

FIRST JOINT BAY AREA BRANCH DISCUSSION  
ON BLACK PANTHER PARTY

Meeting of June 23, 1968

DISCUSSION CONTRIBUTED BY SWP AND YSA NC MEMBERS

Bob Chester (San Francisco Party NC)

This discussion is confusing in a major respect. And that is that it combines an independent analysis of the BPP with the question of critical support. They should in reality be separated, at least in our minds and in our discussion. The BPP itself and its development is an important factor in American politics.

I saw a report this week, for example, that in Seattle there's a BPP that has taken form. It's thinking of running in the elections independently and our comrades are working with them in this. That's a significant point. I understand also that New York is now seeing the possible formation of a BPP tendency inspired by Kathleen Cleaver's visit East.

All of this points to the fact that we have to consider the BPP development separate and apart from this question of its relation to PFP, at least at the starting point. The analysis that we made is that this is a major step, or the best one so far, in the direction of independent black politics. This is quite important and you have to see that development in its independent form first. Keep it separated from the question of critical support, at least in our thinking on our relations with the BPP.

I don't want to go into the details about the weaknesses and faults of the BPP. There are many of them and they've been touched on here. But I think the essence of it is that they are a revolutionary tendency and we have to consider them as such and try to aid in their development and form points of contact with them.

Defense has been a major point and should continue to be. We're all out in defense of the BPP against the attacks of the police and the bourgeois government. That is a major field of work we will continue no matter what our other relations with them are going to be.

It's very possible that BPP formations might spring up in a number of cities. What we do here, of course, has bearing on what is done in the other cities, so that our understanding of them is quite important.

Our objective ought to be to build what political collaboration we can with them in defense and other fields and establish an understanding and mutual respect between the BPP and us. Out of that understanding try and build up a collaboration in the future that

has more meaning. I stress mutual respect because I think the relationship between the BPP and PFP isn't a good one at all as far as a political relationship. And we can understand why. A good part of the attitude of the BPP is, we want to be in PFP so that we can get as much as we can out of them. And for that, they're willing to trade a little bit of political independence which is the wrong aspect of it and which we have to criticize and condemn. So that the problem becomes complicated by the whole question of the relationship, the coalition between the BPP and the PFP.

PFP itself, I think, is going to require a little bit of study on our part. We have given it the label of operating in bourgeois politics, but that isn't the whole story. PFP is a petty bourgeois organization composed of different layers and different elements all traveling possibly in different directions. They don't have a program, but they operate in the field of reformist bourgeois politics. Therefore, we have to understand it as such and actually maintain a political pressure on them. If we find any left-wing tendencies, we should be able to aid their leftward development.

Obviously to everybody PFP is not long for this world. It will probably operate until the elections in the fall. So that the whole question of the relation to PFP has to be watched, especially for the sake of trying to see if there are any leftward tendencies in there that we can establish a better understanding with and aid in their leftward movement. This is especially important in a period such as this when the whole tendency among the radical youth is in a leftward direction and we have to be able to make the most of that.

As a side point, I have some criticisms of the statement on PFP in Peter Camejo's document. First of all, on the question of coalitions and on the question of what he means by their qualitative difference from the Democratic Party. You could have a number of interpretations. In a discussion such as this, the point is to make a clarification rather than to leave ambiguities. So that, as far as the document goes, whereas I can agree with its main line generally and agree with the last two paragraphs on evaluation and approach to the BPP, I would have some reservations on the explanatory section.

Our attitude toward the BPP, of course, is much different than towards PFP. Whereas our basic objective in PFP is to explode it, eliminate it to get it out of the way because it's a competitor in the field and acts as a diversion back toward bourgeois politics for the radical milieu, our attitude toward the BPP is a lot different. That is, to aid them, have them build, develop a clear political understanding and to try and concentrate around them the radical section of the black community. As such, the coalition with PFP has worked in the opposite direction.

It's only after this analysis, I think, that it's possible to raise the question of critical support or not in the electoral field.

The whole question is what is the essence of that relationship. Are they really running an independent campaign or are they actually running a collaborative campaign as part of the PFP? Frankly, I'm not clear on it myself. I don't think the comrades have given me enough facts or information to be able for us to crystalize that question and say, this is it. There are a number of counter-tendencies. These counter-tendencies tend to balance each other as far as I'm concerned.

For example, if Cleaver is the presidential candidate of PFP, it's bound to affect the campaigns of Kathleen Cleaver and Seale. It ties in all the bad relations of the BPP with the PFP and tends to block the independent action of the BPP. If Cleaver is the presidential candidate, this raises some serious questions in my mind as to whether critical support is possible.

