

The African American Struggle: Reflections on the Black Panther Party's United Front Against Fascism (UFAF)

Lessons for 2019, Five Decades Later and the Struggle Continues

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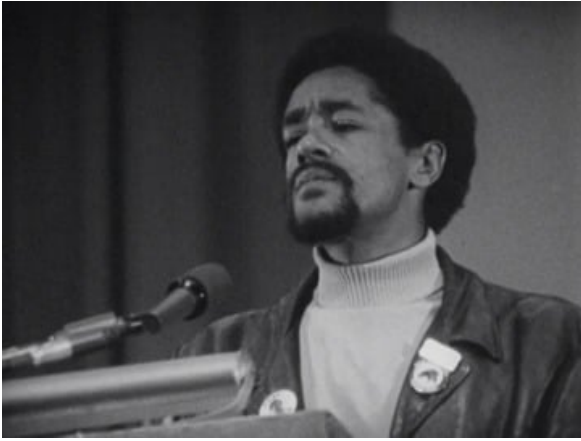
During July 18-20, 1969 a gathering in Oakland, California sought to galvanize a broad cross section of progressive and revolutionary organizations across the United States into a united front opposing the escalating repressive policies leveled principally at the African American people.

This National Revolutionary Conference for a United Front Against Fascism (UFAF) was conceived and constructed by the Black Panther Party. This organization which grew out of the Civil Rights Movement of earlier years and the mass rebellions which struck urban areas throughout the country beginning during the period of 1962-64 and extending through 1965-1968, radicalized a significant sector of youth within the larger municipalities, the rural south and the college campuses.

In response to the rapidly shifting mood of the African American struggle, the federal government unleashed a wave of repressive measures resulting in the deaths of such luminaries as Medgar Evers; three Civil Rights workers in Mississippi during the Summer of 1964; Malcolm X of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU); Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); to name only a few of the most widely known.

Although the initial framework and structures for the movement emerged from the work of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Lowndes County, Alabama in 1965-66, leading to the ascendancy of Stokely Carmichael as chair of that pioneering organization in May 1966, the concept of independent political parties under the banner of the Black Panther spread throughout the state and the country. All during the course of 1966, Black Panther groups were established in cities such as Detroit, New York, Cleveland, Los Angeles, etc.

Image on the right: Black Panther Party Chairman Bobby Seale delivering address at the National Conference for a United Front Against Fascism, July 18-20, 1969



In the Bay Area city of Oakland, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, two student and community activists formed the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BBPSD) in October of 1966. The Panthers purchased arms, sold copies of Mao Tse-tung's Red Book, established patrols to monitor the actions of the police, founding a weekly newspaper which by July 1969 was circulated to hundreds of thousands in order to build political clout within African American and broader communities.

After a series of encounters with law-enforcement and an armed march on the State Capitol building in Sacramento on May 2, 1967 to oppose the passage of the Mulford Act which was designed to restrict the capacity of African Americans to publically carry weapons, the Party was soon identified by the state apparatus for containment and liquidation. A shoot-out on October 28 of the same year left two white Oakland police shot, one fatally, along with the wounding and arrest of BPPSD co-founder Huey P. Newton.

In the aftermath of the October 28 confrontation, the reputation of the BPPSD rapidly spread prompting significant growth within the organization. Chapters sprung up around the U.S. during 1968. The Oakland-based Panthers would form an alliance with the newly-created Peace and Freedom Party (PFP) where they ran candidates for several offices including U.S. Congress and President.

Building a United Front Against Repression

By mid-1969, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had labeled the Black Panther Party (BPP) as the most dangerous of all of the radical and revolutionary groups in operation at the time. Local field offices were encouraged to develop tactics aimed at disrupting and neutralizing the Party and its leadership.

Several hundred BPP members and supporters were arrested on largely trumped up charges, others were driven into exile, while many died in confrontations with law-enforcement personnel. Bobby Hutton, one of the early recruits of Newton and Seale, who served as the Party treasurer at the age of 17, was gunned down in cold blood by Oakland police on August 6, 1968. Later John Huggins and Alprentice Bunchy Carter, two leaders of the Los Angeles chapter were killed in January 1969 on the campus of the University of California by members of the US organization headed by Ron Karenga. The Panthers were in a political struggle with US members over the control of the Black Student Union (BSU) at UCLA. A brief physical clash led to the assassination of Carter and Huggins.

