

## History

**A. History:** The Black Panther Party was founded in October 1966, when Huey Newton and Bobby Seale drafted the ten demands which still represent the party's guiding program. Newton and Seale who had met and worked together at Merritt College in Oakland were appalled by the disorganization and helplessness of the black community in the face of daily police brutality. Influenced by the writings of Franz Fanon and Malcolm X, angered by Newton's recent experience in jail, the two men first wrote up a program calling for self-determination for blacks and then set out to organize for mass movement.

From the beginning, their appeal was to the young black people on the ghetto street corners. And their initial message was simple "we are not going to let them push us around any more." They bought guns and began patrolling the Oakland ghetto (at that time it was illegal in California to carry concealed weapons). Newton, who had attended law school, compiled 13 points of legal "first aid" which they taught to ghetto residents. Armed Panthers followed Oakland police around a distance and informing any black people who were stopped of their constitutional rights. As a consequence, the general incidence of police brutality and harassment in Oakland's ghetto declined; but soon, harassment of known Panthers began.

The party's brief history has been one of rapid growth and genuine service to ghetto residents accompanied by drastic official repression and violent encounters between party members and police. In May 1967 the Panthers came to national attention when they arrived, armed, at the California legislature to lobby against a bill specifically introduced to prevent them from carrying guns. The incident which resulted in murder charges against Huey Newton took place in October 1967. The shooting which involved Eldridge Cleaver and other party leaders and which ended with the murder of party Treasurer Bobby Hutton took place in April 1968. By summer 1968 the party was establishing chapters in cities across the country and seeking alliances with other political groups, even as arrests, shootings, and police raids on Panther offices were increasing in number.

**B. Popular misconceptions:** It is difficult but important to show how inaccurate and distorted is the image of the Black Panther Party conveyed by our conventional media. As a Wall Street Journal article of August 29 pointed out, the Black Panther Party is frightening to Americans as "a symbol of social disruption and of the potential for racial violence in the U.S." But that symbol has been created not by the Panthers but by a press which — out of the ignorance, bigotry or fear that plagues most whites — persists in misunderstanding and misrepresenting the Panthers.

Gene Marine suggests that many of the inaccuracies stem from Reporters' reliance on the Panthers' "hometown" newspaper, the Oakland Tribune, for information about the party. The Tribune, with a notoriously conservative editorial bias, not only relies on the police for its information about Panthers but also presents that information in a tone clearly contemptuous of the Panthers. One story published after the party's appearance at the California legislature began: "The Black Panthers of the East Bay is self-proclaimed 'revolutionary,' party whose members are best known for their habit of dressing in black clothing and lugging pistols, rifles and shotguns around in public." The Sacramento Bee, a paper known for careful reporting, inaccurately described the Panthers as "anti-white" in their story on the incident that brought the Panthers to national attention; This inaccuracy has been repeated in story after story across the country.

The press regularly describes Panthers as anti-white, as instilling hatred of police in ghetto children, as advocating the violent overthrow of the government. These are the most frequent and most harmful ways in which the Black Panther Party is misrepresented.

**C. Police in the ghetto:** No understanding of the Black Panther Party is possible without an understanding of the way police have functioned and continue to function in American ghettos. Although this paper cannot do it, one of the most convincing ways to explain the Panther's program and success is to describe — one after another — the hundreds of occasions on which ghetto residents have been subjected to brutal and degrading treatment at the hands of police.

It is this fact of ghetto life which gives force to the Panther's comparison of the ghetto to a colony and to their characterization of police as occupation troops. In a June 1 article, the New York Times reported that blacks' distrust of and hostility toward police is increasing, despite cities' attempts to institute reform in their police departments. The article also noted that in Detroit police permitted white youths to drive around with rifles hanging out the car windows, while some black youths with a rifle locked in their trunk (such transport of weapons is legal in Michigan) were arrested. But every Black Panther newspaper is filled with better examples than this of the reason for blacks' feelings about police: the November 1 issue reported that a 19-year-old Chicago youth was shot by police the same day he had attended the funeral of his 16-year-old brother shot by police. A few months after the party was founded, the Panthers gained in membership and prestige in the Bay Area black community by rallying Richmond blacks to protest the police murder of Denzil Dowell. Every incident of brutality aids in Panther recruiting.