Our basic problem here, in the whole question of critical support, is essentially what kind of political message are we going to get across to the BPP and to the radical youth in the area. And we have to make our principled aspect very clear. The tactical aspect has to be in line with that principled approach. We can't look for any gimmicks or any half-answers to this question. It's got to be clear not only to us, but especially clear to them or the political message does not get across. And that is the essential problem we'll have to solve in the coming months on the question of that relationship.

For example, I can pose the possibility that it might be possible for us to give them support in Seattle and not give them support here. That would be valid if it aids our political message in showing them what we mean by independent black politics. All these variants are possible. We should judge very carefully on the question of the tactic and keep that completely separate from the basic problem of our understanding of what the meaning of the BPP development is.

I'm not ready yet to say I'm in favor of critical support say, of Bobby Seale. I think the task that we have now is the task that the previous speaker gave on the relationship of the Fresno meeting. But this is only a part of it. What is involved is not only the written and oral statements which are made in public form, but also what their actions are.

I don't think we have enough facts to be able to say that these actions or these statements add up to the fact that they are really independent. But if we can establish that, then I think critical support is warranted. But we've got to be able to make that clear to the BPP and the radical milieu that we're talking to. Otherwise, our principle becomes blurred and the tactic is muddy.

Carl Frank (San Francisco Youth NC)

The question before us right now, given the context of the local 1968 elections in this area -- the BPP campaign and its alliance with the PFP in that campaign, the PFP coalition with the BPP, and the BPP as a force in the ghetto -- is to determine how we can best propagandize our position for building independent black political action. That presupposes an evaluation of the BPP and the coalition they've established with PFP.

I think we ought to start first with a slight re-examination of the PFP and where it stands now. We understand very well where it came from -- an electoral expression of the radical antiwar sentiment and the general antiwar sentiment in the mass, given the vacuum in the current bourgeois political spectrum. We want to understand what kind of alliance exists between the BPP and the PFP now.

We ought to be able to see that the PFP has gone through certain changes that were inevitable given the rise of a peace force inside the established bourgeois political spectrum. Given the rise of the Kennedy campaign and the McCarthy campaign, the PFP became more and more clearly a very special expression of the radical antiwar sentiment. We saw that very clearly at the PFP convention. Who controlled the PFP convention? It was not controlled by the people who, in large numbers, wanted to express their antiwar sentiment within the bourgeois political spectrum. It was controlled by the Independent Socialist Club who, by and large, dominate the state apparatus.

The PFP at this time looks specifically towards the radicalizing youth on the campus. That's who they look towards and propagandize towards. That's very important. It's completely dominated by the radical student movement -- by the ISC in Berkeley and on the other side of the Bay by the radical caucus and primarily by Progressive Labor. And that's an important consideration in terms of our understanding of the PFP and also the coalition.

It's clear that the PFP is not like the Democratic Party in an important sense. It's not an organ of the ruling class. It possibly could become one, but at this time it is not. Unlike the Wallace campaign, for example, which was completely dominated and controlled by sections of the ruling class, the Wallace machine. The PFP is not like that. It's dominated by radical, social democratic or Maoist organizations.

If you look at Marvin Garson's article which appeared in the (San Francisco) Express-Times, you see a very real sentiment that's developed. That is, the PFP has become, in a sense, a parasite on the BPP. What holds the PFP together right now is the very fact of their alliance with the BPP. That's also an important consideration. They really have no independent existence with which to control and dominate the BPP.

In examining the electoral alliance, I think we can see that it's not really in any sense of the word a kind of popular front type alliance. The BPP comes to the PFP as an independent agency. And there are going to be little compromises that they're going to be forced to make. Nevertheless, it runs its own press, runs its own office, etc. On the basis of that, I don't think you can say in any sense they are merely a black section of the PFP. They're clearly not the brown-black caucus of the PFP. That's a different group. The BPP continues to maintain an independent existence.

The image of the campaign that we get is certainly not one that the BPP candidates who are running are running as PFP members. That's not the image that the students understand or the black population understands. For instance, take at Colton Street (antiwar coalition headquarters) when we wanted to have a PFP speaker on the agenda and a BPP speaker on the agenda. Everybody laughed at the idea that Bobby Seale represented the PFP in any way. It was incredible; he clearly represented the BPP.

On the BPP campaigns. I think you can say that the advantages of the electoral campaigns are obvious. It starts its way towards a strategy of reaching, propagandizing towards the black masses rather than an elitist type organization, underground existence, hiding from the Man.

It's not always good to take a position on every issue, especially when we can't act on it. However, on this question I think we're presented with an excellent opportunity to advance our line on independent black political action and further the movement of the black population as a whole. Our evaluation here has to lead to our finding those avenues through which to push the movement forward.

