

What's Behind the Renewed Attacks on African American Activist Assata Shakur?

Exiled Black Panther Party veteran has lived in Cuba for three decades

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On the 40th anniversary of the shooting and capture of Assata Shakur, the FBI and the State of New Jersey has now placed the African American revolutionary on the most wanted terrorist list. This latest provocation against Shakur, 65, is directed not only against the veteran Black Panther Party (BPP) and Black Liberation Army (BLA) member, but represents an overhaul attack on the struggle of African Americans against racism and national oppression in the United States.

Assata Shakur has now been placed under a \$US2 million bounty offered by the racist government of the U.S. She had previously been subjected to a sum of \$US1 million instituted a decade-and-a-half ago.

Since 1984, Shakur has been living as a political refugee in the revolutionary Caribbean-Island nation of Cuba. She sought asylum there after living underground in the U.S. where she escaped from maximum security prison in New Jersey on November 2, 1979.

Shakur was arrested on May 2, 1973 after being stopped by the state police while riding in a car traveling on the New Jersey Turnpike. She was seriously wounded in the routine traffic stop where Zayd Malik Shakur was killed and Sundiata Acoli (formerly known as Clark Squire) was also captured. Acoli remains in prison until this day some forty years later.

During the traffic stop New Jersey state trooper Werner Forester was killed. Shakur was charged with numerous crimes during a series of trials between 1973-77. However, she was acquitted of all these charges and was finally falsely accused and convicted in the death of the law-enforcement officer.

At the time of the arrest of Assata Shakur and Sundiata Acoli and the murder of Zayd Malik Shakur, the Black Liberation Army had been vilified for years in the corporate media. Many law-enforcement agencies throughout the country were on high-alert for the capturing or killing of members and associates of this organization.

Assata was held for six-and-a-half years in maximum security prisons in New Jersey. She wrote in her political biography entitled "Assata: An Autobiography," released in 1987 by Zed books, that she was detained in all-male correctional facilities and subjected to torture by prison guards and other law-enforcement officials.

In late 1979, a group of BLA and Weather Underground activists liberated her from prison. She later immigrated to Cuba where the revolutionary socialist government of President Fidel Castro granted her political asylum.

Background of Repression Against the Black Liberation Movement in the U.S.

The Black Panther Party grew out of the southern Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s in the state of Alabama. In Lowndes County, Alabama in the aftermath of the Selma to Montgomery March that preceded the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) moved into the area to begin organizing for independent political action.

Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) was a leading organizer with SNCC at the time and played a significant role in the struggle in Lowndes County during 1965-66. SNCC partnered with the John Hulett of the Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights which eventually led to the formation of the all-Black Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO).

The LCFO rejected attempts to integrate into the all-white Alabama Democratic Party which was segregationist and thoroughly racist in character. The LCFO took on the Black Panther logo and was consequently labeled the Black Panther Party. This idea spread throughout other regions of the state leading to the formation of the Alabama Black Panther Party by early 1966.

These efforts in Lowndes County gained national attention during 1966. Although the party registered thousands of African American voters, the November 1966 county elections were stolen by the racists.

Nonetheless, by this time the idea which time had come spread throughout other sections of the U.S. There was the establishment of other Black Panther organizations from New York State to California.

In October of 1966, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale formed the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense which eventually became the most dominant within the entire movement by mid-1968. By 1967, there were at least three different organizations working under the banner of the Black Panther in California in both the southern and northern regions of the state.

Carmichael, who became Chairman of SNCC in May 1966, pushed for a more nationalist orientation for the organization and the Civil Rights Movement as a whole. The Black Power slogan, which became popular in the summer of 1966, was advanced by Willie Ricks, a SNCC field secretary, (now known as Mukasa Dada) and Stokely Carmichael during the "March Against Fear" in Mississippi in June of 1966.

In 1967, Carmichael was drafted as "Honorary Prime Minister" of the Newton-Seale organization. Carmichael and other SNCC leaders entered into an alliance with the BPP for Self-Defense in February 1968.

Later this alliance broke down but Carmichael and other SNCC organizers continued to work with the Panthers based in Oakland through mid-1969. As a result of both the FBI's Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO-Black Nationalist) as well as ideological and political differences, there was a split within the Black Panther Party during the summer of 1969.

COINTELPRO and the Splits Within the Black Liberation Movement

In 1967, the FBI stepped up its efforts to undermine and neutralize the Black Liberation Movement in the U.S. This took place amid burgeoning urban rebellions which had struck over 200 cities by the end of 1967.

By October 1968, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover had labeled the Black Panther Party based in Oakland as the most serious threat to the internal security of the U.S. Hundreds of Party members and supporters were indicted on spurious charges and several organizers were killed by the police and their collaborators.

Leading members of the Party were imprisoned and driven into exile during 1968-69. Newton was wounded and convicted in the murder of an Oakland police officer in 1968. Eldridge Cleaver and Kathleen Cleaver went into exile in Cuba and later Algeria in 1968-69.

