

THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY
by Peter Camejo

The Black Panther Party (BPP) was originally conceived by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale as an organization to patrol the Oakland community in order to provide assistance and protection to Afro-Americans facing police brutality. The original name used by the group was the Oakland Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. The group first began about the fall of 1966 and apparently chose its name from the Lowndes County Black Panther Party.

The original group organized armed patrols. Exactly how many people were involved is hard to ascertain, but at first there were no more than twenty. The BPP first received press coverage when they provided Malcolm X's widow, Betty Shabazz, with an armed escort around San Francisco. About the same time the BPP sent an armed delegation of about 30 to Sacramento, to protest certain legislation regarding firearms regulations. The Sacramento protest resulted in a series of arrests and a great deal of publicity.

Since its formation the BPP has had to face continuous police harassment. After the Sacramento events, this harassment increased. The police have attempted to kill BPP members twice, once successfully. Their founder, Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, and about five others are imprisoned at this time. Facing charges, or on parole from previous charges, are a host of other members including Bobby Seale, the BPP chairman. All these events have been detailed by the Militant.

The BPP once again received substantial publicity after the imprisonment of Huey Newton on charges of killing a policeman. A sizeable defense campaign developed in the Bay Area in behalf of Newton. The campaign was led by Eldridge Cleaver who sought ties with radical students and through them broadened the defense effort.

BPP speakers began to appear at all major anti-war rallies where, at first, they had been hesitant to engage in joint rallies with whites. The first time that they spoke together with another organization was at an SWP campaign rally during the 1967 city elections in Berkeley. Their first rally at the U.C. campus was organized by the YSA in defense of the Sacramento arrests. After Newton's arrest such joint meetings became common between the BPP and all anti-war groups.

During the summer of 1967 the BPP attacked the SWP, CP and the CNP in their paper The Black Panther. The article, written by Eldridge Cleaver, was primarily directed at the SWP. It reflected a series of incredibly stupid but common slanders, such as the accusation that the SWP is making money off Malcolm X's works. The CNP was attacked only lightly and some CNPers, specifically Bob Avakian, were held up as "good" whites. This article began a process of closer collaboration by Eldridge Cleaver with CNP types, rather than with the SWP or other socialist formations. Through Cleaver's efforts this became the policy of the BPP.

With the development of the PFP at the end of 1967 the BPP collaboration with the CNP types took the form of a formal "coalition" with the

PFPP. Once again the initiative came from Eldridge Cleaver. Since his original attack, Cleaver and the BPP have not made any attacks against the SWP but have instead gradually indicated a changed attitude. Cleaver wrote an article on the Newton case for the Militant and since his arrest, Kathleen Cleaver has collaborated with SWPers in organizing the Cleaver defense efforts.

After the PFPP achieved ballot status, the BPP decided to enter the 1968 elections with candidates in three districts running on the PFPP ballot designation. A sensational mass rally of 4,000 was held about this time in which the BPP "united" with SNCC by incorporating leading SNCC representatives into the BPP leadership. In organizational terms the "unity" did not change anything. It neither created a BPP in the East where the SNCC leaders are nor did it change the orientation of either the BPP or SNCC groups on the West Coast. The size of the rally indicated the potential of an all black party in the Bay Area.

With the new year the BPP activity became centered around their defense of Huey Newton and their electoral campaigns. After the assassination of Bobby Hutton and the arrest of Eldridge Cleaver, the BPP activity has suffered somewhat.

Composition

The BPP is an all-black organization. Its members are primarily young Afro-Americans from high schools, junior colleges or unemployed. The original leaders came from Oakland City College and apparently had some experience in the past with organizations like the DuBois Clubs and the Progressive Labor Party. The BPP is estimated to have about 200 members and a fairly broad number of young sympathizers.

Program

The BPP is opposed to racial oppression. Their program revolves around the demand for self-determination for Afro-Americans as an oppressed nation. They do not have a clear analysis of why racial oppression exists, where it comes from or how to end it. They simply emphasize the empirical fact that it exists and recognize the need of Afro-Americans to fight for their own liberation.

Although their statements are sometimes contradictory, they tend to try to separate racism from capitalism, to some extent in the same manner that liberals do. They, therefore, fall for the "white racism" propaganda of the ruling class, seeing the cause of racial oppression in some sort of psychological or ideological problem among all white people.

Bobby Seale in various speeches has tried to separate the struggle for socialism from the struggle to end racial oppression. The BPP public position on the question of capitalism, socialism, Marxism, etc. reflects a certain amount of adaptation to pressures from the ruling class. Anti-communism is still a common prejudice among student radicals and in the black community.

