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Black Autonomy

Civil rights, the Panthers and today

Do or Die

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In May 2000 two anarchist ex-Black Panthers from America did a British speaking tour. Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin and JoNina Abron talked to groups ranging from white anarchos to mass black meetings on police racism. Between them they have 70 years of political activity spanning lives that have included everything from teaching at a revolutionary community school to hijacking a plane and taking it to Cuba. They conceded to being interviewed in sunny Brighton after a record buying spree (for their pirate radio station) to dazzle the gods. Both are now involved in the Black Autonomy Network of Community Organisers.

Perhaps you could tell us how you both got radicalised?

JoNina The thing that actually got me was the assassination of Martin Luther King in April of 1968. At that point I was at college. King was a civil rights leader and we all thought he was working through the system to change things. When he was assassinated, it really began to make me think. It was

suddenly obvious the way he was going about things was not going to work.

Right after he was assassinated, I went with some other students to Zimbabwe - which was then still Rhodesia. I was very naive. I knew nothing about international capitalism or imperialism, nothing. Now I was so naive as to think that Africa was a continent that was controlled by African people. I got over to Zimbabwe and we were out in the countryside and I saw this sign saying Coca-Cola. So that was really the beginning for me to understand the role of the United States and Western imperialism. That was really the beginning - that was how I began to get involved.

Lorenzo In my case, it was the beginning of the student sit-ins in 1960. The sit-ins swept the South that year. I was ten years old at that time. It was Chattanooga round about in March when we had the demonstrations there against segregation. Black youth actually fought it out on the streets with the Ku Klux Klan and the white racist cops. The resistance was really widespread. For a young black kid at that time to see the entire community rising up against these racists; that really affected me, radicalised me.

As a young kid I'd been humiliated in the South with racial segregation in terms of not being able to go to school with whites or enjoy the same kind of rights. Black people were subjected to any kind of abuse you can think of and certainly some beyond your level of thinking. I had a white kid spit in my face one time. 'Course I didn't stand there and take it - I was a real hothead in those days. But you could've been beaten and killed by a white racist in those days for standing up and resisting.

The people came, led by the youth, they challenged the white power structure, the years and years of abuse. The youth weren't controlled in any way, shape or fashion by the black or white adults. We were the ones that had the demonstrations, we were the ones that led the sit-ins, did the grassroots work, we were the ones that did. When the 60s came along, kids as

needs of people: food, clothing, housing, shelter, whatever. If you have that, then people can relate to you. If all you have is an ideology it's irrelevant to them. They're not going to deal with it. I think that was very important. Poor people, working class people, they want to know, "What kind of programme do you have that will help me keep the police off my back, get a better school for my kids, put food on the table, find me a job". Other than that and you're irrelevant to the black community and you might as well not waste your time.

programme to do grassroots work. So you therefore wind up with a bunch of white kids or some other youth base from the petit bourgeoisie. We think we've got a chance to build working class black and non-white support. We think we can reach in around the issues that are really important - the day to day issues of poor working class people. We can build that kind of alliance. But we can also come out of the community and raise issues that other forces outside will unite around. It's important to recognize, just as the Panthers did, that although issues might begin in the black community, they don't terminate in the black community. The point is to recognise there can be autonomy on the one hand (certainly for the black struggle and the women's struggle) - and at the same time there can be class unity.

The left doesn't mean shit in this period. The Black Nationalist movement doesn't mean shit in this period - they just represent a very small number of people, they're petit bourgeoisie to the core. Our approach has to be instead of worrying about all this garbage, do community work, win the people and all the other bullshit will fall into place. All of that really doesn't matter. And you know, our thing is to try and reach into the black masses, lift their level of consciousness. Grab a hold of them and bring them into the work that we're doing around practical things. Things that really affect them - food, housing, stopping police brutality. This is what we're attempting to do. It has not been easy to get in a position to even build a strong group. We're trying to do that, it will happen. We think we'll break out of this whole stage. You know, it's the kind of stage the Black Panther Party found itself in too, at one time being one of a number of Black Power formations. It was able to break out of that. I think we'll be able to do that as well.

J I think one of the lessons... one of the things that Huey Newton used to talk about was that in the black community you really can't just be concerned with a political ideology. You really have to have programmes that meet the concrete

young as 10 or 11 got involved in that struggle, along with high school age kids. We shook that town up the way it's never been shook up before. We had the sit-ins - occupations of the premises of white racists: stores that wouldn't serve black people. We'd go in, demand to be served food, drinks or whatever. And, of course, they would ignore you or just outright tell you that they weren't going to serve you. "We don't serve niggers here." I remember one of the kids threw back the line - "Well, I didn't come to buy a nigger, I came to buy a hamburger!"

