

Interview with Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin from 1995

Black Flag

Autumn 1995

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin's story could have come out of the pages of fiction. The fact that we were privileged to hear him speak and interview him is easily the best thing to come out of the "Ten Days" debacle. Even Ian Bone admitted that at least it was worth it to "get Lorenzo over here".

However, Lorenzo's visit is a classic case of how not to organise a speaking tour by a foreign comrade. It was shameful that it wasn't until three days before his departure that he got his full fare refunded to him. Equally, he had to fill in for so many other advertised but absent speakers it did not present a good view of what anarchists in Britain are capable of. Fortunately, speaking is something Lorenzo not only enjoys, but is very good at.

As you will read in the interview, Lorenzo isn't interested in being a "token black" to soothe white anarchists' guilt about there being so few black anarchists. He was keen to meet black workers and activists and discuss anarchism with them. It was only on the last day he was in London that he got the chance, when he met members of the independent Panther group. Although he had differences with them, he came away impressed with their clarity, vision and sense of purpose. He had also hoped to meet Newham Monitoring Project but it didn't come off.

He has been invited back and we need to ensure that this time, both Lorenzo, and the anarchist movement as a whole, reaps full benefit.

BF: How did you first become active politically?

LKE: Well, I got active in the civil rights movement of the early 60s, particularly the sit-in movement. This started in Greensboro in 1960 and came quickly to a number of other cities, including Chattanooga, my home town. I was a grassroots youth radicalised by these activities.

Out of that agitation, the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee (SNCC) was born. SNCC was created after most of the sit-ins had started. Ella Baker, Secretary of Dr Martin Luther King, recognised how important the sit-ins were and that the adult movement hadn't done anything in a while. She called a mass meeting in South Carolina, which was attended by 300 black southern activists and 200 white activists and observers. SNCC was originally meant to be a way of co-ordinating these struggles.

It went on to become a unique organisation. It was anti-authoritarian in that it had no leadership (certainly not at the beginning). Power was in the hands of the membership and grassroots

organisers. It was exceptional in that it did not emphasise charismatic leadership, but instead field organisers went into communities and built autonomous organisations. Field organisers would develop a person or persons who already commanded respect in the community into local leaders and subsequently back out, unless asked for support or advice. These were generally the SNCC methods throughout the south.

It was also unique in that it was secular, though in the early stages there were people who were motivated by Christian doctrine. SNCC won many of the major victories that have been credited to others, particularly King. This myth is to build faith in the government and belief in leadership, when in fact the masses make the struggle and the revolution.

Even in Montgomery Alabama, King was picked to be the public face of the struggle by E.D.Nixon, who was the local organiser. Nixon planned the bus boycott, but his important role has been lost to history. He was a grassroots activist, unlike most at the time who were middle class. The struggle lasted over a year, and the masses made it win.

BF: How did you go from SNCC to the Panthers? It seems like a big leap because of the non-violence of SNCC?

LKE: SNCC laid the grounds for the Panthers. SNCC lasted ten years, but in 1966 started to reassess the struggle. The phrase "Black Power" came through SNCC, and SNCC wasn't a non-violent organisation. It saw non-violence as a tactic not a principle. When SNCC met Malcolm X he impressed upon them the need for armed self defence. SNCC also agitated for local communities to be armed to repel racist attacks and police brutality.

In SNCC's Black Power phase there was more chance of black revolutionary tactics. But most of SNCC came from the black middle class and most had very little association with black workers, which is why they made the mistake of redirecting their energies away from their base in the south towards the north and the west. This changed the politics and made the organisation weaker.

Ideologically, SNCC provided the politics of armed self defence and the symbols (the black panther was originally from the SNCC chapter in Lowndes County, Alabama) to the Black Panther Party (BPP). In 1967 the BPP and SNCC merged and memberships united. I used to sell the Black Panther paper and consider myself a member. The merger was short-lived, and while it lasted the BPP felt SNCC should be its southern wing and didn't organise chapters in the South until the 70s.

SNCC had won most of the civil rights gains – voting, freedom rides, desegregation. In 1966 it analysed that racism and economic inequalities still existed, and that the Vietnam War, with its increasing number of black dead, were political issues they had to come out against. This attracted the BPP.

The alliance died because there were two different kinds of organisations. SNCC was anti-authoritarian and only changed after it got weaker. The BPP fell apart because of government subversion and leadership egos, SNCC just faded away.

The BPP were one of several Black Panther Parties – originally from Oakland in the Bay Area. They came to the fore because they had a more advanced programme and were able to dramatise their actions. The BPP was made up of grassroots youth while the other groups were middle class. Huey Newton was a good organiser and a brave individual. The BPP had a different class composition and a different kind of style – hard language, direct talk and encouraging resistance to the "pigs".