The official ten point program of the BPP emphasized the demand for self-determination, of black control of the black community. The BPP has been very clear on opposition to both the Democratic and Republican parties as organizations of the ruling racist power structure. Their attitude towards liberal Democrats both white and black has been correct.

Internal Organization

The internal organizational structure of the BPP is a combination of personality cultism and a high degree of centralism around the leadership executive or central committee. There is no indication that the rank and file members have much control over the leadership or the program. A certain interplay of discussion and voting exists, primarily among the leaders. Formal membership exists, but there is no institutionalized way for the members to make any changes.

Perspectives

The greatest confusion in the BPP's outlook is their perspective on how to achieve self-determination. They have no clear strategy for the liberation of the Afro-American community. Instead, they project partially contradictory strategies.

They have widely published a statement by Huey Newton entitled "In Defense of Self-Defense" and subtitled "The Correct Handling of a Revolution." In this statement Newton calls for guerrilla warfare. Referring to the events in Watts, Newark, Detroit, etc., Newton states, ". . . this manner of resistance is sporadic, short lived, and costly in violence against the people. This method has been transmitted to all the ghettos of the Black nation across the country. The first man who threw a molotov cocktail is not personally known by the masses, but yet the action was respected and followed by the people."

The statement continues, "The Vanguard Party must provide leadership for the people. It must teach the correct strategic methods . . . If the activities of the party are respected by the people, the people will follow the example. This is the primary job of the party. This knowledge will probably be gained indirectly. When the people learn that it is no longer advantageous for them to resist by going to the streets in large numbers, and when they see the advantage in the activities of the guerrilla warfare method, they will quickly follow the example. But first, they must respect the party which is transmitting this message. When the vanguard group destroys the machinery of the oppressor by dealing with him in small groups of three or four, and then escapes the might of the oppressor, the masses will be over-joyed and will adhere to this correct strategy. When the masses hear that the gestapo policeman has been executed while sipping coffee at a counter, and the revolutionary executioners fled without being traced, the masses will see the validity of this type of approach to resistance. It is not necessary to organize thirty million Black people in primary groups of two's and three's, but it is important for the party to show the people how to go about revolution."

This view is the classical "spark" theory. A small group of dedicated and self-sacrificing revolutionaries strike out against the state apparatus. The masses awake and respond, creating a revolution. This approach has been tried for about 100 years with the same result -- defeat. It reflects frustration in not being able to reach and organize the masses and therefore seeks to substitute small numbers and quick action for the more difficult process of organizing millions politically over a relatively long period of time.

Eldridge Cleaver, on the other hand, never speaks about guerrilla warfare. Cleaver has projected a basically different approach for moving towards self-determination. He has attempted to outline a program of action based on politically awakening and organizing the black masses rather than attempting to "spark" a revolution.

In Eldridge's "Black Paper" he outlines the following project: "As our major political objective, the Black Panther Party is calling for a Black Plebiscite, a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the black colony, in which only black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate. The plebiscite is for the purpose of determining the will of black people as to their national destiny . . . the burning question . . . is: Whether the black people want to be integrated into Babylon (white America), or whether they want to be separated into a sovereign nation of their own . . ." The plebiscite concept is clearly geared to expose the United States not only before world opinion but to Afro-Americans. Obviously, Cleaver does not expect the United Nations to project such a plebiscite nor the present U.S. government to permit it. Cleaver spells out clearly the objective of such a campaign -- "The campaign leading to the plebiscite would be the means of solidly organizing Afro-Americans along national lines. Committees organized by people on both sides of the national question will spring up . . . The issue will be hotly debated, and people will organize around the issues involved . . ." Although the plebiscite concept is not the most practical in the world, the basic concept of organizing around demands which expose the ruling class fits the present objective needs. Cleaver's encouragement and involvement of the Panthers in electoral activities is another step in this direction and a lot closer to a realistic perspective. The Huey Newton defense work is basically similar.

Bobby Seale tends to emphasize the need for armed self-defense and formulates it in a defensive manner. He is quoted by the BPP newspaper as saying "Panthers never attack anyone, but when pushed into a corner, like the brothers last night, we must defend ourselves." In various speeches Seale has pushed this kind of formulation of armed defense.

It is important not to assume that Cleaver, Seale and Newton see any contradictions in their varying statements and emphasis. They do not hesitate to print all three variants in the same issue of the Black Panther as official positions.