Other leading Party members including Erika Huggins and Bobby Seale were arrested and charged with murder conspiracy in the brutal torture and killing of a New York Panther

named Alex Rackley who was accused of being a police informant. Seale was also brought to Chicago as a defendant in the trial charging that 8 movement leaders had conspired to disrupt the Democratic National Convention in August 1968.

An article published in the weekly Black Panther newspaper on May 31, 1969 made an appeal for people around the U.S. attend the UFAF Conference. The July 18-20 gathering attracted an estimated crowd between 3,000-5,000 people, a majority, approximately 90%, being European Americans.

Various organizations and activists attended the Conference including members of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS); Young Patriots Organization of Chicago, a white youth group composed of people from Appalachia; Young Lords Organization (YLO), a Puerto Rican group similar in posture to the BPP; Herbert Aptheker, a Marxist historian and then member of the Communist Party, USA; movement Attys. William Kunstler and Charles Gerry; Dr. Marlene Dixon, who had been terminated for her activism from the University of Chicago; Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr., then of SCLC Operation Breadbasket; the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), the family and supporters of Los Siete del la Raza, a group of seven Chicanos charged in the killing of a San Francisco police officer in a confrontation; among others.

Chairman Bobby Seale opened the Conference with an appeal for unity among progressive forces throughout the U.S. He warned against the problems associated with ideological conflict and emphasized the necessity of concrete political action against the rising tide of fascism.

One of the highlights of the Conference was a Women's panel featuring Elaine Brown, a Central Committee member of the BPP, who read a statement from prison written by Erika Huggins; Evelyn Harris of the NWRO; Carol Henry of the BPP; Penny Nakatsu, a Japanese American activist and later lawyer; Dr. Marlene Dixon; and Roberta Alexander of the BPP. The women emphasized that the struggle against male domination, patriarchy and chauvinism was integral in the fight to defeat fascism.

Contradictions and Conflicts: Strategic and Tactical Questions in Defining Fascism

Of course the ideological and political differences within the Left and National Liberation Movements in the U.S. during mid-1969 could not be avoided at the UFAF Conference. One major incident was the physical exclusion of the Progressive Labor Party (PLP), an organization which evolved from the splits within the CPUSA during the late 1950s after the rise of Nikita Khrushchev to the leadership in the Soviet Union and the subsequent ideological positions emanating from developments inside the world socialist movement.

PLP youth members had entered SDS in previous years, and as a result, sharp ideological differences would surface over the role of students, workers and the nationally oppressed in the Left movement in the U.S. The June 18-23, 1969 SDS national conference in Chicago had voted to expel PLP for what it described as disruptive behavior.

At a March 30, 1969 national leadership meeting of SDS in Austin, Texas the organization had passed a resolution recognizing the BPP as the vanguard of the liberation struggle among African Americans. This position was opposed by the PLP faction of SDS. The alliance with the Panthers is cited as an influencing factor in the purging of PLP at the June 18-23 national conference of SDS in Chicago.

Nonetheless, disagreements would arise between the leaderships of both the Panthers and SDS over the question of community control of the police. A mandate was given to delegates of the UFAF Conference to launch petition campaigns aimed at community control of police in African American, Chicano, Asian and white neighborhoods. SDS held the view that the concept of community control of police agencies did not apply among European Americans unless it was directed by class conscious working class organizations.

Following the conclusion of the UFAF, Mark Rudd and other SDS national leaders adopted a resolution rejecting the mandate of seeking to build support for community control of police in white neighborhoods. This decision drew the ire of Panther leaders Bobby Seale and David Hilliard, the Chief of Staff of the Party.

