subservience, its subordinate relationship to the Democratic Party.

There's another factor that we should take into consideration. And that is that there are differences inside the BPP. The extent of these differences is very hard to tell. I hear a report from a comrade who attended a meeting. She reports that questions were asked about how do you explain this alliance with this white PFP. It's not the kind of expression of difference that is parallel, necessarily, to ours. It's an expression of this reaction against all whites, not necessarily the factor of the PFP. In fact I'm sure with most of these young people it's got nothing to do with the class nature of PFP.

But there are some sophisticates around. James Forman who is formally, nominally, part of the PFP made a speech only recently, several months ago in Los Angeles that was in the Militant in which he projected the whole idea of the skin-class concept of the black struggle for freedom in the United States. That was an important step in the direction of an orientation towards the working class.

And, most recently, in kind of an expression of possible differences of a very healthy type inside the BPP, a report I heard at a branch meeting last Wednesday said that James Forman along with SNCC in Los Angeles is participating with us and others in a demonstration in solidarity with the French youth. This is an expression of their movement in the direction of a class understanding of the problem that is very much related to this electoral coalition.

How do we stand in a situation where there's a difference inside the BPP? How would we stand? Would we take sides? Let's suppose there's a difference, a group that says no, we can't have this coalition with the PFP because it will destroy the independent character of our campaign. Now, our intervention and action is a very important part of theory. Our intervention, you see, what we did, our act would affect that division. We would be

intervening, in that kind of a situation, against those who are moving in a healthy direction. ?

The problem is that we don't know. I don't want to be presenting a hypothetical situation that doesn't have any connection with the reality. We don't know the extent to which there might be differences inside the BPP. I suspect very little right here in the Bay Area. But there are intellectuals, there are people who are sophisticated and have experience, who can see the problem very similarly to the way we do. So we have to take that into account.

Another factor that's involved in this that we have to be concerned about is the very delicate problem that we have of not appearing to be taking a factional approach. The PFP are rivals of ours and because you're in an alliance with them, we're not going to give you critical support. That's a problem. But on the other hand, we don't want to capitulate to this implied pressure. That particularly in the context of a long history in this movement, both PFP and BPP, of using racism as a whip and as a bludgeon to charge us with white racism in substitution for argument against the positions that their opponents take. Now that's the pressure that's operating on us, too. It makes situations very delicate. But we shouldn't respond to this pressure, either. We should make an independent judgment and evaluation and come to a decision on the basis of all the facts.

There's no question of alliances, either. We're all for alliances. We participate in "alliances" with the PFP, but they're on specific, defined issues. An electoral alliance is by its nature something entirely different. The form, you know -- there's a tendency to say, well, that's only form, we've got to look at the substance -- form is very important because there never is form without substance. There is no such thing as form without substance.

The form of the electoral alliance is non-independent. There is some substance to it. And in the context of the manner in which the campaign is carried out, there are elements within the substance that support the form. So don't just toss aside the question of form. Form is very important. That's why we're able to support a Stokes when he runs formally independent, although we know that this guy, if given the opportunity, would run as a Democrat -- he proved it.

It's got nothing to do with independence from the Democratic Party or capitalist politics. But the form gives us the freedom to get across the basically correct, potential idea inherent in the action. That formal independence.

The same is true of the Frankenstein case in Detroit where the form was independent. We criticized the form because it didn't say labor party and it wasn't based on the organizations of the working class. It was formally independent of the Democratic Party but did not formally constitute a labor party type organization.

But we swept aside that form because the lack of a formal connection gave us the opportunity to extract what we considered to be an aspect, an important aspect, of the character of that campaign as being independent.

First Joint Bay Area Branch Discussion
on Black Panther Party Candidacies

Meeting of June 23, 1968

Summary by Nat Weinstein

Motives are important but they're not decisive. What's decisive for us is not whatever opportunistic motives Cleaver and the others might have in their coalition but how will that affect the independence of their campaign. How will it manifest itself in real life? The technique or device of reducing an argument to an absurdity is a legitimate one. I use it and it's been used against me today. But I want to show the limit of this technique which is to say, as one comrade did, that what are we going to do, wait until the day before or the night before the elections before we make the decision. That's not involved at all. We've got time.

The whole nature of this discussion was organized on the basis that we have the time and we should take advantage of the time and have a leisurely discussion leaving out the question of what we decide until later. Now we're faced with -- because of the form which the discussion is taking as a result of certain conclusions drawn by Pete in his document -- what we're faced with is deciding a question that will tip the scales very heavily when we have to make the decision as to whether or not to give critical support. What we're being asked to do -- and that's what I disagree with in Pete's document -- is decide that this is an independent campaign now.

I don't think we can decide that yet. I don't say we have to wait until the evening before the elections. We can wait a month before the elections. By that time, we'll know. Anything that happens after that, we're innocent of. We don't have to take responsibility for it. But we owe it to ourselves and to the people to whom we talk and to the people whom we are acting upon to be absolutely clear about what we're saying, what the thing is we're talking about, what its nature is.

There's another device and that's the device of posing a question in a way that brings to the surface the pressures that prevail in this situation. How is it going to look if you vote for Kathleen Cleaver or you don't vote for Kathleen Cleaver? Obviously, the implication, whether it's intended or not, is secondary. The effect that it has is how are we going to look not going along with blacks who say that they're conducting an independent campaign.