The local BPP attracted members and I stayed in from SNCC. I was isolated because they didn't really build in the south at that time, except for New Orleans. The BPP had an advanced social programme but in the first few years it was mainly military confrontations with the police.

Then they became a political party – part of the world black revolution – denounced the black bourgeoisie and called for new black struggles. They implemented “survival programmes” before the welfare state started by the federal government, which won them respect. This included “Breakfast for Children” Programme, which served breakfast across 40 chapters. They provided free clothing, shoes and medical care. The BPP captivated most of the US left and influenced their programmes. Some formed Panther style organisations like the Brown Berets (Chicanos), the Puerto Rican Young Lords, the Y Ching (in San Francisco) and some white radical groups, like Rising Up Angry in Chicago, and the White Panther Party in Michigan. Even today the idea of a Panther is someone who is resolute and would fight for their rights against the state.

However, there were internal problems, such as the tight leadership, who were also tightfisted. There was a division between cadres and leaders. There were abuses of women and of individual members for idiotic reasons. Police informers got in and even committed murders. What really killed the BPP was military and police action. The COINTELPRO conspiracy murdered at least 39 members of the BPP as well as other black militants, and jailed hundreds. People were summoned before grand juries. There was a legal, political and police offensive which disrupted the Party's work. Funds were diverted from the programmes into legal defence and bail.

This came down on me. Rebellion took place in Chattanooga. I was summoned to testify before a grand jury and refused. I'd been harassed for some time – this was another in a long line. I could have been jailed for five years, and the local jail was a chain gang- no way. I left the City for Atlanta hoping it'd just blow over. But the FBI got involved and circulated bulletins nationwide giving shoot to kill orders, so I had to get out of the country.

There had been some hijackings to Cuba. I got a gun, went to the airport, took over the plane and flew to Cuba. The Cuban authorities questioned me and took me to Hijack Hotel. Eldridge Cleaver was also in Cuba and in dispute with the government there. Cuba wouldn't act on him, so they jailed us and started deporting us. I was supposed to go to Guinea but instead ended up in Czechoslovakia. While there the Cubans got me arrested and turned me over to the US authorities. I escaped into East Germany but was captured, smuggled into Berlin, tortured for a week and brought back into the States. I was put on trial in a small town in Georgia and sentenced to two life sentences.

This was the heaviest sentence for air piracy up to that time, because I wouldn't show any regret or apologise. They drugged me at my trial so I couldn't make statements and tried me in a small redneck town.

I was only 20. It brings you face to face with your own mortality at an early age and puts you to the test. I was not going to compromise or let them see me weak. I would be part of, or leading, any resistance. But you've got to have some reason to do this.

I started analysing my philosophy and my life. Thinking about my experiences in Eastern Europe I started looking at an alternative method, theory and strategy of revolution. All these, in a manner of speaking, led me to anarchism. I was not happy with the local anarchists in the US – they were too middle class, white and it was pretty much a countercultural scene. But this didn't stop me working with other anarchists around the world who had written to me. I desired a new way forward for the black revolution – which had been smashed by the state and finished off by reformism and neo colonialism. The original writings around my book came from this.

Kropotkin influenced me most — I was engaging in all kinds of debate, hostile and friendly. It made me reevaluate what I had been involved in, particularly the authoritarian problems in the BPP and SNCC in its later stages, and the black movements of the 70s and 80s.

Anarchism in the US has always been an immigrant thing — the Jews, the Germans of the original International Working Peoples Association, the Italians of the 30s and 40s and so on. Why it should suddenly seem threatening that there was a black anarchist I don't know. Blacks and hispanics will surely constitute the backbone of the US anarchist movement in the future.

My prison writings called for an international anarchist resistance movement and a new International Working Peoples Association. This won me a following in Europe, Africa and among Australian aborigines. I was made an honorary member of one of the Aboriginal tribes. I distributed stuff in Nigeria. I don't know what impact it had, but I have to believe someone read this stuff.

Since the fall of communism even more people are looking at anarchism as a serious alternative, as set out by past and even some current movements. Especially if we were to speak to more so called ordinary people.

The real political conversion came from contacts with anarchists around the world. In Europe there was a campaign to get my freedom, by the Anarchist Black Cross (Stuart Christie, Albert Meltzer and Miguel Garcia) and Help A Prisoner Oppose Torture in the Netherlands. This sharpened my beliefs and made me more serious about anarchism as a force for black revolution. I never saw myself as a token black anarchist, but as someone to apply anarchism to the black community.

My other writings dealt with how the movement should have a predominant class struggle tendency. I never thought lifestylists would still be in the ascendancy — we need to go further than rebellion.

Letters to prisoners are especially important, to reach them at a certain stage and talk to them about this. The main thing is the contact. It didn't happen much in the US, as they were hostile to prisoners and the black movement. I got particular support from the Australian aborigines.