Think about a vote for Kathleen Cleaver. Is it the same as if a person before was registering PFP? No, it's very, very different. A person registering for PFP was registering to help broaden the bourgeois political spectrum. A person voting for Kathleen Cleaver is voting against Willie Brown. He's voting for independent black political action. On the basis of this discussion, I think we can see that vote is something we want to support. Our job is to find avenues to be able to explain, clarify and give consciousness to the meaning of that vote.

#### Derrel Myers (Oakland-Berkeley Youth NC)

I really think it's important that we take our time. Not because I think the comrades here lack an understanding of the phenomena we're discussing, but because of what's come out of the discussion and what most of us already knew was the touchy relationship that intervenes in the development of independent black political action.

On this question of support to the BPP candidates, what we have to keep in mind is that the most important question that we're trying to get across during an election campaign is the concept of independent class political action. What we have to look for is every opportunity where that is expressed where lessons can be drawn, where actions can be taken that force and explain that concept. We have to look for ways to exploit that and to educate through that.

In a consideration of the nature of the PFP and of how we would relate to it, we saw that the best way for us to explain the concept of independent class political action was by not engaging in this type of political activity. We saw that it was the wrong kind of political action, that it was not independent class political action. It fell far short of that and to the contrary was a backhanded support to the concept of bourgeois political action. We saw at the PFP convention and in their policies, in their equivocating on the question of the Democratic and Republican parties, and on some of the other alliances they've tried to affect, for example with Tijerina who was in the back pocket of Robert Kennedy. We saw that this was a wrong way to educate people to the need for independent class political action.

On the other hand, we see the formation of independent black organizations that clearly split themselves from the Democratic and Republican parties are important steps in the direction of independent class political action in the form of independent black political action.

What complicates that and why I think we need time is that you have an electoral coalition of these two phenomena. One, the PFP, claims itself to be independent political action, does not claim, remember, to be independent class political action. You have this on the one hand. On the other hand, you have the BPP which has made very clear its severing itself from the Democratic and Republican parties. But what complicates its politics and what drives the BPP into this complicated situation is its lack of a clear political perspective. As Pete Camejo mentioned, you ask different leaders of the BPP not only what this coalition represents, but what the BPP represents and what it is going to do and you get three answers -- guerrilla warfare, building independent black political action, coalition with whites.

This coalition between the BPP and PFP I think is clearly a wrong lesson to the black community because of this relationship. And this is where there's some disagreement between the comrades, on the nature of the relationship, how independent or dependent. It's wrong for blacks to see that the only way they can get on the ballot, the only way they can manifest their independence, the only way they can build a revolutionary movement is through coalitions with a very weak, very unclear, not independent white radical organization. That complicates the lesson, the educational value of the organization of a party like the BPP.

What determines whether support or not support of the BPP best gets across our politics, our attitude towards this question, is this relationship. If we see that the BPP continues the bulk of its campaign under the radical Berkeley community, under the aegis of white radical middle class movements, if it doesn't organize street rallies, if we see a tremendous lack in its program, in its activities in spreading out to the black community, of going to the black community for the defense of Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver --- then this tells us something about this coalition. It tells us something about the dependence of the BPP on this white radical coalition that is not an independent class party.

I think that's very important and I think that's why we need time. If the BPP does not conduct an independent campaign, if there are no posters that show that the BPP is independent, if there is no independent campaigning -- this is the test. If the black community, every time it hears BPP, thinks only of a black white student middle class coalition and doesn't think in terms of the beginnings of an independent mass black party -- then something is wrong, some wrong education is going on. And this is a very important test of the BPP and the question of our support to them.

What lessons is the BPP teaching the black community? Is it encouraging them to split from the Democratic Party? Is it encouraging them to build their own black organization? Is it encouraging them to build a united black coalition in the black community as they've started to do in Los Angeles? Or, will the whole thing continually center around the PFP coalition in defense of the candidates?

I think it's true that we function from a position of weakness. We've got to keep that in mind in deciding how we intervene in the education of the black community. Our only option is not through endorsement or non-endorsement of the BPP. We have to remember that. Unfortunately at this time there are very few activities that we're conducting where we directly relate to the black community. I don't think it's because of an incorrect attitude or program on our part. I think it's lack of organized activity, lack of organization in the black community that we can relate to. That's what keeps us out of the black community. We cannot go in and substitute ourselves for this.

What we've got to keep in mind is that a lot of pressure will be brought to bear if we don't endorse the candidates. But it's wrong for anyone to get us trapped in a box by saying that the only way that you can relate to the black community is by supporting the BPP. Let's not decide it on that basis. There are other ways through which we have to relate to the black community. This question of the BPP candidates is but one way that we can intervene.