



A STATEMENT BY THE BLACK LIBERATION COMMISSION OF THE PLP

THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY

January 1969

IN RECENT YEARS, the struggle for Black liberation has intensified from civil rights struggles to Black Power to open armed conflict. Black people are developing more effective means of striking blows against capitalist oppression. The organized mass scale of the civil rights movement represented a step forward from the relative quiet of the late 40's and early 50's. Black Power was still another advance for the Black liberation movement -- here the focus was on resisting the system rather than on integrating into it. Rebellion in Harlem, Watts, Detroit and all over the country symbolized the greater consciousness of Black people in our fight for liberation--particularly in seeing the need for armed struggle.

As the movement developed, many organizations arose. Some of these were armed groups--Robert Williams' band in Monroe, the Deacons for Self-Defense, the Revolutionary Action Movement. And rising to national prominence in 1968, the Black Panther Party.

The Black Panther Party has served as a positive force in the Black Liberation Movement. In this period when Black people are responding to the system with defensive violence, organized armed self-defense is needed. The impact of ghetto rebellions has focussed on the question of what is the most effective way for Black people to defend themselves against the organized assaults of the state. Political line, strategy, organization, and their relationship to the state, become the critical questions when evaluating new groups.

The Black Panther Party's program is centered on arming Black people of the ghetto

against the racist attacks of police and the army. Its program of self-defense attracted many working-class young people who might never otherwise have been involved in the Black liberation struggle. More than any Black organization in the recent period, the Panthers have attracted mass support in the community, mainly in the San Francisco-Oakland-Berkeley area of California. Systematic attacks came from the ruling class against the Panthers because of the threat posed by organized militant armed Black people. These attacks sharpened the awareness of many people of the violence used by the state and the ruling class behind it to keep Black people oppressed.

In order to better defend itself, the Black Panther Party saw the need to ally with at least some sections of the white population to fight the system. The alliance with the Peace and Freedom Party in the Bay area was, at least in the beginning, a positive step. The P&FP was a basically white organization of activists mobilized primarily against the war in Vietnam. It's necessary that Black people understand the need to make alliances with those whites who will work to organize other white people in order to overthrow the capitalist system. Even though the P&FP did not meet this criterion the fact that the Panthers made a step in this direction and understood the concept was a positive approach to a very complex problem.

Thus the Panthers put forward the concepts of armed self-defense in the ghetto and unity with white people who are fighting U. S. imperialism. And it put these concepts forward as it began to organize behind a militant, 10-point

reform program for the Black community (see program in Aug. or Oct. 1968 Challenge.)

Precisely because the struggles of the Black Panther Party are so very important that we point out certain weaknesses that must be overcome if Black liberation and working-class revolution are to be achieved.

Failed to Consolidate Base

Though the Panthers have attracted many young Black men and women, they have failed (so far at least) to consolidate a base among Black workers. The Panthers appear to be conscious that there is more to organizing the Black people than just talking about the gun. Their 10-point program is based upon solid working-class demands that the oppressed Black people can identify with. But this is only on paper. What they have done, in fact, is to ignore the working-class demands and concentrate on the question of armed self-defense and conduct themselves in a semi-military fashion.

The result is that they have attracted mainly young unemployed and high school youth. Not recognizing the decisive revolutionary power of Black workers, the Panthers don't attempt to organize Black workers. So far at least, the Panthers have not offered a plan of organization for young Black men and women around them who are already working in shops and factories, and in the army, or who soon will be.

In some Black communities the Panthers have refused to unite with Black community groups involved in struggle. In others they have played a role. In San Francisco, the Western Addition Community Organization (WACO) called on the Panthers for support in the fight against the city redevelopment program. Although a large section of the Black community has been involved in and supports that WACO struggle, the Panthers refused to join in the struggle on the grounds, stated by several Panther members, that "WACO is not a revolutionary organization."

In Los Angeles, just after two Panthers were shot by cops, a community meeting was called by the local Panther leaders. The meeting attracted many young non-Panthers from the community but the Panther leadership again failed to see the need to unite with these new forces. At the outset of the meeting a Panther spokesman announced that all those who were not Panthers or ready to join the Panthers then and there could leave.