An article published in the August 16 edition of the then New York-based Guardian newspaper outlined the conflict saying:

“Referring to SDS’s agreement to support the petition in the ‘colonies’ (black and brown communities) but not in the ‘oppressor country’ (white America), Hilliard wrote in the Black Panther: ‘How abstract and divorced from the reality of the world around them they must be to think that the Black Panther Party would allow them to leave their communities and begin to organize the colony; to control the fascists in the oppressor country is a very definite step towards white people’s power, because James Rector [a white youth killed by police in Berkeley during the confrontations over People’s Park in May 1969] was not shotgunned to death in the black community. It seems they prefer to allow the already legitimate reactionary forces to take root or sanctuary in the white communities.’ Stating that the ‘Black Panther Party will not be dictated to by people who are obviously bourgeois procrastinators,’ Hilliard went on to imply that SDS, among other groups, was ‘at best national socialist’ (i.e., fascist).” (See [this](#))



Black Panther Party led National Conference for a United Front Against Fascism delegates in Oakland, July 18-20, 1969

This same above-mentioned report went on to illustrate the obvious frustrations of the Panther leadership with SDS, noting:

“In the interview with Guardian correspondent Goldberg, the Panther leaders described many white radicals as ‘bourgeois Boy Scouts,’ and ‘little petty racists.’ ‘All revolutionaries and all revolutionary organizations eventually have to make a choice between revolution and counter-revolution,’ Hilliard said. ‘If they will not take the lead from the vanguard, then they will have to move to the other side. From now on we will not take theory, but actions as the basis for the coalitions we make. The Young Patriots [a Chicago white working-class youth organization] are the only revolutionaries we respect that ever came out of the mother country.’ Then Hilliard added, “[T]he only revolutionary force in the bourgeois mother country is the women.’ In the Guardian interview, the Panther leaders defended their community control petition as ‘revolutionary,’ saying that community control of police would eventually lead to “liberated zones” and that when the people really controlled the police forces, you had in actuality a “people’s militia.’ Seale and Hilliard argued that by refusing to circulate the petition in the white community, white radicals were giving fascist elements sanctuary there. Seale said that over 1500 persons had signed up at the UFAF conference to work on the National Committees to Combat Fascism, and circulate the community control petition. ‘When you circulate that petition, you are moving in direct opposition to the chief opponents of the revolutionary movement,’ he said.”

Moreover, the lack of agreement over a clear definition of what is fascism would aggravate these ideological and political conflicts. Historically, this was not a new problem. With the emergence of fascism in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s there were different explanations regarding the character of fascism and the struggle to eliminate state repression.

In Italy, Communist leader Antonio Gramsci wrote in a 1921 essay on what he analyzes as the “Two Fascism.” On the actual social origins of the phenomenon Gramsci says:

“The crisis of fascism, about whose origins and causes so much is now being written, can easily be explained by a serious examination of the evolution of the fascist movement itself.... Due to their trenchant opposition to the socialist movement they obtained the support of the capitalists and the authorities. This aspect of the Fasci was inherited in part from the conflict between the Socialist Party and the ‘interventionist’ associations during the war years. They emerged during the same period when the rural landowners were feeling the need to create a White Guard to tackle the growing workers’ organizations. The gangs that were already organized and armed by the big landowners soon adopted the label Fasci for themselves too. With their subsequent development, these gangs would acquire their own distinct character - as a White Guard of capitalism against the class organs of the proletariat.” (See [this](#))

Benito Mussolini came to power in 1922 and would serve as an inspiration to Hitler and the Nazis in Germany. The rise of fascism on a foreign policy level led to the calamitous second imperialist war, and from an African viewpoint, it began with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935.

Leon Trotsky, the exiled (1928-1940) co-leader of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and head of the Red Army in the Civil War against counter-revolutionaries backed by the imperialist countries during 1918-1921, wrote extensively on the rise of fascism in Germany over the period of 1928-1933. Trotsky viewed fascism as arising among the petty-bourgeois elements in alliance with the capitalist class. In essence fascism is characterized by a mass

movement of reactionary elements which seeks power in its own name, as developments in Italy and Germany would reveal. (See [this](#))

Later Bulgarian Communist, Georgi Dimitrov, who was put on trial in Germany after the rise of the Nazis, called for a United Front Against War & Fascism in 1935. The Panther's approach was more akin to Dimitrov, accepting a similar name as the Third International's efforts of the 1930s and early 1940s. (See [this](#))

With specific reference to the Panthers in 1969, the debate over whether the U.S. had become a fascist state and society was theoretically abstract. The African American people had been brought to North America for the purpose of enslavement. There had never been any genuine social equality or self-determination for the African population. Reconstruction after the Civil War of 1861-65 had been betrayed due to a compromise among all leading sectors of the ruling class of the period. The burgeoning Civil Rights, Black Power and revolutionary movements of the mid-20th century had been subjected to severe repression by the capitalist state and supported by the majority of white constituents whether they were members of the Democratic or Republican parties.

