

Presentation by Bob Himmel

Comrades, I want to repeat a point that Carl made and a point that comrades should keep in their minds in this discussion. What we are discussing is not whether or not we think the BPP is a good development, a progressive development, or whether the logic of their development is in the direction of an independent black party. What we're discussing today is a concrete proposal at this time that we make a decision to extend critical support to three BPP candidates within the framework of the electoral coalition with the PFP.

Now what becomes clear, and I think comrades will understand this after listening to Carl's presentation, is that those who favor the course of critical support believe that the independent character of these campaigns has been thoroughly established. That is, that whatever may be the outcome of the Cleaver nomination, including the possibility -- and I think the likelihood -- that Cleaver will become the presidential candidate of the PFP, at least in California, that this will not have any fundamental bearing on the character of the local campaigns. Now, I don't agree with this. And I'll attempt to indicate why I think this is a false notion.

Moreover, the electoral alliance, or the electoral coalition, between the BPP and the PFP has, even without waiting for a decision in relation to Cleaver's presidential candidacy, shown already a certain trend away from one of independence on the part of the BPP. The most likely variant, I underline that, the most likely variant in the next period is that the trend will continue to be away from an independence in this relationship. And for that reason, and for reasons of clarifying in the minds of comrades and helping them make the clearest possible decision, the motion that I am presenting today, which is a motion presented jointly by Nat and myself, is that we do not extend critical support to any of the Bay Area Black Panther Party candidates.

Now there's been quite a change. Let me trace this a little bit concretely for comrades that haven't been following the written material emanating from the BPP and the PFP. There's been quite a change in the stance of the BPP from the time of the PFP California State Convention (March 16-18) to the present. And that change has not been a good one.

I don't want to take in the thirty minute presentation time to quote. I have a number of quotes that would begin to illustrate this. But I'll try to capsulize it. From an electoral coalition motivated -- and this was the way the thing was presented before the PFP California state convention -- motivated by an alliance of forces working to free Huey, that is an alliance based on the need for the defense of the BPP victims. Comrades will recall that that was, Carl indicated this also, the primary basis for this alliance coming into existence. It has moved now to a point where the Black

Panther paper, articulated most clearly by Cleaver, is putting forward the concept that this alliance is going to be, as Cleaver puts it in the most recent article that I've seen, the fountainhead from which will spring the revolutionary party in the United States. Now, this is quite a different method of viewing this alliance from their point of view. It is expressed very concretely in the decision which obviously has the endorsement and support of the BPP in its entirety as far as we've been able to tell -- the decision to run Eldridge Cleaver as the presidential candidate of the PFP.

It looked, for a time, as though there were some serious differences. That Cleaver's decision to run for president was an individual one. That there were others among the leaders of the BPP like Bobby Seale who didn't agree with that, who wanted to maintain the character as it had developed in the early phase of the campaign around the local candidates which seemed to have a considerable substance of independence. But I don't think there's any question at this point, on the basis of the developments of the past few weeks, that Eldridge Cleaver speaks for the BPP. And to make any type of separation there I think would be somewhat artificial.

So this is the key argument

So then the Cleaver campaign becomes the key for understanding this whole question. Cleaver is running for President of the United States on the PFP ticket. And it's quite likely that he will be successful in getting the nomination of the PFP. We are looking at an election campaign, comrades, and keep this firmly in your minds, in a national context. This is a presidential year. This is what determines the character of local campaigns, not vice versa. The character of an election campaign is determined when you're participating on an electoral ticket, not by a candidate in an assembly district, but by the candidate for president. This is the head of the ticket.

I just want to say a word on this phenomenon of third partyism that we're seeing here concretely in the form of the PFP. It's wrong to say that this is simply a transitory phenomenon. We will be meeting up with third partyism, whatever the form may be and the forms very often are transitory, up until the time when the revolutionary movement, in a period when the working class is in motion, has achieved political hegemony. This is not the end of third parties. It's not the beginning, either. We've had a long history with this type of development and a long history of trying to grapple with it and with problems arising about it in our own movement.

The phenomenon of third partyism nationally is a major obstacle for us this year. A great deal of our time has to be taken and spent in the course of this election campaign in combatting, on a national scale, third parties like the PFP. We are opposed in principle -- we had a lengthy discussion on this question -- we are opposed in principle to extending critical support to third parties that arise within the framework of bourgeois politics. That's why we concluded at the end of our initial discussion of PFP that we could not, without violating our principles, give critical support

to any of the candidates of the PFP.