Thus many Black people who might have been

moved to struggle by the Panthers have not become involved. This type of approach unfortunately has been typical of too many Panther spokesmen and leaders. Many in the community have come to see the Panthers as a group that will only organize and fight on issues involving the Panthers. In other words, the program is becoming self-defense for the Panthers only.

In the spring of 1968, WACO was picketing the construction site of the planned Martin Luther King Apartments because no provisions were made for enough low-income housing to replace the "redeveloped" ghetto. When some EOC officials threatened to beat up WACO pickets and forcibly remove the picket line, WACO called on the Panthers to join the line. They responded with, "We are not a police organization." Therefore the Panthers would not help protect community interest, but in effect helped to serve the interests of downtown by not joining the side of the people.

The history of the Panthers indicates that although they have been able to ally with many white groups, including some pretty weird ones, they have not been too successful in forming similar alliances with Black organizations. When in some areas they have seen the shortcoming of this approach and attempted to rectify it, their sectarian political outlook quickly came to the fore and destroyed the alliance.

The alliance with the Peace and Freedom Party, for instance, has deteriorated into an alliance with the most viciously reactionary "look-out-for-yourself-and-do-your-own-thing" groupings within that organization. Such groups as the Yippies and Up-Against-the-Wall-Motherfuckers and other white political reactionaries that some of the Panther leaders, especially Eldridge Cleaver, have allied with cannot organize white people in any revolutionary—or even progressive—sense. They serve to drive white workers away from the revolutionary movement and at the same time try to influence the movement against the working class, Black and white. At best they reduce the movement to the level of the ridiculous.

The Panther tendencies towards Yippleism are pathetically clear in Cleaver's recent call for "pissing in the voting booths" on election day, and in his smoking marijuana on the stage at a pre-election rally in Oakland "as a revolutionary act." When the Panthers start allying with degenerate white groups but cannot join with serious elements in the Black community, the masses of Black people can only be turned

off. The militant Black youth attracted by the Panthers' early call to arms cannot possibly see such actions as Cleaver's as any kind of move to revolution.

Such weaknesses by at least some of the Panther leadership, and the fact that other Panther spokesmen have not yet repudiated them, reflect a lack of political development. The Panthers have not stressed political study and development. Many Panther members are not clear on the political outlook of the Panther party. Panther members in Los Angeles were generally opposed to alliance with the Peace and Freedom Party but could not fully explain why the national leadership in Oakland had formed the alliance.

When individual Panther members in Oakland and Los Angeles are asked about the Panther position on a political issue, they refer the questioner to the leadership. A number of Panther leaders have made the statement that most of the members are not politically hip but that the party does not have time to deal with that problem now. One also wonders how the New York Panthers can meet with Police Commissioner Leary, Mayor Lindsay, Jackie Robinson and with all types of police agents and front men—and all without a word from the national leadership.

But is there any more important concern than developing the political outlook of the party members? The Panther organization at this point seems to be mainly one where the leaders dictate and the members carry out orders without much question or discussion.

The majority of the Panther members seem to have a low regard for, or at best very little understanding of, Marxism-Leninism—the working-class ideology. In fact, many say it is "irrelevant" to the Black people. But the leadership, mainly Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, have seen the need for political education. They have instructed the members to read the words of Mao Tse-tung. Unfortunately, the reading is done without study, and sterile slogans are raised that have no relationship with the day-to-day struggle of the Afro-American people.

Despite the frequent waving of the Quotations of Mao Tse-tung (the Red Book) it is quite apparent that the Panthers have no class outlook and believe they are out to fight a war against white people in general. With an understanding of revolutionary working-class ideology they would have a better approach to forming alliances, directing their young followers and build-

ing a political base among the Black masses.

The vital need of the Panthers is to develop an understanding of Marxism-Leninism. Without this understanding it is easy to be misled, frightened by ruling-class terror or co-opted by reformist and turn-the-other-cheek philosophies. If the Panthers do not make this political leap forward they will develop into a reactionary opportunist force.