The sit-ins were the initial act of resistance that propelled the whole generation of student and youth protest. It went on all through those years of the 1960s into the 70s, including the Black Panther Party which was, in many ways, a transformation of the students and youth themselves as well as the movements that they were becoming part of. At first, the Student Non-violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC) was made up of all the groups of youths that had been involved in the earlier sit-in campaigns.

In my case, I couldn't serve as a travelling organiser; my mother wouldn't let me leave home at 10 or 11 years old and travel full time. But there were others a little older like Willy Rix who came from my home town. I really had a lot of respect for Willy Rix - he really influenced me. He's the individual who actually coined the slogan 'Black Power'. He was an organiser, a grassroots organiser. He didn't come from the middle class. Most of those SNCC youth organisers in that period were coming from middle class households, were privileged enough to go to college and all that stuff.

That was what really radicalised me, meeting Willy Rix, becoming part of that 1960 rebellion where all those black people just rose up, rose up in a mass against the police and the authorities. That radicalised me.

The Birth of Black Power

Could you tell us about the birth of the Black Panther Party (BPP)?

J The Party was started in 1966. It was part of the whole Black Power thing, it was just one of many Black Power groups.

Was it a seamless transition, or was the emergence of the Black Power movement a reaction to some of the earlier stuff?

L No, it was very much competition between old and new forces. King had a group called the Southern Christian Leadership Congress. There was another group, ACT and the Congress for Racial Equality. All those groups at that time were in opposition to Black Power. Certainly King. He was shocked by it. There was a confrontation that occurred in the June 1966 march through Mississippi. That was the one where 'Black Power' the concept was made public. It was a march with all the factions - one of the few times in the Civil Rights movement when all the factions had come together. There was a great deal of resentment and fear on the part of King about the Black Power movement and the youth. King and his organisation had always been in conflict and competition with the youth. At any rate, that so-called 'March against Fear' in Mississippi is where the confrontation between Stokely Carmichael (who was at that time the chair of SNCC) and Dr. Martin Luther King became direct.

King would get up and speak, as he would, used to call for Federal intervention and talking about voting rights and all that - which was, by then, passé. Willy Rix worked with SNCC, under Stokely actually. And he told him, "Man, the people in the streets are ready for Black Power, every time I say 'Black Power' they go holler and scream". Anyway, so Stokely he got arrested the previous night. He was angry and he came out and gave a speech. King had just spoken. And he got up and just said, "You know, I'm just damned tired of this, I've been arrested too many damned times for this. Every time I show my face in Mississippi these damned cops just arrest me." He said

ising style - which many movements can use and jump off with. Certainly some of that has been reflected in the Seattle movement. It also has some real serious problems in its inability to interact with peoples of colour. I've seen everything from outright racism to condescension and pandering and everything in between. I've experienced that in my dealings with the anarchist movement in the States especially. One example is when I was working with Love and Rage, and I had submitted a written proposal, to allow us to build a semi-autonomous people of colour organisation within it. I received severe censure and chastisement by the main movers in that organisation. I had to quit it. Same thing happened with the Industrial Workers of the World which I was part of, which is not allegedly an anarchist organisation but has a majority membership of anarcho-syndicalist types. I felt the same thing, I wrote a proposal for black/people of colour workers organising group to bring in workers of colour and broaden the agenda of the IWW and of course this was rejected as separatism.

Community Organising

L I have these kinds of experiences, which have taught me that it's important for us to organise autonomously. We won't have to put up with this sort of garbage if we can organise autonomously. As an autonomous formation with our own base of strength in the black community, then we can deal with other organisations from a position of strength and get respect for our positions. That's just one of the realities. Or we can, if we so choose, stay in the community and just organise there and leave the white anarchists to their thing.

Now what we've done, we've created an organisation, the Black Autonomy Network of Community Organisers, which is for sure a formative organization. However we think we've got potential to really reach deep into the black community with a practical programme in addition to just a set of ideas. Another weakness with the movement is that it's got analysis with paralysis. It's got political ideas but it doesn't have a practical

ner cities most of the people there are black and brown and we don't see them as of yet. It's more than just a question of involving black people in the actual events, but also understanding that the same forces responsible for the debt and the impoverishment of 'Third World' countries are the same people who are responsible for the deterioration of the black community and the inner cities of the United States. They're responsible for mass homelessness, they are responsible for the unemployment that is bedeviling the inner cities of the United States. We also think there's weaknesses in terms of them being primarily middle class - even though they're progressive - they have not got a working class base, white or black.