Consequently, the Panther lexicon, and that of many other elements in the Left and African American movements of the 1960s and 1970s, suggested that fascism had already arrived as a fact of state policy and societal institutions. The poster issued by the BPP which promoted the UFAF had as a sub-text: "Fascism: The Power of Finance Capital." Therefore, the priority of the Party was to first defeat fascism as a prerequisite to the ultimate struggle to build socialism.

George Jackson, who after 1970 became a much read theoretician of the BPP and the revolutionary prisoners' movement in general, advanced the notion often attributed to Mussolini declaring that:

"Fascism should more appropriately be called Corporatism because it is a merger of state and corporate power."

Whether this is an accurate quote from the Italian fascist or not and if this definition is accepted, then fascism has been in existence for decades in the U.S.

So therefore, if this is the case regarding the contemporary character of the capitalist state in the U.S., it does not necessarily provide answers as it relates to the questions of fighting fascism in the modern period of President Donald Trump, who is routinely categorized by many leftists and liberals as a neo-fascist. The putative neo-fascism of Trump can be distinguished from the National Front of France and other formations in Western Europe which operate outside of the mainstream liberal, conservative and social democratic parties.

The outcomes from the UFAF led to the creation of National Committees to Combat Fascism (NCCF) in several cities. In many cases the NCCFs became de facto BPP chapters (labeled as organizing bureaus) such as what occurred in Detroit in the second half of 1969 in the aftermath of the decision by some cadre locally as well as the national office to close down the previously existing BPP chapter.

In other areas such as Berkeley, California, an Intercommunal Committee to Combat Fascism (ICCF) was formed by white activists who worked in close collaboration with the

Black Panther Party of the same city. ICCF sought to build solidarity in white areas with the BPP and its programs. The Berkeley grouping took up the petition drive for community control seriously and placed it as a referendum on the ballot in early 1970.

Lessons for 2019: Trumpism and Neo-Fascism

In the era of the Trump presidency there is an enormous amount of usage of the term fascism. Many of Trump's positions including the targeting of nationally oppressed peoples, xenophobia, misogyny, the scapegoating of immigrants, massive tax cuts and direct aid to the capitalist class along with the military industrial complex, embody the character of fascist domestic policy. Although Left, African American, Asian, Middle Eastern and Latinx political groupings are still allowed to function openly, their weakness in relationship to the conservative political base, the state apparatus, security forces and the Pentagon, can in no way reassure those who fear and contemplate far more aggressive measures to curtail dissent and enhance exploitation and oppression.

The prison industrial complex has grown exponentially since 1969. Today well over two million people in the U.S., who are disproportionately people of color, are being housed in the correctional facilities. Detention camps for migrant workers and asylum seekers have been compared to concentration camps during World War II.

Trump's campaign rallies are centered-around him as a political personality. The administration has refused to acknowledge the rising wave of racist violence across the U.S. where scores of white supremacists and other neo-fascist groupings are active utilizing social media and direct contact with their constituencies as well as those they are trying to recruit. Presidential rhetoric and demagoguery encourages racist violence, the rejection of scientific findings related to climate change, extreme hostilities towards Muslims and immigrants, all under the guise of American (actually white) nationalism.

This atmosphere of mass shootings such as in El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio, compounded by police and vigilante attacks on African Americans and Latinx people, has resulted in a social culture of apprehension and caution. Despite the claims of an economic boom, tens of millions remain trapped in poverty, which has a racialized and gendered character. Volatility in the global financial markets during the summer of 2019 raised fears of another economic downturn similar or even perhaps worse than what occurred in 2008. The trade wars against the People's Republic of China and European Union (EU) states through the imposition of tariffs is worsening the plight of those within the agricultural, retail and manufacturing sectors of the U.S. capitalist system.

Today in 2019 there is no Black Panther Party (BPP) or a comparable organization to take on the administration, the capitalist class and their supporters through a program of effective mobilization, organization and political education. This is the principal task of anti-fascists in the contemporary era and that is the imperatives of building revolutionary organizations which have the capacity to reach millions with a program of sweeping social transformation and socialist development.

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