

PHILADELPHIA PANTHERS REFLECT ON THE BPP

By Dr. Yvonne King

What do African-Americans want today? They want jobs. They want to be free of violence and injustice. They want an end to racism, which continues to manifest itself in the education, healthcare, and criminal justice systems. In essence, they want “land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace.” Almost 38 years ago, two young African-American men, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, included that in the Ten Point Platform and Program for their new organization, The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, because of the conditions that existed in the African-American community in 1966.

Unfortunately, but clearly, these conditions exist today, particularly pronounced in the criminal justice system. A Department of Justice report that was released in 2003 notes that the number of blacks imprisoned in 1974 was slightly more than 640,000, which rose to 1,290,000 in 1991, and more than 2 million in 2001. A US Census Bureau study in 2002 revealed that of the estimated 32.9 million people who lived below the poverty line in 2001, 8 million were black, and research has shown that bias in sentencing coupled with economic inequalities contribute to minority incarceration. In 1994, black people were 8.5 times and Hispanics 3.9 times more likely to go to prison than whites. People of color continue to disproportionately fill the prison cells in this country.

The Black Panthers dared to join the historical process of exposing the contradictions of racism and economic exploitation in this country. A local community organization, started by only two in Oakland, California, rapidly grew into an international organization that was supported in the US by not only masses of African-

Americans, but also by Hispanics, Native Americans, Asians, and whites, and oppressed populations in other countries, including, for example, Aborigines in Australia.

Why did young black men and women join this revolutionary organization, especially after June 15, 1969, when J. Edgar Hoover, then Director of the FBI, stated that “the Black Panther Party represents the greatest threat to internal security of the country?” I posed this question recently to the former head of the BPP chapter in Philadelphia, Reggie Schell, who joined the Party in 1969. “At the time . . . , there was a choice between RAM (Revolutionary Action Movement), the Black Panther Party, and the Black Muslims. RAM was underground, and I was trying to get into organizing and mobilizing black people so that we could begin to fight against our situation. The Panthers were the only ones that had a structured Party that you could [use] to talk to and relate to black people and get them organized.”

The Panthers, like other revolutionaries, knew the key was organizing the people, and they did so all over the country, with more than 40 chapters located primarily in inner cities. Through armed resistance, their organ – *The Black Panther* – and the survival programs, they were able to raise the consciousness of black people about the reasons for their poor housing, police brutality, inadequate healthcare, hungry children, and disproportionate rates of incarceration. Although the US government through its counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) attempted to criminalize or, otherwise, denigrate the Panthers, at the end of the day, they failed.

Considering that the media often reinforced the government’s efforts to portray Panthers in a negative light, it is not surprising that there are numerous untold stories depicting how the black community supported the Black Panther Party. One of those

instances occurred after the notorious raid on the Panther offices in North Philly August 31, 1970, when Frank Rizzo ordered the arrested Panthers to strip naked and stand in front of the cameras. Not only did he attempt to humiliate them, his police “cleaned out all three sites [of] furniture, bedding, clothing, file cabinets, party records, and . . . refrigerators and stoves. [T]hey demolished the cinder blocks with which Panthers had replaced storefront windows . . .” I asked Schell how the community responded to Rizzo’s rampage, and he recalled the following: “I think that’s the worst thing he could have done. Because I know when we were in jail on \$100,000 bail, I was getting reports that there were shootings every day for almost a week, police were getting shot.” Schell confirmed that the police “had taken everything out the [Panther] building. They told me they even took the rugs off the floor.” Then he described what the people did. “The people in the community, not the Panthers, took the tin off the windows. They started replacing furniture. We were still in jail. They did in spite of the police telling them not to go in that building. They brought in chairs, tables, and refrigerators because they wanted us to get back to business. So, by the time we got out of jail, we almost had a functional office. Then after that, we had hundreds of people joining the Panthers. It really backfired on him (Rizzo). The support that the people gave us was something that I’ll always remember. I know what black people will do if you treat them right and educate them right. They will respond. That showed me that we were moving in the right direction.”

The tremendous support of the people made the Black Panther Party a threat to the US government. The Black Panthers recognized the political significance of serving the people. Every day that the Party fed children a hot breakfast for free, someone raised

the question, why isn't the government doing this? Whenever someone was tested for and counseled about sickle cell anemia for free, that same question was asked. All of the Black Panther Party survival programs were free. Deputy Chairman Fred Hampton in Chicago, who was assassinated by a Chicago police task force December 4, 1969, used to always say, "The people may not fight for socialism, but they will fight for the Free Breakfast for Children's Program."

Another aspect of this extraordinary organization that distinguished it from many of the other black revolutionary groups during that period, and to a large extent since, was its presence outside of this country. In May 1969, Eldridge Cleaver left Cuba, where he was in living in exile, and sought refuge in Algeria. He established the International Section of the Black Panther Party there and in 1970 was joined by Don Cox (DC), the Party's Field Marshall who has remained exiled, currently living in France. The staff of the International Section grew and facilitated the Party's access to foreign diplomats and increased its credibility. Barbara Easley Cox, from Philadelphia, married DC in 1970 in Algiers and reflects on some of the Party's activities in Europe and North Africa. During Barbara's tenure in the International Section, she represented the Party in Europe, Asia, and Africa. I asked her about her work in Germany. "I stayed in Germany until 1973, working not only with the GIs, the German left and other progressive peoples, but anyone who was against the War in Vietnam. I focused on our brothers of color – black, brown, red."

Before joining the Panther Party, many did not know anything about the international community. Cox admits that she had never traveled outside of the US. But "after joining the Party, with the readings and the educational process, you learned

history. You learned about other parts of the world that were struggling. You were able to see more clearly that you were not alone.” The Black Panthers were never alone. The people remained with them throughout, even after its structural demise. A clear example is the case of Geronimo ji Jaga (formerly Elmer ‘Geronimo’ Pratt), a Black Panther victim of COINTELPRO, would not have been freed in 1997 after 27 years of false imprisonment without the tenacity of many people.

The Black Panther Party taught its members and others the need to organize and educate the people. But, more importantly, it taught them how to organize because they understood that theory without practice will change nothing. In this world of computers it is important to remind ourselves of something that Huey P. Newton used to say, “The spirit of the people is greater than the man’s technology.”

All Power to the People!

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