It was evident in Seattle that there was some union participation, more than there was in Washington DC which was just almost totally youth. In Washington DC - which is 85% black - the demo was almost entirely white. They had not raised the issues which allowed them to connect with black working class people. These things are going to be a noose around their neck if they don't understand that they have to revise their politics and be more inclusive. Black people are not going to come and join that movement unless there are genuine attempts to correct those deficiencies. Having said this, the fact is that these kids are in the streets, fighting with the fuckin' police with an anti-capitalist perspective... This does remind me of the old Panther politics. They're broader in the sense that there are much larger numbers and they are an open coalition - which I don't think we could have afforded to have done back then. Obviously, we'll see the effect on the situation when the secret police penetrates further - we'll see. Right now, we can just say, it's remarkable to see the success rate at this stage.

Then there's the question of the idea of the anarchist movement. You know for over twenty-five years I've been critical of the anarchist movement for its failure to involve itself in the struggles of blacks or other peoples of colour. Anarchism has some strengths in terms of its theories, in its grassroots organ-

"You know, we need to get our hands on some political power, we need some Black Power." All the people started screaming "Black Power! Black Power!" And it shocked the shit out of the white press, it shocked the whole Civil Rights leadership. It really shocked the hell out of them. King was lost for words. He didn't know what the hell was going on. Black Power came into existence, at least the public image of it - at that moment. And then shortly after that, in 67, was when Rix, Stokely and some others then became part of the Black Panther Party. Because Huey Newton [primary leader of the BPP] wanted a merger between the Panthers and the much larger SNCC. The merger wasn't seamless at all. There were all sorts of forces inside each organisation that didn't trust the other.

What sort of relationship was there between the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement and the more traditional left?

J It depends. There were some Black Power groups that were extremely nationalistic and they did not want to work with white people at all. The Panthers were severely criticised by many black groups because we did work with white radicals. They didn't want anything to do with it. So it depended upon what group you were in. Some like the Panthers worked closely with white radicals, others - if you had a white skin, as far as they were concerned you were all devils. Of course the debate still continues today. There are many black activists today who still do not want to work with whites. They don't care how radical they are, they don't see the importance of building a coalition, a united front. It will be an ongoing argument. I'm sure it'll be here, you know, in 300 years. We'll be long buried in the ground and there will be arguing still.

The Panthers & The White Left

What was the reaction of the left to the emergence of the Panthers?

L Well the white left, certainly the Communist Party, was absolutely opposed to any form of what they called 'narrow

black nationalism', and they lumped together everything from SNCC (after the whites left) to Malcolm X and the Panthers. They were not in favour of any black political formations. This carried on for quite some time. It was in fact anti-black in our opinion.

But then there were the other major organisations. The Socialist Workers' Party of the United States [not connected with the SWP here in the UK], it had been influenced by Malcolm X. He had spoken at some of their meetings and he was very influential at that time, not only with black people but with a lot of white youth as well. He understood that if there were whites who would put themselves on the line and take some of the risk and would follow black leadership, then he could work with them. That was his position. Of course, that was an extremely radical and controversial position. Certainly for someone who had come out of a really dogmatic Black Nationalist organisation. So the SWP was very much in favour of what he was saying. Also they recognised his popularity - there was a certain measure of opportunism there. He was a very popular figure. He was a worldwide spokesperson for black causes, so from their estimation, they could attach their cause to his star somehow.

Then there was a broader organisation - the new groups that came out of the New Left. And the New Left was more contiguous around the time of the Black Panther Party. They had a love-hate relationship with the Black Panther Party. Some elements of the New Left were very much in favour of the Panthers and had been in coalitions.

J The SDS - the Students for a Democratic Society.

L Yeah, which was really influenced more by SNCC. It actually came into existence partly as an organisation of some white members of SNCC, you know, after they left that organisation. But that organisation, which was broad-based, had all kinds of political tendencies in it.

J "We thought it was a real gun..."

L ...so they say. They are killing people on suspicion of having guns. People have been killed for having deadly weapons such as wallets or razors.

J A West African immigrant was shot with 41 bullets, 19 of which killed him. The police claim they killed him because he was reaching in his pocket for a weapon. The weapon was his wallet!

L He actually came out with the wallet. They killed this 5 year old kid the other side of California several years ago - with a baby. It's just the idea that the police should use any level of deadly force that they think necessary and then justify that with saying, "Well, he thought it was necessary!" When it happens a few times, maybe they can sell it to the masses of people that it's an accident, that it's something that was regrettable. When it happens over and over and 1,000 people die a year then that's too bad. People know then that's class warfare. The police have declared war on you, on your people, poor people - that's what the deal is. That was why the Black Panther Party came into existence as the Black Panther Party for Self-Defence. It's a necessity today, but it requires understanding that this was a political organisation not just a damn militia. You know, people can't just think, "Let's form a black militia, that's going to do it!" You've got to form more than that, you've got to form a political organisation guided by some kind of understanding of the way the system works.

Seattle & White Anarchists

I wanted to know your views on recent events like Seattle. What do you think of the white anarchist movement in America and across Europe? Where do you see black groups in America going in the next five years?