Although the party does not advocate use of violence except in self-defense, they answer accusations that their presence and program encourage violence in the ghetto with the following story: On the day Huey Newton was alleged to have shot a policeman in Oakland and was himself shot by the policeman, a 70-year-old unarmed black man, who was later proven to be innocent of any crime, was shot in the back and killed by a Palo Alto policeman. Who is responsible for violence in the ghetto? the Panthers ask.

**D. Basic ideas:** There are three basic beliefs that underlie Black Panther Party programs and organizing. Briefly stated, they are:

1) Black people in this white-controlled society have been and continue to be segregated off from whites, brutalized, and exploited. They are denied full humanity because they are denied control over all important aspects of their lives. They are thus unfree in much the same way colonial subjects are unfree; and the American ghetto can be compared with a colony oppressed by the foreign mother country.

2) This racist subjugation of black people has become so closely bound up in our present economic and political institutions that elimination of such racism can be achieved only with very great changes in these dominant

institutions.

3) Our economic and political systems will probably not yield to such drastic changes without violence.

The influence of Malcolm X's thinking is clear. Frantz Fanon, who wrote about the special psychology of colonized peoples, also influenced Black Panther Party doctrine. These two men are much more the spiritual fathers of the Panthers than Marx, Mao Tse-Tung or Lenin.

In the first of these basic beliefs, the emphasis is on exploitation and impossibility of self-determination. The Panthers see that the black population's imposed inferiority produces economic helplessness — the most important feature of which is that blacks are hired last and paid least — and that their economic helplessness makes possible continuing exploitation. Thus, by "self-determination" the Panthers mean more than just pride in blackness or emphasis on cultural heritage. The Panthers carefully distinguish themselves from what they call black cultural nationalists. What the Panthers want is the opportunity for blacks to set the terms by which they will live rather than having them imposed by whites.

But they also recognize that racism is only one way in which people get exploited. And they stress that they have common cause with all oppressed people, here and abroad. Although racism is a kind of exploitation which pervades our society, there is exploitation of whites as well as

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believe in revolution by force only in the absence of any possible peaceful alternative. Huey Newton explains it this way:

If a Kennedy or Lindsay or anyone else can give decent housing to all of our people; if they can give full employment to our people with a high standard; if they can give full control to black people to determine the destiny of their community; if they can give fair trials in the court system by turning over the structure to the community; if they can end their exploitation of people throughout the world; if they can do all these things, they will have solved the problems. But I don't believe that under this system, under capitalism, that they will be able to solve these problems.

Many of their present programs show that the Panthers are willing to try peaceful alternatives, to exhaust all their legal remedies. They simply feel that it is very improbable that their will not be violent confrontation.

This identification of the Black Panther Party as revolutionary and the Panthers' insistence on Blacks' right of self-defense (a right this society has always acknowledged where whites are concerned) has led the press to depict Panthers as violent. It is very important to stress that the Panthers do not use violence as an organizing technique and in fact condemn any unnecessary use of violence. They are very much opposed to ghetto riots and have helped quell several. Members have carried guns only where legal and only in order to gain something

sometimes to other agents of the established powers) is often pointed out as evidence of their hatred of whites. But "pig" is not synonymous with "white". The word has tactical significance for blacks who have long suffered humiliation and insult from police. "It is no accident that the Panthers turned 'pig' into a derogatory black synonym for 'cops'; it is a deliberate attempt to let the black community hear blacks addressing whites as whites have always addressed blacks..." (Gene Marine, *The Black Panthers*, p. 43). It is still fair to say that the Panthers remain more pro-human and pro-black than anti-cop.

**F. Program and issues:** In the black community Panthers still organize around the ten demands that Newton and Seale drew up in 1966. They are demands for rights so basic that it is outrageous that they not only need to be made on behalf of millions of Americans but also are considered revolutionary when made by blacks. The Panthers demand job or guaranteed income, decent housing, education, freedom from conscription, fair trial by their peers for all black prisoners, etc. The tenth demand incorporates in its entirety the Declaration of Independence.