Our View

It is quite important to keep in mind our views on the political questions involved here. What is the correct orientation at this stage? What is wrong with calling for guerrilla warfare?

The masses in the ghetto are not only living under a bourgeois democratic structure but have strong illusions about it. It is necessary to continue to use bourgeois democratic norms, such as elections, until those illusions are broken by concrete experience. If nothing else makes this clear, the present mass trust in Kennedy cannot fail to impress revolutionaries with the depth of these illusions. Even SNCC chapters here on the West Coast are giving Kennedy their support.

In "The Case for a Black Party", the SWP explains how these illusions must be fought. "The tradition of electoral democracy which the rich manipulate for their own ends is potentially a gun loaded against them. It claims to permit people the right to establish their own political parties which can take over and run local, state or national government. Thus a black party independent of capitalist control could take advantage of this right to gain control of some areas of government. If the capitalists tried to prevent this, that would expose the farce of their electoral democracy and create conditions where the masses could legitimately fight 'by any means necessary' for freedom against the tyranny of the very rich white minority -- a far smaller minority than the millions of black people.

"If it is to move ahead, the black liberation movement must be able to counter the enormous facilities for political deception used by its enemy."

Answering the proponents of guerrilla warfare, the resolution continues, "Some advanced elements in the black communities insist that only armed struggle is warranted and any one who advises different tactics is cowardly or worse. They believe that any sort of political organization and action is incompatible with direct action. Their militancy is undeniable. But small bands of men, however courageous and self-sacrificing, cannot serve as a substitute for the organized urban masses.

"The main task at the present rudimentary stage of the struggle for power is not to hurl unorganized, unprepared masses against the most highly organized, centralized and formidable power in the entire world, and even less to pit small and scattered groups of armed men against it. The basic problem is how most effectively to organize and educate these masses and equip them with the proper understanding, leadership, program and perspectives.

"The time for armed struggle does not come merely because a few daring rebels are ready for it, talk about it or want it. It ripens as the culmination of a prolonged process of mass mobilization after other available methods of action have been tried and found wanting.

"So far as the black masses are concerned, the stage of electoral activity has not been exhausted; in fact, it has hardly been tried.

The same black people who came out into the streets and tore up districts in Newark, Detroit and elsewhere have still not broken with the Democratic Party, the party of white supremacists, exploiters and warmakers!"

Referring to the use of black mayors such as Stokes, the resolution explains the need for the black masses now "to go through more experiences of disillusionment with their black Democratic mayors. Black militants can hasten this process only by showing an alternative acceptable to the masses at their present level of consciousness -- and nothing will meet this need better today than advocacy of a political party controlled by the masses and not their oppressors."

Such a political party could "conduct education about black history and revolutionary struggles elsewhere; take measures to form co-operatives and credit systems to ease the economic squeeze; defend black victims of government persecution; initiate literary campaigns among adults; organize Afro-American cultural affairs and community recreation."

Crucial to the whole demand of an independent Black Party is the necessity to politicize, unite and organize the black masses. The concept of a black political party is the most tenable orientation to achieve the above.

It is also essential for revolutionaries to use defensive formulations not only now, but when a higher stage of struggle is reached. Seale's statement regarding the Panthers is an example of such a defensive formulation. Unfortunately, in many cases the BPP members reject this essential aspect of developing a movement.

Defensive formulations are not a tricky way to make it harder for the ruling class to victimize revolutionaries. Defensive formulations reflect objective reality. They educate the masses correctly regarding both the objective reality and the subjective aims of the vanguard. The ruling class seeks to cover up its oppressive violence by trying to convince the oppressed that they are responsible for violence while the ruling class forces are only maintaining order. The masses cannot break such illusions if the vanguard reinforces the ruling class lies.

Between the different and partially contradictory political perspectives within the BPP, a policy has gradually been evolving in action. It is hard to predict exactly in which direction the Panthers will move. Hopefully, they will move towards use of the electoral arena and propaganda campaigns to build an organization laying the ground work for an independent black political party. If they project an ultra-left course, it can only result in their victimization. However, we should keep in mind that the vacuum of leadership in the ghetto and the continued radicalization creates a powerful impetus for the growth and survival of the BPP in spite of their errors.

Life is always more complicated and contradictory than we would like. The BPP is one more reflection of the contradictions which we can expect in the gradual process of the emergence of an Afro-American vanguard.