L The Seattle demonstration, the success of it, even the coalition, was very surprising. I don't necessarily see that as the way. Firstly there's the question of longevity - is it going to last more than a year or two, even that far. Secondly, in the in-

time with. Inside I had a better understanding of the national picture than I had outside.

Paramilitary Cops

L To understand that time it's worth realising that the police are more of a paramilitary force in this period than they were in the 1960s. They were overwhelmed by the 60s inner city rioting. These rebellions - Detroit, Chicago, New York etc. really shook up the state. They didn't know how to handle it. They couldn't handle it. They had to bring in the National Guard - the army. The police as a force started changing around that time. They started bringing in more and more levels of paramilitary. They had more and more funds at their discretion from central government to buy all kinds of advanced military weaponry. They got a lot of surplus weaponry from Vietnam and even Korea - they got automatic weapons, personnel carriers and over the years they've gotten larger and larger budgets to buy military armaments. Now the police is a paramilitary force with advanced military technology including communications, surveillance equipment, certainly armaments of all kinds. You see them in the streets - they are really heavily armed. However bad it was back then it wasn't anything like this is now.

I think that what you got today is style over substance. You've got a lot of people who talk about militancy and they get the Black Panthers style, but they don't have any programme and they don't do any practical work in the community. That is the frustrating part of this period because the BPP does not exist now, and it's hard to make the youth understand that you just can't go out and strap on a gun and that's going to make you equal to the police.

Now that the police have this armament, they kill people just for having guns. They'll shoot kids for having toy guns! I know it's happened numerous times where young kids - 13, 10, 12 years old, have been shot and killed by the police, because they had some cap pistol or some kind of water pistol or gun.

Many of the so-called hippies were non-political but some weren't - even selling the Black Panther newspaper. I was coming from the South with Rix to deal with the two Black Panther coalitions and there's this white guy selling the newspaper. A Californian hippie selling the newspaper, the Black Panther newspaper.

J Very popular paper.

L A lot of people were selling it, all kinds of folks. 'Course that really angered the black nationalists. They thought, "they're selling out to these whites, they're under the control of these white radicals". Even today they'll accuse you of that. Historically there has been some opportunism, so there is some legitimate sentiment, but most of the time it's just dogmatism. Certainly the white left has not been as supportive as it should be. When the Black Panther Party was being destroyed they did nothing! What do you say?

J They did very little. Of course in all fairness we could say there was a Counter-Intelligence Programme against the New Left too. The FBI also went in and destroyed a lot of the New Left organisations as well.

L Specially ones that supported the Black Panther Party. Many of the white organisations that are still around were at that time as well. Their thing was just to stand back and see the government come in, destroy the Black Power groups and then swoop in and try and get their members. That was really one of the most treacherous things I can think of.

You mentioned there was a point at which a lot of the white members left SNCC. What was that about?

L Well, starting around 64, after the success and failure of using white students in Mississippi on the campaign called 'Freedom Summer' - it was a large campaign, brought in 1,000 white students to work in Mississippi. The idea being that whites would not receive the same level of oppression that black people had. Of course, that was not necessarily true. Some were murdered. Eventually it came up in terms of the

Black Power movement, the Black Power sentiment in the black community. The Southern struggle had changed from democratic rights. The relationship had changed between black and white organisers. The necessity of having white organisers working in white communities was an issue. Beyond that, certain members just felt that all whites, generally, should be removed from the organisation. That caused a real painful battle on the inside. I think that was one of the things that killed it off. I have to say that many of the things that the Black Power movement raised were certainly legitimate questions; about black people having their own political agenda and organising, especially in the inner cities.

J The Black Power movement was a more urbanised movement.

L The older movement had a lot of adults in it as leaders and so forth - it had a lot of youth too, but what SNCC used to do is go in areas and it would recruit people to build their own movements. It didn't send people to stay. The purpose of an organiser was to go in, stir up interest, get black people around specific campaigns, bring out indigenous leadership and then get the hell on out of there. Go to the next place.

These older people who led these autonomous movements in the South at that time were shunted out of the way. Younger people were leaving these areas and going to the cities in the South - Memphis, New Orleans, Montgomery, Birmingham - cities of considerable size. They weren't confronted with sharecropping and tenant farming - those weren't issues there. It was a different dynamic. I think that was one of the things that led to the Black Power movement and the debates and, ultimately, whites being removed from organisations.

I won't lie to you, but even to this day, I don't go to reunions of SNCC or the BPP. Well, the BPP has never settled issues. I don't go to reunions because I don't want to relive all that stuff again. That stuff is still very much alive for some people, they're very sectarian. It's alive, and it's a fresh open wound. I don't

wrote our own curriculum and I helped to write the Language Arts portion of it. So I had a lot of really wonderful experiences in the Party and I still consider what I'm doing today as a continuation of that, even though obviously we can't do it the same way. There may not be a formal Black Panther Party in existence any more, but I'm still a Panther. I'll die one. It's interesting that's still near to my heart.