Well, the question should really be posed in this way. How would it look now -- and I've told you how I think it would look now -- if we said, yes, critical support to Kathleen Cleaver. I think we could legitimately say that because the campaign appears now to be on balance essentially an independent campaign. But

we have glimmers and even here in this discussion new factors are being introduced that I was unaware of. This meeting somewhere where a coalition is beginning to take shape between Cleaver, the BPP, and the leftist elements, the left-wing caucus inside the PFP. I don't see this as a positive development. What's the logic of this?

What hadn't occurred to me and is beginning to occur to me with this information is the possibility that Cleaver may have illusions of taking over the PFP in collaboration with the leftist elements. Now, whether that's feasible or possible is something that we'd have to think about and we'd have to see. What's the logic of that? You know, if you're going to start coalescing and grouping with a faction inside the PFP to achieve a purpose, you begin objectively to identify yourself more and more with the PFP. Isn't that the logic of that course of action?

To a great extent, the BPP attempted not to participate in the internal politicking. Now, there were some negations of that. Cleaver's nomination for presidential candidate was a negation of their decision not to play inner politics in the PFP because that's part of maintaining independence of the BPP. Once you begin to put your hand inside the party, you're beginning to take responsibility for that party. You're beginning to identify your group, your independent group, as a faction inside the PFP when you begin to maneuver inside the party to determine its policies.

These are things that are only in their incipient stage. They strongly call to our attention the imagined hypothetical possibility that something terrible could happen. But it's right before our eyes, burgeoning and developing. We don't know where it's going to go. It seems unlikely, the whole idea of Cleaver's forming such a coalition, wanting to be the presidential candidate and the possibility of their thinking in terms of taking over the PFP. It seems so unreal. But that's happening, isn't it? It seems to be happening.

There's nothing wrong with waiting. A little bit more time -- let's see what happens.

Now, there's an undercurrent in this discussion -- Pete indicated it in his presentation -- that's very hard to discuss in the context of this discussion, the form it has taken. Additionally, it's not really properly within the domain of the two branches of the Bay Area to begin such a discussion because it has national implications. That is, to a much greater extent than our discussion on the coalition and the BPP. And that is the potential, possible limitations to black nationalism.

Pete indicated that there was a tendency in our earlier writings on black nationalism to indicate that there were some limits to the objectively progressive nature of black nationalism. Now, this came, I might say -- and this is where I disagree with Pete

-- I think that these concerns are legitimate. Pete put it, I think, we saw it as divisionary. I don't think that that would be the proper word. The proper word would be diversionary. We saw it as diversionary. We've had experience with black nationalism in the context of a struggle of workers, black and white, to combat racism and to organize and to defeat the bastions of capitalism in America.

And there was the phenomenon of black nationalism that objectively served the interest of reaction, of capitalism. Because in the face of this context of the attempt to develop a united struggle of workers and blacks, black nationalism extracted the Garveyism that was legitimate in that period in the absence of a working class struggle and introduced it into the situation in order to divert the united struggle, if you please, of black and white workers against the common enemy.

That doesn't undercut, even under those circumstances, the importance of seeing to it and defending within the context of a struggle against capitalism any manifestations of the desires and the aspirations of black people to participate on an equal basis in the making of decisions. And to see to it that any decisions are not made that will compromise the interests of the black community in the name of what's good for the working class, which is the way phonies operate. Now that's a different matter. But black nationalism can, under very special circumstances and we can't reject that possibility, act in a way that's objectively not progressive. It can function that way.

That's something that we have to keep into account. In the name of black nationalism, a coalition is formed with a very large and effective and growing PFP that could become something quite a bit different than it is today. Black nationalism as a rationale, a rationalization and a justification to participate in this kind of politics would be reactionary.

There were some allusions to the differences between the Progressive Party of Wallace and this coalition that takes place in the name PFP. And the point was made that there was a Wallace machine and that's what was the dominating factor. No, the dominant factor was not the Wallace machine in the Progressive Party because it was the radicals who were dominant inside the Progressive Party. Not that they determined what the policy was. What determined the policy was Wallace's program, not his machine. It was his program, which was a capitalist program.

What determines the nature of the PFP today is the absence of an anti-capitalist program which, in the last analysis, amounts to a bourgeois program. When you don't talk about the existence of classes, when you don't take positions on the basis of the existence of classes in the context of a class society, where there is class exploitation all around us and class oppression all around us and you don't take a position on that question, you're taking a position, de facto, for capitalism. That's why

the PFP is a capitalist party.

And it's not a capitalist party in the same manner that the Communist Party is a capitalist party. And it's not because the PFP cannot become an instrument of capitalist rule. I think somebody implied that. It doesn't matter. So can the Communist Party become an instrument of capitalist rule as we have seen over and over and over again. It's not excluded that a party that is revolutionary at one time can become an instrument of capitalist rule at another time. Witness again the Communist Party.

The question before us is what is the essential nature of the BPP campaign. In conclusion, I'm going to say this: that I wanted to hear what Pete had to say and how firm he was on the last paragraph in his document were he implies, or he says, that once we establish in this discussion the principled question, or words to that effect, that later on we can go on and make a decision on the tactical application of our policy in this question. I disagree with that.

So that, in effect, the document that I presented amounts to an amendment on that point. I am opposed to settling that question now on the political character of this coalition and what it implies, that is, the independent character of the BPP campaign. In the light of that, therefore, I would offer my document as an amendment to Pete's.