

The Agitator

A Bulletin for the Student Left

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The Black Panthers



In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Black Panthers represented one of the greatest challenges to the racist power structure. Hurricane Katrina reminded everyone that this system still exists, which is why the story of the Black Panthers remains as relevant as ever.

Amid the student rebellions, urban insurrections and the vast protest movement against the Vietnam War that swept the US in the late 1960s, a new political force arose – the Black Panther Party. This party of armed black militants became an icon for revolutionaries across the world.

By the time the Panthers formed in 1966, black people had already been fighting racism and segregation for years. The civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King and born in the southern US states challenged the apartheid-style laws that still existed in the South. But even in the northern cities, life for poor black people continued to be blighted by racism. In the mid-1960s, between a quarter and a third of black people in urban areas were unemployed. Those who found work were pushed into the toughest and worst paid jobs. Housing was overcrowded and vermin infested, and infant mortality was high.

During the late 1960s, the black population rose up in almost every city in the north east, the Midwest and California. The riots resulted in dozens dead, tens of thousands arrested and the invasion of inner cities by the military. This was the context in which Huey P Newton and Bobby Seale, two college students from Oakland, California, formed the Black Panther Party For Self Defence. They were impressed by the civil rights movement's ability to mobilise large numbers. But they found King's stress on non violence and his demand for integration into "white society" too meek. The founders of the

Panthers were more attuned to the black nationalist leader Malcolm X who argued for the defence of black communities "by any means necessary."

The Panthers were also influenced by Maoism. Mao's strategy was an elitist one, which stressed the role of a self-proclaimed and committed revolutionary vanguard. But these ideas were influential on many 1960s radicals who wanted an alternative to the Stalinism of the Soviet Union.

The Rise of the Panthers

Together Seale and Newton drew up a ten point programme for the Panthers. It included demands for an end to police brutality, the release of all black prisoners and exemption of black men from military service. It ended with a demand for "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace – all power to the people."

Newton had studied law and knew that all US citizens had the right to bear arms. He and Seale decided that one of the first objectives of the Panthers would be to end police harassment in their community. The Black Panthers began to "patrol the pigs" by following police patrols through the ghettos of Oakland.

In the spring of 1967, Californian assemblyman Don Mulford brought forward a bill to outlaw the carrying of loaded weapons. The Panthers responded by organising an armed march on the state capital, Sacramento. Thirty armed Black Panthers arrived in a caravan on May 2. California's governor Ronald Reagan,

who was on the lawn of the state legislature, took one look and ran. In front of hundreds of reporters, Bobby Seale read a proclamation that put the Panthers on the national map. Within months, the party grew from about 50 members to over 5,000 and spread across the US.

Eldridge Cleaver was among them. He had a concept of building a party from among the "brothers on the block", or what he sometimes called the "lumpen proletariat". He argued that those with the least to lose, those without jobs and commitments, were the section of society most open to revolutionary ideas. He had borrowed the idea from the revolutionary Frantz Fanon, whose book *The Wretched Of The Earth* had explained why oppressed people had a right to use violence against their oppressors.

Anti-Imperialism

The growth of the Panthers coincided with a wider radicalisation across US society. In 1967, over 100,000 joined a New York rally against the Vietnam War. The anti-war mood fed other demands – for black rights, equality for women and gay liberation. The connections were there to be made. Black people made up 13.5 percent of all enlisted army personal and 22.4 percent of the war's casualties, but only 3.4 percent of the officers.

The Panthers differentiated themselves from black nationalist organisations by making alliances with predominantly white, left wing groups such as Students For A Democratic Society and the Peace And Freedom Party. Any

organisation that stated its opposition to capitalism and imperialism was a potential ally.

However, there was a weakness within the growing rebellion. There were very few sustained confrontations between US workers and their bosses in the 1960s. This reinforced the Panther's emphasis on the most marginal sections of the black community, along with the minority of white students and committed white revolutionaries.

The weakness was exposed when the US ruling class launched a violent crackdown on the Panthers. The Panthers found that they had no mechanism to counter the violence of the state. The "brothers on the block" strategy had enabled the Panthers to find thousands of young people who were prepared to engage with revolutionary politics, but when it came to gun battles, it soon became clear that the state was much better armed. The Panthers' leadership largely overlooked the millions of black and white workers, in factories, offices and mines, who had the power to hit US capitalism where it was most vulnerable. They regarded these organised workers as being both "enslaved" and at the same time bought off by the system. Newton argued, "We're exploited not only by the small group of the ruling class, we're oppressed, and repressed by even the working class." Yet within a few years these workers would themselves be fighting pitched battles against police while attempting to defend their jobs and conditions. Black workers in the car industry were already beginning to organise themselves, and there was potential to win white workers to a struggle against the system.

Despite this weakness, the Panthers did enjoy considerable support. This was reinforced after 1968, when the party started a series of community programmes designed to rob the state of any right to claim legitimacy in the ghettos. To the armed resistance of "patrolling the pigs" they now added the notion of "serving the people", setting up feeding centres that provided breakfasts for up to 250,000 children a week. They also launched medical clinics and community controlled schools – all of which exposed the wilful neglect by the state. They won enormous support from the black population.