L By the time the Black Panther Party came along I'd already been an activist in the South for some time. Then I saw this much more militant new organisation which certainly had a practical political platform in terms of Black Liberation NOW! As a youth I had been brutalised a number of times by the police. We used to have a group of cops in Tennessee called the Black Head Breakers. This idea of fighting against police brutality - I was really excited by that.

The Panther Party didn't really get to the South, in terms of branches, until the early 1970s. In Chattanooga we didn't have a Panther chapter until after I went to prison, but we were creating what was, I guess, a pre-Party formation. I would go every so many days to the SNCC HQ in Atlanta to get the Panther newspaper. I would go and sell the paper in Chattanooga and talk to black youth and so forth. I'd got a little group of black youth around me and we were talking seriously about forming a party chapter. It was 67/68 and I was receiving severe repression from the police. Some terrible beatings. I got my head caved in a few times, framed up on criminal charges and all kinds of stuff. When King was assassinated, the repression from the resulting protests drove me out of the city. But we had circulated the newspaper, organised. So I was, like, sowing the seeds. I saw the fruit of that from behind bars as I went to prison in 1969.

They were important years in terms of developing my political understanding. When I went to prison I met other Panthers inside from all over who I served pretty substantial amounts of

In Oakland we had this really bad tenement, a really bad slum. The owner had written a book called How I made a Million Dollars Without Really Trying. Part of that was he just ran all this slum housing. Someone who lived in one of the buildings contacted the BPP. They wanted to organise a tenants' union because they were tired of paying rent. They had roaches, nothing was fixed, the elevators didn't work, there were mice and everything. They needed help.

So the Party sent me in to help organise a tenants' union and it got some changes. Lorenzo talks about SNCC and the Black Panther Party being organisations of organisers - that's what we were. That was one of the best experiences I had in the Party actually. Being able to go in and provide assistance. When they had a really tightly organised tenants' union and they pretty much knew what they wanted to do, that's when I stopped going. That's what we did - helped people organise themselves.

After a while in Oakland I worked on the Panther newspaper, which covered not only events that the BPP was involved in, but also community news. In March of 78 I became editor all up until September 80. By the time I became editor we were a very small organisation, we didn't have many people left. In that role I represented the Party in a lot of coalitions with other organisations.

I also taught at the Party's school. I taught Language Arts - what you'd call reading, spelling and writing. I would sometimes stay up half the night working on the newspaper, sleep a few hours, get up and then take the bus down the street to the school - teach the children for half a day. The school was considered a model elementary to the point that in the late 70s we actually got an award from the government of California, saying that we were the State Legislature Model Elementary School. Other schools around the country that were trying to have alternative education kinda' looked at our model. We never had a very big school because we didn't have the resources. We

see the utility of that. I think what we need to be trying to do - those of us that have some knowledge and who still have the energy - should concentrate on building new movements and that alone.

The Panthers Merge With SNCC

Tell us about your involvement in the Panthers.

L I went in with the merger. This is a curious situation, it's one of the few times, historically in the black struggle, where members of one organisation were drafted (in the word used at that time) into a new smaller organisation that had just been in existence maybe not even a year. Huey Newton understood what he had in terms of his own forces - young and inexperienced organisers, 'brothers off the block'. SNCC was an organisation that had trained organisers and a method of struggle. Believe you me, through the years we've learned if you've got trained organisers you can do a helluva lot more than if you've got someone who just walks in off the street - you know you've borne a lot more mistakes, and they're disciplined. Anyway, he wanted to bring in the SNCC organisers and he thought the way to do that was to recruit the three main leaders - Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown and James Foreman. Stokely was the Field Marshall. Then H. Rap Brown was Minister of Justice and Foreman was Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Immediately from the inside of SNCC there was a firestorm of resistance, because all those guys inside SNCC had factions of support. Many raised questions about the idea of going into the BPP. They were saying, "Nobody consulted us! We didn't vote on this matter! This is undemocratic". What this did was really tie the tail of Stokely Carmichael because he was chairman. People said, "This guy is just taking powers in a way that SNCC has never done before". Up until that point SNCC had always been an anti-authoritarian organisation. In fact, at one stage, in the early-mid 60s, Paul Goodman [editor of the anarchist mag The Liberator] actually called it an anarchist organisation. They had never had any kind of strong leadership

and central committee until he got in power. So it was already rumbling about that - when he came into office he brought in a central committee and then he goes into the Black Panther Party - "What the hell is going on?" Inside the Black Panther Party there were those that were afraid that because SNCC was a large organisation it would take over. So there was all this tension in both these organisations and that had a lot to do with what happened to me when I came in. It was in the middle of that, coming out of SNCC, that I went into the BPP. And I was in the South where the BPP didn't have any bases, many chapters or anything. It was a kinda really hairy situation.