The organizing issue on which Panthers put heavy emphasis is stopping police brutality in the ghetto. They are presently circulating petitions which request community control of police. Their theory is that a policeman who lives in the district he patrols and whose hiring and firing is in the hands of his neighbors will be inclined to deal fairly with his district's citizens.

Although the needs of the black community are the Panthers' chief concerns, their doctrine leads them to support a wide range of causes besides black self-determination. A glance at any issue of the Black Panther illustrates this: the paper carries articles about the war in Vietnam, labor disputes, the plight of workers in Japan or Italy, injustices in the army, police brutality, etc.

**G. Services:** One of the most impressive facts about the Panthers (noted in *The Wall Street Journal*, August 29) is that in the midst of repression they are providing so many genuine, badly needed services to black and other poor people across the country. Besides the petition for control of police, the party's key programs are all services: free hot breakfasts for children, free health clinics, free liberation schools.

The Panthers are now feeding an estimated 40,000 children every morning. In several cities Panthers have recruited doctors and nurses to give some time to treating ghetto residents free of charge, either in clinics, or by house call. The party also has plans to train members to teach nutrition, parasite prevention, and oral hygiene in the ghetto. *The Wall Street Journal* reports that Panthers are making an "increasingly effective effort to curb narcotics traffic in the ghetto." Other services include distributing free clothing, calming ghettos when there is threat of riot, and informing people of their legal rights under police questioning or under the welfare law.

*The Wall Street Journal* quoted a black woman on Staten Island — a woman whose children had gotten free breakfasts and medical care — as saying, "The Black Panthers are doing things for us no one else has done. If they can keep it up, a lot of people are going to cooperate with them." Here, then, is an explanation for the Black Panther Party's growth and increasing influence. And here is support for Ronald Steel's argument that, because they defend the people's interests when no one else cares, "the Panthers are actually a force for stability in the ghettos."



blacks; and there is exploitation by blacks as well as whites. Because our capitalist economic system depends on one man's controlling and making money from another's labor, a lot of people in the country have their basic life conditions controlled by people richer and more powerful than they. The Panthers feel that one man's lack of freedom and security makes us all unfree and insecure.

*The Wall Street Journal* of August 29 summed up the Black Panther Party's basic doctrine in this sentence: "The party seeks to forge a coalition of all 'oppressed' people as the basis for an interracial revolutionary movement toward a socialistic form of government in the U.S." The Panthers believe that a socialist organization of the economy — giving the people who actually do the work control over decisions about what is produced and who produces it under what conditions — a form of organized sharing, should correct the grave injustices which characterize our society now. But socialism will not necessarily bring an end to racism, although preservation of the capitalist system will preserve racism. Both kinds of changes must be sought at the same time.

Finally, the Black Panther Party is revolutionary in that they believe sweeping changes in this country's apportionment of wealth and power are necessary. They know that people and institutions resist such evasive changes and that such resistance often leads to violence. As Ronald Steel points out in the *New York Review of Books*, September 11, the Panthers

like bargaining power vis a vis powerful, bigoted police. Although many Panthers have been arrested or tried for violent crimes, none has yet been proved to have used his gun in something other than self-defense.

**E. Lack of Racism:** It cannot be overemphasized that the Black Panther are not anti-white, not racist. They maintain that exploited races and classes of people have a common cause. Eldridge Cleaver has stressed that suffering is color blind (*N.Y. Times*, July 21, 1969). *The Wall Street Journal* article noted that a growing number of Puerto Ricans, Mexican-Americans, and Orientals are joining the Black Panther Party; and that party leaders have not dismissed the possibility of admitting whites. The Black Panther Party is now virtually the only Black "militant" group which seeks and works with white allies (witness the alliance with the Peace and Freedom Party that led to Cleaver's presidential candidacy).

The Panthers do not see their willingness to work with whites toward common ends as contradictory to their belief in the need for black self-determination. Only blacks, says Huey Newton, can decide on the proper strategy for the black community; and there can be no black-white unity until there is black unity. The Panthers want the opportunity for blacks to set their own terms; but they also want to cooperate with whites whose goals are compatible with theirs.

Panther use of the word "pig" when referring to police (or