White and Black Coalition

There is a tendency among many black militants to see all whites in America as one mass of exploiters rather than as divided between exploiters and exploited. The BPP generally falls into this same error. Their conception of the role of whites in winning black liberation is mistaken because of their failure to recognize the existence of the class struggle, of a revolutionary class, the working class, within the United States.

In the same "Black Paper" mentioned before, Cleaver makes the following comment: "This era can be further defined as that in which significant sectors of the exploiting population have turned away from the system, have declared war upon the system" Here Cleaver is referring to student radicals. He continues, ". . . and that white America is an organized Imperialist force holding black people in bondage. From this definition our task becomes clearer; what we need is a revolution in the white mother country and national liberation for the black colony." Not recognizing the existence of the working class as a revolutionary class, Cleaver must make a revolution in the mother country by alienated "exploiters." Thus, he concludes: "We need functional machinery that is able to deal with these two inter-related sets of (revolutions) . . . we need a revolutionary organization that is able, guided by a revolutionary ideology and comprehending the necessity involved, to move in two directions (mother country and colony) at the same time. We are here tonight because we believe that the Peace and Freedom Party is the beginning of the answer of one half of this equation and the Black Panther Party . . . the other half."

The Alliance with the Peace and Freedom Party

The desire for alliances with whites by the Black Panther Party is not inherently wrong. On the contrary, it is politically advisable for any organization attempting to improve the conditions of oppressed people to seek coalitions. There is nothing wrong with a coalition with the Peace and Freedom Party as such. The SWP sought out and created a coalition which included the PFP during the work towards the April 27 anti-war demonstration.

Our criticism of the PFP-BPP alliance is based on the incorrect evaluation by the BPP of the PFP. That is, their evaluation of the PFP as a revolutionary organization with the potential of leading a social revolution in the United States.

We also disagree with the kind of electoral orientation the BPP is taking because of their coalition with the PFP. The BPP by its support of PFP candidates, its call for black people to register PFP, is weakening motion towards the formation of an independent black political party. Instead, as a small left vanguard they have gone outside the black community to create an electoral coalition. Although it has provided ballot status for them, it mis-orientates their own members and mis-educates the black community on what is necessary.

The BPP underestimates what the black community could do through an all-black party seeking the registration of all Afro-Americans and

over-estimates what the reformist, pragmatic, student-led Peace and Freedom Party can achieve. They have reinforced some of the backwardness of the PFPers in their opposition to a socialist perspective. They have also, however, reinforced the healthier tendency among some PFPers in their uncompromising opposition to liberal Democrats, white or black.

It is important to keep in mind what this coalition is not. It is not a unity between the BPP and PFP. The BPP maintains its own apparatus, membership and decision-making totally separate from PFP. They have their own program, and their candidates run on the BPP program, not the PFP program (in so far as there is any PFP program.) The coalition is not an adaptation to electoralism. Their statements, both oral and written, indicate the BPP sees the use of elections only as a propaganda and organizational tool.

One final point should be made on the PFP-BPP coalition. The use of the PFP ballot status by the BPP is qualitatively different than similar use of the Democratic Party.

The PFP was created at a conjunctural point when the perspectives within capitalist politics did not provide expression to the existing anti-war sentiment. Since then the gap has been partially closed by the Democratic "peace" candidates. The PFP as such is only an electoral expression of the student based anti-war sentiment. Our evaluation of the PFP is that it cannot evolve outside of the spectrum of bourgeois politics. Therefore we cannot support it.

The Democratic Party is an apparatus through which the bourgeoisie rules, and has been ruling, for decades. Although both organizations fall within the over-all spectrum of bourgeois politics, they are different and the differences have qualitative meaning regarding their role now and their future perspective.

Our Evaluation of the BPP

We see the BPP as one manifestation of a general radicalization among young Afro-Americans. Its clear break with the ruling class and its political parties puts the BPP in the vanguard of the existing radical black formations in the Bay Area. Their ultra-leftism is a reaction to the utter opportunism which has been common to the existing black leadership. The ultra-leftism, however, threatens to isolate them, curtail their activity and influence, and open them up to victimization.

Our Approach Towards the BPP

We give unconditional support to the defense of the BPP leaders and members from any and all attacks by the ruling class. We seek, where possible, to create the broadest possible defense through the creation of a defense committee.

In our public stance we concentrate on projecting our own program of what is needed and what is a correct orientation. We try to emphasize the positive sides of the BPP as the most effective way to intervene both among black and white radicals to explain our views.

After our discussion on our evaluation of the BPP we will then be in a position to discuss what tactical orientation we should take towards their electoral campaigns.