J And the merger didn't last long. On the one hand there were personality problems, but of course the government were intent upon it not lasting. They did all they could do to sow discord. If they had been able to stay together it would have been powerful. With the talent and experience of the SNCC organisers and then with what the BPP had accomplished in its short period of existence. But it didn't last long.

L What's so amazing is that Newton understood it. Nobody understood it - even the guys he drafted in. They didn't understand what he saw in terms of what the government and police were going to do. They did exactly what he had suspected, they moved in on him. He was shot and almost killed after that. If it hadn't been for the merger there would not have been anyone to take the organisation over at that time. People don't like to admit that at this late date, but it's true.

J Kathleen Cleaver was one of the people who played a really important role in Huey's defence after he had been shot and set up by the police, accused of killing a cop and severely wounding another, whilst he himself was seriously injured. Kathleen came out of SNCC herself, so she was an experienced organiser. She was able to take charge of that campaign and make it into an international campaign. If she hadn't, Huey might have spent many years in prison. She

J We had some fratricide in the Black Panther Party. We were killing each other. That's one major reason why some animosity remains among some former Panthers. A lot of folks don't want to talk about it, but it happened. We have to acknowledge it and figure out how not to ever do that type of thing again.

Life in the Panthers

I wonder Lorenzo if you could talk about your experience in the Black Panther Party and what led to your imprisonment. And JoNina, your experience with being editor of a newspaper and being involved with it as a process when the Black Panther Party was in decline.

J I joined in Detroit, Michigan, in the second Detroit Panther chapter. The first one created in 69/70 was destroyed by the FBI Counter-Intelligence Programme. It was rebuilt around 1972. My basic work there was in the Free Hot Breakfasts for Children. I was also one of the drivers in the Panther 'Free Busing to Prison Programme'. Many black people or poor working class whites, they got involved in crime and they were sent to State prison. These State prisons were always far away from the cities and if your families didn't have transportation they couldn't visit you. That was the only thing you may have to help you get through imprisonment. We'd take the family members - girlfriends, friends, wives, children, whatever - of the people who were incarcerated, so that they could go up and visit their relatives. And of course along with that, selling the newspaper.

In early 74, I and the rest of the chapter left Detroit and relocated to HQ in Oakland. Across the country many of the chapters disbanded in the local cities because we got to the point where we could no longer sustain all these chapters in all these cities, so they came to Oakland. Some people think that was a mistake and that we might have lasted longer as an organisation if we hadn't.

L Yeah, that is part of it. You've got to have democratic procedures, but you've also got to have the ability to get rid of these people when you find that you do have enemy agents. You know, because some people will say, "You're expelling this person. Why, he's a good person. I've seen him doing..." You have to explain to them why you do it. You have to have procedures in place to do this. I mean, it's not a chore that's pleasurable.

J But, you know, in the Black Panther Party you could be expelled. One week you may be a really loyal, faithful member of the Party thinking you're doing a really good job and two weeks later you could see your picture on the front of the Panther paper saying "Expelled for life. Enemy of the people". There might have been some cases when in fact these people were, in fact agents, but they were not government agents all the time.

L I think there's some things that are just basic to organisation: be sure everything's done above board, be sure you've got accountability in the organisation, be sure you've got basic unity and mutual respect. You know some of these things are pretty obvious. There are going to be people coming in with bad blood and, to be quite honest, there's going to be conflict, but there has to be a method that you've created inside your organisation that can diffuse certain kinds of conflict. Otherwise you've got serious problems. Serious problems. It will split you right down the middle and if it doesn't do that, it will crush your organisation.

J What we need to do is not make the same mistakes we made. People are going to make mistakes, because we're human. But there's no point in us doing the same things that we know failed before.

L And deadly errors. Those kind of errors don't just result in some bad blood or something, but actually result in people getting killed or the organisation being crippled. Those things must be avoided.

could do it because she was an experienced SNCC organiser before she had joined the BPP.

L Exactly. You could not overstate the importance of having SNCC at that stage, of Kathleen Cleaver pushing the 'Free Huey' movement, because the politics of the Black Panther Party was made known to millions of people. That's no exaggeration whatsoever. Millions of people worldwide heard of the BPP who wouldn't have otherwise. And it pushed it way beyond the stage when it started; just one of a number of Black Power organisations. It pushed it to the front, the very front.

J After Huey was shot and put in prison, that's when the membership really began to swell. Because of the 'Free Huey' campaign and word got out, you know, about this. So the membership grew, and grew rather quickly. It had been a very small group and then it started spreading to all of the major cities of the United States, and a lot of that had to do with what happened after Huey was shot. Incidentally, the police tried to kill him and frame him in October 1967.

