

REPORT ON PEACE AND FREEDOM PARTY NATIONAL CONVENTION

by Betsey Barnes

While in Ann Arbor, Jon and I had an interview with Shermont Banks, the head of the Los Angeles Black Panther Party. The interview took place before the vice presidential candidate question came up, so we got a picture of the way, at least this person, who is one of the main secondary leaders of the BPP in the country, looked at the PFP-BPP alliance before the blow up at the convention. After the convention we were able to talk with him again, when we drove him and another Panther from San Diego to the airport.

One thing that became clear throughout the convention was that, as we've always suspected, Eldridge Cleaver is the one who has initiated and pushed through the PFP-BPP alliance within the BPP. Bobby Seale, Shermont Banks, and other Panther leaders have gone along with it. He convinced them, to a certain degree, that it was a good thing.

In talking with Shermont Banks we found that he didn't seem to know very much about the PFP in Los Angeles and he didn't seem to have much interest in what the PFP was like. He never talked about any projects which the Panthers were working on in common with PFP. We asked him what the relationship between the BPP and PFP was, and he had no clear answer. He obviously hadn't thought concretely about the alliance, that is, about such things as the implications of Eldridge Cleaver's running for president as a Peace and Freedom Party candidate. When we asked him how the Panthers in L.A. were going to relate to the Cleaver campaign, he said they planned to campaign in the black community, to hold rallies and pass out literature. At the time of the interview, before the fight took place on the vice presidential candidate, Banks' reaction to the PFP convention seemed to be simply that he was pleased that here was a group of white people who supported the Black Panther Party and who were enthusiastic about running Eldridge Cleaver for president. Banks said he was thinking of running for office himself, perhaps as a write-in candidate.

It is clear that there is a lot of pressure against the PFP-BPP coalition within the Black Panther Party. There is also pressure against it from other black organizations. Banks told us that the Panther leadership had a lot of problems convincing the ranks of the BPP to support the PFP alliance. He said that as soon as the coalition was announced he started getting telephone calls, and people came down to the office asking about it.

The only way Cleaver was able to rationalize the coalition was to say that the PFP was a revolutionary party. I think Cleaver actually did believe that through his own personal prestige and intervention of the BPP in the PFP, he could make the PFP into a "revolutionary" organization. Not only this, but he had a conception that the PFP would be able to move out into the white community and build a mass revolutionary white movement in a short period of time.

Many times during the convention, people referred to the fact that the BPP was moving ahead of the PFP, and warned that PFP should avoid being merely a "support group" for the Panthers. At one point Cleaver got up and dealt with this by stating that it was "hogwash" that you could organize faster in the black community than in the white community. He said that if white radicals would just "get down to business" they could have a large white revolutionary movement.

To some extent the very nature of the PFP has helped to encourage the illusions of the Panthers. Almost every single person at that convention was some kind of a socialist and under the pressure of the BPP and the SWP there has been the development of the Radical Caucus within the PFP. The people in the Radical Caucus are a very peculiar type. A lot of them are people who have already come around the SWP and who, for one reason or another, have rejected it -- either because they think we're "old left" or because they're afraid of belonging to a disciplined revolutionary party but they have been influenced by our ideas. Their rhetoric, at least, is extremely radical. When they get up and speak, they talk about "revolution" and "socialism."

Up until the end, Cleaver was built up to be the "big leader" at the convention, and he made no efforts to counteract this tendency to build somewhat of a cult around him. Also, there was a definite tendency at the convention toward the attitude of "anything Bobby Seale, or Eldridge, or the Panthers say goes." The resentments among the whites which accumulated as a result of this unhealthy attitude were expressed at the end of the convention when Cleaver got up and announced for Rubin. Then, the delegates had an absolutely frenzied, irrational reaction against Cleaver.

Witnessing the end of the convention and the dissension between Cleaver and the other delegates, and seeing the total chaos which broke out, was a shaking experience for many of the Panthers. Doubts that were first raised when the so-called revolutionary program was voted down in favor of the reformist position were confirmed when the infighting began and the convention was unable to choose a vice presidential candidate.

When we drove Shermont Banks to the airport, he expressed his disgust with the convention by pointing to two things -- the fact that there was no agreement among the delegates, and the fact that he did not think the delegates were "revolutionaries." As we were driving away from the convention, Banks reached out of the car and took a bumper sticker from a girl standing nearby which said "Eldridge Cleaver for President." One side of the sticker was the PFP symbol, and on the other was the Panther. "I'd just like to cut this end off and leave the Panther," he said.

It is clear that, no matter what happens, the coalition between the Black Panther Party and the PFP will never be the same. The story of the convention will get around among the Panthers, especially among this layer that Shermont Banks represents, the new

leadership growing up in various areas around the country. The Militant could and should play an important role in getting information on the PFP and on the convention to the Panthers. We're the only paper that will say what really happened.

The Panthers are continuing to grow very quickly and they're recruiting youth from the ghetto who are totally alienated from the system. Both the Los Angeles Panther and the San Diego Panther indicated that people are joining so fast that it is hard to absorb them. They're setting up various procedures and classes to deal with this. While the convention was going on in Ann Arbor a BPP was formed in Detroit made up of various local groups and including a number of people who have never been involved in black liberation groups before. There was also a representation at the conference from a new BPP group in Omaha, Nebraska.

* * *

QUESTION: What was the composition of the convention?

J. BRITTON: The great majority of delegates were between twenty and thirty years of age.

QUESTION: What Panthers were there outside of Cleaver and Seale?

JON BRITTON: There were about a dozen. The cities we knew of were the Bay Area, Los Angeles, San Diego, Omaha, New York. Nobody from Seattle.

QUESTION: Did they stay through the last part?

BRITTON: Bobby Seale did not stay; the others did.

QUESTION: And neither Cleaver or Seale took the floor at all during this debate when the radical program was defeated for the minimum program?

B. BARNES: Shermont Banks told us that on that question and on the question of the vice presidential candidate, Cleaver had told him he was going to leave that up to the PFP.

QUESTION: What was the reaction to our literature table there?

BRITTON: The literature sales went quite well, \$127.00 worth. There was a lot of traffic at the literature table. There was one independent that I mentioned before from New York who was very friendly to me. He came up to me very shaken with the experience and asked my opinion of it and we got into a very good discussion. I strongly suspect that he was representative of the whole layer of independent kids there who were similarly shaken.

QUESTION: So the delegates there were overwhelmingly young people of college age who'd been in and around the antiwar movement?

B. BARNES: But the main people that took the floor were members of radical tendencies or sophisticated old-timers, anti-SWP, so-called revolutionary socialists like Bob Avakian.

QUESTION: What was the reception to our campaign?

BRITTON: I wasn't at the table so I don't know exactly what kind of discussions they had. But they had a whole section of the table devoted to campaign literature.

QUESTION: How many people did we have there?

BRITTON: In addition to Betsey and I who were observing the convention and reporting for the Militant, there were eight from Detroit.