What would be the character of Cleaver's presidential campaign on the PFP ticket? Take a look at Cleaver's choice of campaign managers -- Bob Avakian, his local campaign manager, Tom Hayden, a social democrat and white, a white social democrat, has been designated or was designated by Cleaver a couple weeks ago as his national campaign manager. This tells you a little bit about the direction that this campaign is moving in. The character of these local campaigns -- I want to repeat this -- will be dominated just as much by the national campaign of the PFP ticket headed by Eldridge Cleaver if that's the way it develops. Just like a maverick Democrat's campaign like Phil Drath up in Marin County will be dominated and overshadowed by the character of the national Democratic Party. It's an illusion to think that we can make a meaningful distinction, meaningful to us or anyone else, between Eldridge Cleaver's campaign and Kathleen Cleaver's campaign.

What are the consequences of this alliance, or this coalition or fusion that's taking place around the 1968 elections? What are the consequences of this type of electoral coalition for the black struggle, for its development? What are the needs, the most fundamental, burning need today for the black community? Is it to form an electoral alliance with a bunch of white students? When Malcolm X made the point that we've got to have black unity before we start talking about black-white unity, he was making an extremely profound observation, one that we completely concur with. The black movement must first, foremost and most important build and extend its independent base in the black community, in the black ghetto, build an independent black political party. And any alliances of an electoral character are secondary or tertiary in importance to this in relation to this task.

Ask yourself this question: If this is the fundamental need for the black community, does the BPP-PFP alliance help this? Or does it cut directly across it and hinder it? I think the answer is obvious. Derrel made the observation, I recall, at the previous joint discussion we had, that one of the worst things that's coming out of this coalition is that it gives black people the impression that the only practical method for them to get on the ballot and participate meaningfully in elections is to form an electoral alliance with groups like the PFP. That's wrong, comrades. Dead wrong.

The reality of this alliance is that the BPP serves to strengthen, to provide a cover for the PFP. It's quite true as comrades observe and PFP people observe, too, that without the BPP alliance, what have they got? Nothing. What the PFP leaders tell kids in order to suck them into this third party trap is, "We are the only party that's been able to make an alliance with the black ghetto." It's the only talking point they have at this point. And the BPP provides this cover all the more effectively by seeming to have made an alliance that allows them to maintain their own program and their own independence. That makes the cover more

effective. And for the PFP, it's beautiful. It means they don't have to take any responsibility for what the BPP may do or say; they are independent agents. The only condition of this alliance is that that independence expresses itself through the PFP ticket on the ballot. That's the condition for this alliance which works solely in the advantage of the PFP and third partyism in general and to the disadvantage of the independent development of groups like the BPP.

The BPP -- and I don't want to be misunderstood on this -- has many aspects, has many sides to it that are impressive and positive. The development of a cadre in the Bay Area of several hundred young black members is cause for us to rejoice. It's a sign of hope. But within this general motion -- and it's true that the inexorable logic of the black struggle will, in the long-run, propel them to a greater degree of independence -- within the framework of this contradictory phenomena, it also must be said that it has another aspect to it. And that is dependence, political opportunism that expresses itself in this concrete electoral alliance that they've entered with the PFP.

Now, this alliance is going to break up. It's not going to last. Don't anyone say that I said that this is going to be some permanent feature of the development of the BPP. It will break up. But the alliance of the working class and the Democratic Party is going to break up, too. And because we know it's going to break up, that doesn't mean that we adapt ourselves to a present situation which is bad and harmful and say, well, we know some day you're going to. . . .

What are we saying to the Black Panthers? This is a bad alliance you've gotten into. It's not going to last. You're going to find that you're going to have to cut loose from it. But we'll support you in it, anyway. Maybe that's some kind of support to self-determination. It isn't, comrades. That's a disservice to tell people, in effect, that what you're doing is wrong, but we're going to say it's right because we support you in whatever you do.

Let me take up this question of the defense of Huey Newton and other Black Panther victims. It's true that this tends to get all mixed up in their electoral effort. That the defense of Huey Newton, the Free Huey campaign, the Huey for Congress campaign -- all of this tends to get lumped together and mixed up. Is this good? This is the worst thing that could happen from the point of view of defending Huey Newton. It narrows the base of the defense. It blurs the distinction between a defense coalition, a coalition or an alliance with the PFP or anyone else to defend Huey Newton which is good and proper and necessary, with an electoral coalition that is unprincipled, unnecessary and harmful. There is nothing in the election campaigns of Cleaver, Seale or Newton that serves to advance the defense efforts around these victims.