In the Summer of 1967 the government set up a Counter-Intelligence Programme to destroy the Black Power movement. The Director of the FBI, the domestic secret police of the United States, ordered all his secret agents around the country to do all they could to disrupt and destroy what he called the Black Nationalist movements - in essence, the Black Power movement. He issued the initial memo in August 67 and the BPP was not included. By 1968, because of the 'Free Huey' movement, the BPP was added. J. Edgar Hoover, then head of the FBI said, "The Black Panther Party represents the single greatest threat to the internal security of the United States." We didn't have that many people - there was really no way! But the reason he did that was that the word had begun to spread about the Party, so it too became a target.

So their attempts to frame Huey Newton backfired on them?

J Yeah, the name became quite well known, especially by the poor youth in the United States and overseas. Panther leaders would come to Europe... I know they spent a lot of time in places like Norway and Sweden.

L In fact there were Black Panther Solidarity Groups all over Europe. Most importantly, there were seven autonomous BPP organisations internationally. You had a Black Panther Party in India, a Black Panther Party among the so-called Black Jews, you know - the Asiatic and African Jews of Israel. You had a Black Panther Party in the UK led by Michael X among other leaders. You had the Aboriginal Black Panther Party in Australia. So the BPP was an organisation that was having a tremendous impact, both inside and outside the United States. People fell into two camps, they loved it or they hated it, there was no in between.

J At the conference in London the other day [Mayday 2000], we met a woman who had been in the Black Panther Party in the UK.

Learn From The Past

Do you have any thoughts on mistakes made by the Black Panther Party and what can be learnt from them?

J Where shall we start?!

L I would start at the structure of the organisation. One of the things that always sticks out in my mind is how the BPP failed in terms of the leadership question. The leadership was not accountable to the membership. After it became obvious that Huey Newton was clearly disabled [to put it kindly - suffering from mental paranoia not helped by heavy amounts of cocaine and an overdose of power] we weren't able to remove him.

I think this whole question of cadre organisations as opposed to broad based structures - cadres are just the arms and eyes and ears of the leadership of the structures. Organisations should be broader based; based in and controlled by the community. I guess I'm more in favour of some of the SNCC politics.

They singled out individuals they felt had potential as leaders, or as major activists, and they sowed discord among that group. The Bari bombing was meant not only to kill or maim the activists, it was also meant to create conflict and confusion amongst activists, so that they would think somebody else was responsible for it. It really did do some of that. It split certain people, it created doubts and suspicion - even after they found out that the FBI was involved in the bombing.

So, I think what is really important is to have accountability within the organisation. Have broad based coalitions that are accountable to the community as well as to the masses in the organisation itself.

I think one of the weaknesses of this idea that if you create this tightly structured organisation you resist political penetration - that comes out of the Leninist politics - I think it was proven with the Panthers and others that that's not necessarily the case. It's much more possible to isolate you and just destroy you. You don't have any assurances just because you've got an organisation, a supposedly tight leadership and this, that and the other, that you're safe. No, they can come in. Even though it had the appearance of a tight organisation people could come in and set up chapters! Can go from one place to another.

This is what George Sams [FBI infiltrator] did. He came, he said, from Oakland to Connecticut on orders from the leadership. People were afraid to even question him. Because, you know, "Well, I'll get in trouble with the leadership". So he was able to lay around there and harass people and set people up. He set somebody up to be killed and another two or three people to be charged with murder.

If there are contradictions inside the organisation, air them; they cannot be allowed to fester. You have to make it a policy - you've something to say about somebody, bring it forward and make it public. And then if that person continues to do that then they have to be expelled.

J Also, just to have more democratic procedures.

come forward and make it public to the entire membership of an organisation or chapter. So that there won't be this backbiting. That garbage leads to a lot of difficulties, leads to personal and political conflict later on. That's one thing there should be some method in place so that if there's a conflict or something it can be made public. So these people don't worm their way in.

Also there has to be some kind of procedure so that you know a very basic thing - that is to know who's in and who's out of the organisation. People will come up and say they're part of this and that and they'll set up an organisation or chapter, and you won't even know who the hell they are or what their real intentions are. That's a very simple thing to prevent. I've seen organisations where someone's just come along and started a chapter and nobody's ever seen them in their life! That's very dangerous. Infiltration and disruption of movements - they've done it to various generations of activists. You pointed out it happened to the Panthers, but it also happened to EF! Certainly US West coast EF!