It is important for anarchists to make contact with the black movement, even if you don't agree with them, as it may be possible to change their politics. They may adopt some of the core of anarchist politics and go deeper and build their own autonomous formation — they don't need to have white people telling them what to do. People have to find their own path. It is always good to keep those bridges open — we shouldn't be sectarian, be partisan instead.

I got out in 1983 and immediately started doing anti-racist work in Chattanooga. Lots of people were dying in custody. When the son-in-law of the local police chief killed 66 year old Wadie Suttles in jail we started a ten year campaign which drove this bastard from office. Since 83, I've concentrated on local organising — fighting the Klan and the police. Though there's purportedly a new South, the same kind of racist murders, economic exploitation etc goes on. From 83-93 I worked in Chattanooga, which made me current with 90s struggles and put me in contact with other activists, some of whom were anarchists. I came back into anarchism in 93 and have been trying to find a place in it ever since.

BF: What are your criticisms of anti fascist and anti racist organisations?

LKE: The role of white anti racists is not to usurp the role of people of colour. We must build a mass movement against racism, this is understood by all independent black activists. We need to challenge the fascists politically, not just beat them on the street, by mobilizing the progres-

sive wing of the working class into a cohesive coalition. This is possible. Vanguard against vanguardism is no good — a section of the class cannot substitute for mass action.

This needs to be a broad based initiative under a radical banner, it won't win with an undemocratic vanguard strategy. It must have its own agenda, not that of the vanguard parties. This is one of the reasons blacks don't come out on demos.

BF: What about the role of white anti-racists, ie fighting racism amongst their own communities?

LKE: This was said when SNCC expelled whites in 67. This hasn't happened in America because of the class base of white radicals. White anarchists also need to support black organisers in terms of resources. It must be remembered that the police state, in alliance with the KKK, was effectively nazi in the past, and the Klan machine had control over the State apparatus of a number of states during the 20s and 30s.

BF: Can you tell us about the organisation you are part of?

LKE: Well, it's called the National Federation of Black Community Partisans, and it's an anti-authoritarian organisation of black radicals. It's at a formative stage at present, but it's meant to be a mass organisation. It's non-political in that it doesn't support parties. It's revolutionary in programme and attempts to use the black communities as a base. It's somewhat based on the affinity/ direct action movement I raised in Anarchism and the Black Revolution. Ideology is one of black autonomy, a conglomeration of black revolutionary and anti-authoritarian politics. You don't have to be an anarchist to join.

The black authoritarian tendency differs from us in that we are not xenophobic, we do not want a nation state, but advocate other solutions. We do not simply aim for power, but to empower the masses.

BF: A lot of your ideas in the book advocate mutual aid solutions to the pressing problems of the black community, with community organisation supplanting the state and driving it out. How do you envisage this situation of dual power?

LKE: Our ideas of dual power means that an opposing force would battle with the State, but on the Community's terms, not the State's. Dual power is not an end in itself, it is an effort to delegitimize authority and fight the ruling class strategy of using back congressmen etc. It is a counter power to oppose every aspect of the State's ability to have power over and police our communities. That's the intention, it's not meant to be a permanent situation. The movement must be the people.

BF: Generally, from your writings and talking to you, you're very optimistic about the prospects for anarchism, and the black revolution:

LKE: I've been at this 15 years and more people than myself have come forward. The Federation is small in number but high in quality. We have veterans of labour, student and community movements, as well as ex-prisoners and 60s struggle veterans. We're not going to get trapped into single issue campaigns. I had no idea of this federation — people came to me after my speaking tour. People are looking for answers.

BF: How big was the tour?

LKE: A major tour in the US is usually 25 cities. I've done 30 so far, the East and West Coasts, Canada and the South West. I've talked to 25,000 people or more in the last 7 months. It started on the spur of the moment and here I am in England.

BF: Do you have contact with the black anarchists in prison?

LKE: There's a lot of contact with black activist prisoners, as well as a great deal of interest.

They're looking for a new direction. From my personal experience, letters from Europe, Africa and Australia kept me going, and put prison officials under the gun and prevented worse things happening. In many cases the US left don't write.

BF: What's your opinion of MOVE and what relations do you have?

LKE: We have good relations. Some consider them the first black anarchist formation. Regardless of some of the peculiarities of their politics (ie deference to John Afrika) their politics are anarchist, including environmental and animal rights platforms, they're against government as an institution, in favour of autonomous communities, co-operative lifestyle and society. The problem has been conservative anarchist-purists who refuse to accept it, except in Philadelphia. MOVE were the first organisation since the BPP to advocate black armed self defence and I have great respect for them. They have all the essentials of an anarchist political formation.

Lorenzo's book will be reviewed in the next issue.

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