Let me deal with the other side of the question -- what's in it for us. What our primary purpose is, of course, in dealing with some of these questions is how will it help us advance in the direction of building the revolutionary party. What will we gain from it?

The proponents of critical support advance three basic considerations. One, it will help us explain our position on independent black political action. By giving critical support, it will help us explain our position. Secondly, we will deal devastating blows to the PFP by extending critical support. And third, and implicit here is by driving this wedge between the PFP and the BPP, we will help influence the future development of the BPP.

In each of these considerations, if you think them through very carefully, the results would be just the opposite of what's intended. How are we going to explain our position? Concretely, how are we going to explain our position? What is our position? Our position is you're doing exactly the opposite of what you should be doing, but we're going to support you anyway. Isn't that the logical position? How do we explain that? Or would we say anything critical? Would we put out any written material saying this alliance with PFP is wrong? Maybe we would just do it by example. Maybe we should just do it by showing that our kind of support is the best kind of support for your candidacies. Maybe what's being proposed here is not even something properly called critical support. Because if you want to give critical support, you have to explain how you are going to present that criticism.

We would organize a special committee? Think through the concrete steps of this. The comrades that have been talking about it have tried to. We're going to organize a special committee for Kathleen Cleaver in the 18th Assembly District or perhaps for Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, etc. in the East Bay. We are going to organize it. That was the implication at the last meeting in Berkeley. And we'll get a committee with us in it, and the PFP kids will be in it, and the Black Panthers will be in it and it's not going to be connected with any of these groups. And we'll go out and wage an independent campaign for Kathleen Cleaver for the 18th Assembly District.

Of course, with Eldridge on the ticket for president, a presidential candidate, this is going to be a little difficult. As a matter of fact, what we'll run into is the following: We would be, in effect, trying to divide the BPP campaigns, to drive a wedge not between the BPP and PFP, but between the Panthers and the Panthers, between even almost breaking up a family. We're going to support Kathleen, but we're not going to support Eldridge. Now we would elicit some righteous anger in a situation like that. What in the hell are we doing butting our noses into the internal affairs of the BPP and telling them this campaign is independent, therefore it's good, but that campaign is uh-uh, not Eldridge, but Kathleen's okay. I think if we did that, comrades, we would let loose a blast

that would make that article in the earlier issue of the BPP paper look moderate in tone. And with good justification. We would be maneuvering to use the Panthers for our own purposes, to tie their campaign to ours so that we have a certain tactical advantage that we don't have at this point. Their campaigns are undoubtedly going to be very popular. We would be campaigning for Halstead-Cleaver. They would be campaigning for Cleaver-Cleaver. And that would show the distinction. Comrades, we'd look ridiculous in that type of situation if you make it concrete.

Now, there's a tendency here, I believe, towards looking for political shortcuts, looking for gimmicks. And that's something we've got to be on guard against. The easy way is not necessarily the correct way. I sense a certain fear and alarm on the part of younger comrades especially at being at odds, at having to advance a position that doesn't seem to be swimming with the current, of having to try to explain to student radicals who are all caught up in both PFP and the Cleaver campaign why it's wrong rather than riding with it.

It's quite correct to be concerned at the prospect of swimming against the stream, at the prospect of being a little bit isolated, even when you're correct. It's not a good thing to look forward to. But it sometimes is a very necessary thing. We are swimming against the stream right now within the antiwar movement. We're going to be in a minority in the next period. The days when we were spear-heading large antiwar coalitions for the time being are over. We're going to be swimming against the stream for the remainder of this year, or at least until the election campaign is over. And the same thing is true in the political arena. Our campaign is not going to be that popular with a lot of militant kids when Fred Halstead is up against Eldridge Cleaver running on a write-in campaign when Eldridge Cleaver's name appears on the state ballot in California. But we've got to do it and we've got to explain it. We've got to, above all, understand it ourselves. Because that's one of the worst effects of trying to take political shortcuts. We're not only not going to make an impact on this movement by engaging in this kind of a gimmick, we run the risk of demoralizing and disorienting many of our own people, of opening the door, by virtue of this, to adaptationist attitudes toward third partyism in general.

Now, it's good to look for ways to intervene in situations. It's good to look for ways to participate in important developments, even though at each and every moment we may not be exactly in tune with the way they're going. And we should look for ways to intervene. But this is not the only way. And comrades should not feel that the only way we can relate to the development of the black struggle and the BPP within that framework is through supporting their electoral ticket. The defense campaigns, our own propaganda activities, our own electoral efforts can provide extremely effective ways to intervene if we are clear in our own minds what we're doing.