[Ed. note: In May of 1990, EF! activists Judi Bari and Darryl Cherney were on their way to an organising meeting for the Redwood Summer forest blockades when a bomb exploded in Bari's car. The FBI subsequently tried to frame them for their own attempted assassinations. Strangely in charge of their case was the FBI's Richard Held - already notorious for his involvement in COINTELPRO against the Panthers, the American Indian Movement and others. This bombing came at a time of ferocious attack on a number of EF! groups around the US, including the infamous Arizona case where EF!ers were set up by an FBI agent provocateur. EF! co-founder and editor of Ecodefence, Dave Foreman, was also heavily targeted. Judi Bari, who had been crippled by the bomb, died last year.]

If you could merge the two and have a broad based organisation with a politically focused and militant stand I think that you've got a chance to build a mass movement and stave off repression.

Clearly having a tight organisation didn't stave off repression in the BPP. Part of the reason it didn't is because of the leadership. I mean, I can't lay everything at the leadership, we didn't carry our role in terms of challenging as a body what we saw was clearly wrong and was harming the organisation. That's all really painful to look at. And I really loved Huey Newton and everything, at that period, more than anyone. Still do to some extent. But there were many mistakes made.

What happens to the masses of people is more important than any organisation. That was a lesson that was hard to learn. I was told that by Martin Salisbury, who was never in the BPP but was a black militant at the time and later was an important political prisoner. He was the one that said, "You know, organisations come and go, but the people are always there and the people are our promise." Now he was in the Young Lords organisation at one point, when he got out of prison, because he was a black Puerto Rican. The point he's making as I understand it - and I thought about it for years and years afterwards - is that these organisations are not meant to live permanently, they're simply tools to get liberation. It's the masses that have to move, not the political party. Then there were things with women. There were always women in the organisation. The Panthers were much more in advance, in fact, than most of the organisations of the day. That's something no one wants to admit. When they criticise the BPP, they're criticising, at that stage, the most advanced organisation. They were the first ones to come out in favour of the gay revolution. There were no other black organisations who did that, in fact I don't think many still have.

J Well, of course, there were a lot of black organisations that were against gay rights...

L ...and against Women's Liberation. So they made a number of mistakes there. But you have to look at that within the context of the time. So I think really, in my mind, that was less of a problem. I'm not minimising... I'm sure you wouldn't allow me to do thatway! Women were not common enough in leadership roles, but if you look at them in comparison to the black movement organisations and the Civil Rights organisations... you know they were head and shoulders above it. Dr. King's organisation had a terrible reputation for sexism and womanising. Now SNCC had the best reputation over the roles women had, especially in the late stages.

J There was a struggle within SNCC too, about that whole question. About female leadership. All the organisations went through it at some time.

L So I think those areas are important. But in my estimation because they had a broad based organisation with community support they could have resisted. I believe, I've always believed, that they could have resisted the pressure. What do you think?

J Well, yeah, I think if the structure had been different. I also think look at the state repression, what was done to destroy the organisation. We did not understand how much repression we were going to get by telling the black community it should defend itself against the power structure. Even with our community survival programmes, J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, at one point he said that out of all our activity our 'Breakfast Programme' was the most subversive.

Subversive! We were feeding kids! J. Edgar Hoover was a racist, but he wasn't crazy. He understood the power of what we were doing in terms of radicals feeding hungry children. That was a really dangerous programme, and that was one of the programmes that the FBI went out to sabotage. [At its height the BPP Breakfast Programme fed 10,000 kids a day.]

We did not have a complete understanding of what scale of confrontation we were entering with the state at that stage already. We had these agents provocateurs sent in to disrupt us.

We'd let anybody walk in off the street to join, so in came these infiltrators and paid informants. I think that was one of our main errors. We were young, we were basically kids, we didn't know. That just made it easier for the Counter-Intelligence Programme to destroy us. I think that in the present day and time you have to do a lot more in terms of assessing people when they come to join you.

L I think you're right - they were young people, they weren't trained as leaders of these organisations, they went into these roles, they made many mistakes. Every mistake that they made the government would seize upon and use to weaken the organisation. That's what they did over the course of time.

Now, if there had been more tested leadership, if there had been, certainly, a membership base that demanded more accountability, you know - if, if, if, - perhaps the organisation would still be alive and around today. You know it may have had a different history. We might have been at a different stage of struggle in the United States, by this time have had a civil war, a revolution - who knows!

Certainly, the political times were charged enough to realistically look at that. You know, it wasn't just something in somebody's head, we weren't totally deluded. I think the realistic prospects for revolution at that time were clear.

How to Avoid Repression

From the extreme experiences that you and your organisation have been through, what do you think is the best way to deal with this problem of infiltration? I understand that the attempts to deal with it within the Black Panther Party led to so much in-fighting and recrimination that that, in itself, split the organisation as much as the infiltration.

J It split our organisation in two. It split us.

L I think, accountability within the organisation. So that if someone is saying something or someone is doing something then there has to be some procedure in place to make them