The young Panthers have armed themselves and are looking for a place to go. They should continue along this path of arming themselves and the people with the view towards defending the Black communities from police attacks. Today, unfortunately, the tendency is to de-emphasize the armed struggle. The most recent struggles of the Panthers have been in the area of electoral politics and legal maneuvers (such as the Huey Newton trial and other cases). The politics in each of these areas have become less and less revolutionary.

Panther "Spokesmen"

It cannot be just coincidence that the new tendency towards electoral politics and relying on the courts has come at a time when the organized forces of sellout—the revisionists of the so-called Communist Party, the Guardian and others who rely on the Democratic Party or similar imperialist fronts—have jumped on the Panthers like leeches (see article in Oct. Challenge). The new tendency also coincides with the skyrocket rise to public attention of Eldridge Cleaver and the tremendous, and mostly favorable, coverage by the big business newspapers and TV of the Huey Newton trial, particularly the big press buildup of the revisionist lawyer Charles Garry.

The Newton trial has symbolized the tendency of the Panthers to shift almost all their activities to their own defense. They have generally ignored other areas of struggle in the Black community, such as the WACO actions mentioned above or the growing protest movement in San Francisco against police brutality, which came to a head when San Francisco cops murdered a Black truck driver in cold blood on Sept. 29. In addition, when Huey Newton was convicted, the lack of any organized mass action by the Panthers—despite previous warnings that "the sky's the limit if Huey is not set free"—and even some statements by Panther spokesmen like Cleaver to "cool it," left many Black people wondering how serious the Panthers are.

When lawyer Garry, the C.P., Guardian, Yippies, Independent Socialist Club, et al, started moving in on the Panther leadership, many young Panther members and supporters figured it would be possible to take "aid" from these jokers and still maintain the Panther militancy. But this kind of "aid" always helps your enemies more than it helps you.

The "brilliant" lawyer who defends you in court, speaks for you on TV and in the newspapers and advises you to "cool" the demonstrations so as not to prejudice the jury or the judge. And the C.P. paper, People's World, joins the San Francisco Chronicle in making your lawyer seem like a great white knight in legal armor taking on all the judicial dragons single-handedly. But no political case has ever been won in the courts without the most militant mass action. The only reason Huey Newton wasn't murdered by the courts was because the ruling class was scared silly of the reaction in the Black community.

And then there's the "friendly" Guardian reporter who, when interviewing you in jail, also becomes your chief interpreter. "Huey explained in no uncertain terms that the Panthers oppose violence and all wars, that they want peace, that they advocate total disarmament for everyone" (Karen Wald, Guardian, August 31, 1968). Disarmament for everyone? Including the Panthers? And though one quote or another may be distorted there are getting to be too many such quotes—none denied by the Panthers—to be ignored.

Most of the Panthers' policy statements these days have come from Cleaver—at least until his disappearance. Besides rejecting working people as a force for change, and besides making his main allies the Yippies ("Piss in the voting booths"), "Motherfuckers" and other reactionary groups chock full of cops, Cleaver began to echo the C.P. sellout line that the main enemy is the Republicans, especially Reagan and Raftery in California. They got most of Cleaver's attacks, no longer the phony liberal Democrats who represent the imperialists most effectively in the Black community.

The sad but logical conclusion of this trend has been the attempt by some Panther leaders, especially Cleaver, to move Black people behind a campaign to elect "Police Control Boards." So we are told we can elect good cops! We can vote out police brutality without even changing the system! Imagine telling the Vietnamese people to elect local "control boards" to con-

trol the invading U.S. troops! It is a complete reverse of the original Panther position—the one that drew so many of those working-class Black youth to the Panthers in the first place—the call to armed self-defense of the Black community against the cops.

The Panthers revealed no understanding that the police work for the ruling class, are armed by the ruling class, paid by the ruling class, and do the brutal bidding of only the ruling class—and the only way to get rid of the police is to fight them through armed self-defense and build a revolutionary movement that will topple the ruling class they serve. Instead we are told, in effect, if the cops attack don't fight back—vote. The Panther spokesmen who take this position don't put it that way—they may not even mean it that way—but that is the only possible outcome of their plan.