I just want to make this one final point. I just want to re-emphasize that when we extend critical support, it may seem somewhat artificial. We're a lot more careful when we get into an electoral alliance and extend critical support to candidates outside our own movement than we are about getting into alliances of other sorts -- united fronts, action alliances and so forth. And there's a good reason for this. And the two should never be confused. It's not a matter of being rigid or dogmatic about our political virtue. Because when we touch the question of electoral alliances, we're touching a fundamentally different question than united fronts. We're discussing, we're touching the question of class politics, of the class line. And that's why we think ten times over on the question of electoral support. And if we have to make an error, it would be far better not to make a mistake on this question. We can afford a lot of mistakes. It would be far better not to make a mistake on this question than it would to run the risk of missing some type of a momentary tactical advantage.

Summary by Bob Himmel

I want to deal a little bit with the analogy made by Derrel with the implication that anyone who is hesitant to extend critical support to the Panther candidacies is in fact duplicating Healy's attitude towards the British Labor Party. I think Mary handled that analogy pretty effectively. If you want to make an analogy and draw some lessons for the education rather than the confusion of the American movement, then conceive an analogy, and not a far-fetched one at that, between a group of workers in the United States who have organized a labor party and, because of their numerical weakness, have chosen to express that through the vehicle not even of the Democratic Party, but let's say a third party like the PFP or the Independent Progressive Party of 1948. Now, what would we recognize about that sort of development?

We would recognize two things. One, that this would represent a significant break-away in the direction of independent labor political action. Here are a group of workers breaking, or in the process of breaking from bourgeois politics in the direction of independent class politics that have chosen an unfortunate form to express that. Would anyone, under those circumstances, propose that we extend critical support to those labor candidates within the framework of a third bourgeois party? Now, I'm not being completely abstract about this. There were such groups in the Independent Progressive Party in 1948. There were groups of radicals and socialists and pro-labor party forces who did and tried to do precisely that. What determined our attitude toward the Independent Progressive Party and everyone of their candidates, no matter how much of a maverick an individual may have seemed, was the character of that political formation. And we recognized that for someone who wanted a working class party to have chosen that form, he was defeating his purpose and cutting right across precisely what he was trying to do.

Comrades, perhaps out of certain confusion here, have tried to mix up in this discussion political support to the BPP and their moves in the direction of independent political action with critical support to the specific candidates running on the PFP ticket. And an amalgam has been made here that would leave the impression that those comrades who do not want to put us on record for critical support somehow do not recognize the progressive potential of the Panthers, do not support the Panthers, as a matter of fact, oppose the development of the BPP. Now this should be cleared up. And comrades who make or made that impression should bear a special responsibility for clearing that up.

It's in the dialectics of political development -- and I think we all understand this, comrades -- that things can move in two different directions at the same time. The Black Panthers can be moving in the direction of independent political action and, at

the same time, be taking detours and exhibiting contradictory tendencies, regressive tendencies that cut across that fundamental motion. And that is precisely what's happened here. The independent political action of the Panthers is not shown in their alliance with the PFP. It's shown in the streets -- at the Free Huey demonstrations in Berkeley. That's where we can recognize independent political action. That's what we want to relate to.

Those comrades who say that we want to relate to this movement and then pick out that one isolated aspect that is running counter to the whole direction of the black struggle today and say here's the way we're going to do it, we're going to give critical support to their candidates, are giving support to precisely what they're doing wrong. And by so doing, confusing that with everything they're doing that is correct and good and supportable.

This contradictory character is present throughout the entire black struggle. Is it difficult to understand why black people simultaneously wear Free Huey buttons and Kennedy buttons? We can understand that contradiction. Is it any less difficult to understand that the BPP contains within it the contradictory motion that they want to build an independent black party and have chosen an electoral vehicle, note, an electoral vehicle at this time, that cuts right across the building of an independent black party?

Now, how do we get them on the right track? How do we help them get on the right track on this question? Comrades have expressed a lot of concern here how we relate to this development because we can have some influence on it. I maintain that we don't do it by developing a patronizing attitude to what is precisely their most backward aspect.