In 1969, Bobby Seale was arrested and charged with a conspiracy in the murder of fellow Panther Alex Rackley who was killed in New Haven, Connecticut. During that same year, Seale was bound and gagged on the orders of Judge Julius Hoffmann in Chicago during the conspiracy trial for allegedly attempting to disrupt the Democratic Convention of 1968.

With the Party being a relatively young organization, these actions by the federal government had a devastating impact. By late 1970 after the release of Newton on appeal, tensions grew between the factions within the organization headed by Cleaver, then still living in Algeria, and many of the Panthers on the east coast on the one hand and Newton and Chief-of-Staff David Hilliard along with their adherents based in northern California on the other.

In February 1971, an open split erupted with Cleaver calling for the expulsion of Newton and Hilliard and Newton condemning Cleaver for his public criticism of Party policy. Cleaver and his cohorts soon called for the intensification of the armed struggle inside the U.S.

With the ideological and political struggles coming to the fore inside the Party, various members were forced underground to avoid imprisonment and assassination. These cadres began to call themselves the International Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army.

The BLA was already a part of the Party prior to the split. Rule number six of the Black Panther Party 26 rules, said that no Party member could belong to any other armed force but the Black Liberation Army.

Political fracturing escalated in early 1971 with the acquittal of the New York 21, a group of leading Panthers in New York City who were falsely charged with attempts to carry out bombings in the city. A letter signed by some members of the New York 21 openly criticized the west coast leadership under Newton, prompting their expulsion.

Assata Shakur in her autobiography described this period in detail. Many Party members who had been purged were deliberately sent into the BLA, the underground.

Shakur wrote from the Middlesex County Workhouse on July 6, 1973 that "There is and always will be, until every Black man, woman and child is free, a Black Liberation Army. The main function of the Black Liberation Army at this time is to create good examples to struggle for Black freedom and to prepare for the future. We must defend ourselves and let no one disrespect us. We must gain our liberation by any means necessary." (Break the Chains pamphlet)

She continues in this essay noting that “It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains!”

The prevailing governmental, corporate and reactionary forces were in mortal conflict with the Black Liberation Movement of the period. The heightened repression against the Movement came amid the major re-structuring of the U.S. and world economy.

Inside the African communities of the U.S. large-scale capital flight, police repression and the proliferation of drugs served to level whole areas which weakened the ability of the struggle to rejuvenate on a revolutionary basis. The split within the Black Panther Party between 1969-71 was replicated in other revolutionary organizations such as the Republic of New Africa, formed in Detroit in 1968 and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, also established in Detroit in 1969.

These political developments grew out of the material conditions in existence at the time. The African American struggle between 1975 and the second decade of the 21st century appeared to have shifted into the electoral arena.

However, the greater exposure of domestic neo-colonial constraints is causing a rethinking among the masses in regard to the overall strategic and tactical imperatives of the struggle. The ascendancy of President Barack Obama and the Congressional Black Caucus has fully laid bare the futility of Democratic Party politics and its utility for African American liberation.

The Significance of the Continuing Persecution of Assata Shakur

With the abysmal failure of the electoral political strategy dominated by the Democratic Party, the ruling class in the U.S. knows that sooner or later the African American masses in alliance with other oppressed nations and exploited workers will move in the direction of revolutionary politics. The decline in the world capitalist system has illustrated to billions around the world that there is no future in the current economic dispensation.

Even inside the U.S. it has been estimated that nearly half of the people are now living either in poverty or close to it. The spokespersons and political agents of the ruling class through their own pronouncements make no pretense in regard to addressing the growing impoverishment of the workers and oppressed.

During the 1960s there was deceptive rhetoric related to the so-called “War on Poverty” and providing greater opportunities for the oppressed nations and marginalized workers to receive a larger share of the wealth owned by the top echelons of society. Today this rhetoric has totally disappeared from the lexicon of the corporate media and the political functionaries of both the Republican and Democratic parties.

Consequently, revolutionary politics must be criminalized by the ruling class, the corporate media and the repressive apparatus of the state. Yet large segments of the African American, Latino/as, Arab-Middle Eastern and Muslim sections of the U.S. and world populations have already been criminalized.

Therefore, the recent attacks on Assata Shakur will ring hollow in the minds of the oppressed and conscious workers inside the imperialist-dominated system. This will be the case because there is no future in the current oppressive structures and revolution, or

fundamental change and transformation, is the only solution to the problems of poverty, economic exploitation, state repression, environmental degradation and wars of aggression.

The most just response of the ruling class would be to grant a general amnesty to all political prisoners inside the U.S. and those held by the imperialists throughout the world. People living in exile like Assata Shakur should be granted a pardon and allowed to walk free among the masses of the U.S. who are yearning for such revolutionary leadership and consciousness.

Even if an amnesty is not granted to political prisoners by the Obama administration or successive White House occupiers, the struggle against capitalism and imperialism will continue to accelerate. The people have no other choice other than reject the system that is creating the conditions for their own destruction.

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