And once again the Guardian (Oct. 5, 1968) tries to interpret this switch in Panther policy. Robert Allen explains that the Panthers now believe, "Only an armed black electorate can make its votes count. . ." And Karen Wald, who has apparently become Huey Newton's chief interpreter, twists this new policy one twist further, leaving out the arms altogether: Black people are not ready for armed struggle. "First black people have to be completely convinced that all peaceful means for redress of grievances have been exhausted" (Guardian, Aug. 31, 1968). This, after close to 1,000 Black rebellions in the last five years!

The ruling class has been using the carrot and the stick to either break the Panthers or to bring them under its control. Interspersed with beatings, jailings, murders, and now Congressional hearings it "allows" Cleaver to run for President of the United States, first gives him the right to "teach" a course at Berkeley and then takes it away, puts him in jail then lets him out (and now threatens to put him in again) and pushes his book to become a "best seller." Variations of this theme are being played in every city where Panther organizations have sprung up. This very particular handling of Cleaver has led to his backtracking on any political position that he had in the past. Some of the reasons he gave for not returning to jail were that prison would be too rough for him, because he is an intellectual or because he can't take it any more.

We state that every Black man has the right and duty to stay out of the imperialist jails. This, like all other questions, is a political

question. But to see jail only in personal terms without any relationship to the entire movement and to run to save one's own skin, is giving no political leadership.

These tendencies and statements by some Panther leaders like Cleaver may not, yet, reflect the position of the entire Black Panther Party. But if they are not counteracted the Panthers may well lose the mass support of the Black ghetto youth that have been their most important strength.

These youth, as well as many older Black workers and students, are seeking an organization that will help them resist the racist iron heel of capitalism. They are seeking a leadership that will offer a strategy for helping the revolutionary struggle, a strategy based on confrontation with the ruling class—the strategy advocated by Mao Tse-tung and all true Marxist-

Leninists around the world. They hoped, and many still hope, the Panthers would provide at least some of that leadership. But they will not be led down the dead-end alley of voting machines, courtroom maneuvers, U.N. resolutions and Yip-pie freak-outs.

In the final analysis, only a Marxist-Leninist party can lead the working class to revolution, to socialism and to the dictatorship of the proletariat. Only a party steeled in struggle and armed with the science of Marxism-Leninism can lead the way for the Black people to achieve their liberation.

The Black Panther Party has a chance to play a role in developing that leadership. But if it fails to do so, the Black youth in the ghettos, the Black men and women in the shops and factories will turn their backs on it and develop new forces.

IN MEMORIAM

CHARLES "CHUCK" LESLIE

On December 28, 1968, our young comrade Charles "Chuck" Leslie died in a Manhattan hospital of a rare blood disease. The tragic death that occurred so suddenly and swiftly came just as Chuck had entered an important new phase in his young life.

Just 20 years old, and having worked for the past year in a large, basic industrial plant, Chuck had just become a candidate member of a Progressive Labor Party trade union club in New York. This was not something that either Chuck or our Party had taken lightly, and it followed a period in which Chuck strove mightily to overcome his own weaknesses, had taken seriously criticisms offered to him, and had fought to become a revolutionary.

It was a measure of Chuck's loyalty to the working class and to the struggles of his Party that recently, despite a leg injury that temporarily forced him to use crutches, he did not retire to the sidelines. Workers of the Figure Flattery company will remember him on their picket lines during their recent wildcat strike, offering his support to the fullest. Students will remember

him aiding their efforts to build a worker-student alliance by handing out leaflets on the Columbia University campus. And his Party comrades will always retain the memory of Chuck at various demonstrations, at the Labor Day Parade and during the New York school crisis, hawking Challenge-Desafio and Progressive Labor to the workers he wanted so much to influence in a revolutionary direction.

Chuck did not just "talk"; he contributed all his time and energies to build our Party into a revolutionary vanguard. All who knew him will grieve at his most untimely death.

As our Party becomes immersed in the kinds of working-class struggles that Chuck himself was striving to participate in, we should remember the picture of our dear comrade, leg in a cast, on a picket line in support of rank-and-file garment workers fighting their class enemy, giving his utmost to the working-class.

Our pledge to his memory must be that we can do no less.

The N.Y. Trade Union Section of PLP