Those comrades who try to make a distinction, a qualitative distinction between the Eldridge Cleaver campaign and the other Panther campaigns because their origins were somewhat different are engaging in the most dangerous kind of speculation. There are differences inside the BPP, comrades have said. There may well be, but we don't know what the scope of them are. We don't know what forces and what tendencies exist there at this point. What we do know and consequently what we've got to act on is that their own paper, not the NY Review of Books, the BPP paper which is read by every member of the BPP and circulated by them in the black community and edited by Eldridge Cleaver and by and large written by Eldridge Cleaver is the only ideological and political guide we have to go by. Not by some private conversation in a BPP office with someone who says BPP should be big and PFP small instead of the other way around.

This is what they're reading and this is what it says, comrades. And I'm going to quote. I'll just cite certain passages not out of context. This is in the June 10 issue of the BPP newspaper. "We believe the coalition formed between the BPP and the PFP in California is the foundation or nucleus of this new and needed machinery that is a revolutionary party, or at least its prototype.

And we believe that it will be looked back upon as the fountainhead from which flowed the revolutionary party that will uproot this decadent society, transform its politics and economics, and create a structure fit to exist on this civilized planet inhabited by humanized beings." This is Eldridge Cleaver writing in that issue of the paper.

So that the question before us, and keep this question clear, is not that we're being asked to vote on whether we support the BPP. We're not being asked to vote on whether we think the BPP is moving in an independent direction. We're not being asked to vote on whether or not the logic of the black struggle impels it in the direction of independent political action. We're being asked to vote here specifically on extending critical support in 1968 to the candidates of the BPP when those candidates are in an electoral alliance with the PFP.

Comrades have pointed out that the BPP is growing, that they're developing a cadre. This is absolutely correct. I listened very carefully to see whether there would be some indication that they're developing that cadre as a result of their electioneering. No one mentioned that. Quite the contrary. Comrades came up and said, if you were out at the Free Huey demonstration, they're recruiting all kinds of kids into this action, this is great, they're growing. You're darn tottin' they're growing. And that's why they're growing. They're not growing because of their electoral alliance with PFP. They're growing in spite of their electoral alliance. And they'll continue to grow in spite of it. And that's what we want to link up with and that's where we relate.

I think it was Jean that commented on the fact that in her opinion we would be taking the easy way out if we didn't give support. Quite wrong. The easiest thing for us to do is to go along with this and give support. The hardest and most difficult decision we could make at this point, in the great euphoria that's developed around these campaigns, the most difficult decision we could make is to have to come painfully to the conclusion that we would have to pass this by, that we cannot in good conscience extend critical support to these campaigns.

I'm not concerned whether we're attacked or not. I am concerned that we're not attacked for the wrong reasons. I'm concerned that we not be attacked with justification. And any attacks on us as a result of our maneuvering around and playing games with this thing would be justified attacks. Attacks on us for attempting to use and act as parasites on this campaign when we don't even agree with it, to create artificial divisions when the Black Panthers themselves say Eldridge Cleaver is our candidate for president. Isn't that what they say? Isn't that the way Bobby Seale introduced Cleaver last week? Has anyone publicly disclaimed responsibility in the BPP for Cleaver's presidential campaign? Attacks in that type of a situation would be very harmful for us not because we would be attacked, but because we would be wrong.

I just want to comment in closing. These comments may not have much sequence because I took notes as the discussion progressed. The counterposition of the Seattle BPP campaigns to the California BPP campaigns. Yes, the Seattle developments are very good and very important. And they do represent what they say they represent at this point -- the first attempt for Black Panthers to run independently in their own name. And that's good.

Now, what effect is this development here in the Bay Area going to have on that development there in Seattle? What happens when they are confronted with a presidential campaign headed by Eldridge Cleaver set in motion not by a BPP, but by a PFP in California? Is it illogical to assume that they will conclude and draw the lesson, well, maybe that's the way we ought to be doing it? And PFP people are smart enough to move in on this pretty goddamn quick. They would say, "Let's get a PFP ticket on the ballot here in Washington. That's our line. That's what works. That's the correct way to proceed." The odds are much better that the California experience is going to effect the Seattle development and sweep it up and contain it and change it and subvert it than the other way around.

I just want to end on this note. Comrades, don't let your thinking processes get swept away by emotional fervor. The 18th Assembly District isn't the United States of America. Not yet. And you don't start in a microcosm and then project on a national scale the political character of the campaign. You've got to do it the other way around. And the character of this campaign, unless there's a specific repudiation of Eldridge Cleaver by the Panthers, in which case my opinion would change considerably -- unless there's a specific repudiation of Eldridge Cleaver and the nature of his campaign by the BPP rank and file, that campaign is what's going to feed back and change and determine the method in which the campaign in the 18th Assembly District is going to be conducted.