The War Against the Panthers

The US establishment was terrified by the presence of armed groups of self-declared Marxists winning mass support at the height of the Cold War. FBI chief J Edgar Hoover labelled the Panthers "the greatest threat to internal security of the country". When an unarmed Newton was shot in the stomach by police during

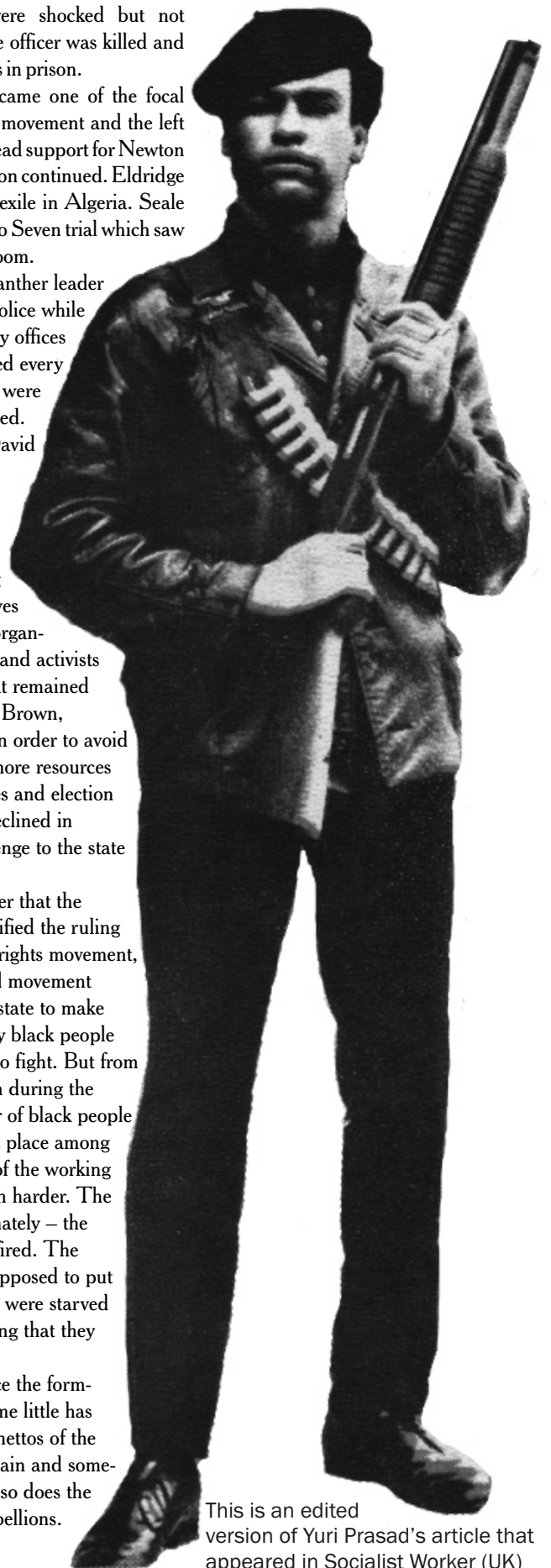
a confrontation, many people were shocked but not surprised. During the clash a police officer was killed and Newton was sentenced to three years in prison.

The battle to free Newton became one of the focal points for both the black liberation movement and the left across the US. But despite widespread support for Newton and the Panthers, the state persecution continued. Eldridge Cleaver was eventually forced into exile in Algeria. Seale became part of the infamous Chicago Seven trial which saw him bound and gagged in the courtroom.

The following year, Chicago Panther leader Fred Hampton was shot dead by police while in his bed during a raid on the party offices there. In that year the police targeted every office of the party and 27 Panthers were killed and 749 were jailed or arrested. In 1969, another Panther leader David Hilliard made a speech declaring "We will kill Richard Nixon. We will kill any motherfucker who stands in the way of our freedom." As a result Hilliard joined the long list of Panthers who found themselves on trial. For a small revolutionary organisation, the loss of so many leaders and activists made life virtually impossible. What remained of the Panthers, now led by Elaine Brown, sought to moderate their activities in order to avoid further losses. They directed ever more resources towards the community programmes and election campaigns. But the organisation declined in numbers as the revolutionary challenge to the state began to subside.

Nevertheless, the explosive anger that the Panthers had briefly harnessed terrified the ruling class. The combination of the civil rights movement, the urban rebellions and the radical movement headed by the Panthers forced the state to make concessions. The situation for many black people did improve – because they dared to fight. But from the 1980s many of the reforms won during the 1960s were reversed. A small layer of black people found themselves with a permanent place among the powerful. But for the majority of the working class, black and white, life got much harder. The black worker suffered disproportionately – the last to be hired, and the first to be fired. The social housing projects that were supposed to put an end to the squalor of the ghettos were starved of funds. They became the very thing that they were supposed to replace.

Over 40 years have passed since the formation of the Panthers and in that time little has changed for those who live in the ghettos of the US. The poverty and injustice remain and somewhere, not far beneath the surface, so does the burning anger that fuelled those rebellions.



This is an edited version of Yuri Prasad's article that appeared in Socialist Worker (UK)