

Panthers Split

anon.

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A massive split formed in the Black Panther Party in recent weeks, as the party's Algiers International Section—including Eldridge Cleaver—and the New York City branch announced their opposition to the California-based leadership of Huey P. Newton, Minister of Defense.

Newton's faction has expelled Cleaver and the entire Algiers faction from the party. In addition, his faction has expelled the 13 New York "bombing conspiracy" defendants, two because they skipped bail and the rest because they criticized his leadership in a public letter to the Weatherman underground.

In turn, Cleaver, the party's Minister of Information in exile in Algiers, has taken similar action against what he calls "the right wing of the party."

A series of events starting in mid-February marked the well-publicized and confusing split within the party. Eventually, ideological differences emerged through the personal barbs—Newton's faction favors legal battles and mass demonstrations, while the Cleaver/New York faction favors underground, illegal and fugitive activity.

The split began on February 10, when Newton expelled Michael Tabor and Richard Moore, two of four Panthers free on bail in the New York conspiracy trial. They had failed to appear in court, resulting in loss of bail for two other defendants, Afeni Shanks and Joan Bird. Newton charged that Tabor and Moore, in fleeing, "gave the pigs an excuse to throw Joan Bird and Afeni Shanks, four months pregnant, back into maximum security" and "propped up the dying case of the prosecution."

Tabor and Moore fled to Algiers with Connie Matthews Tabor, who was Newton's secretary, arranging his speaking tours. Mrs. Tabor reportedly took some of Newton's most important papers with her.

Several days later, Newton expelled Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt, leader of the Los Angeles Panther chapter, for getting into too many conflicts with police. "Geronimo" successfully led the defense of the Los Angeles headquarters when police laid siege to it in December, 1969.

On February 26, Huey Newton appeared on a live San Francisco television program where a long-distance telephone hookup with Cleaver was arranged. The original purpose may have been to refute rumors of a split between Cleaver and Newton, but it ended up differently.

Cleaver said that Newton's recent expulsions of the New York Panther defendants and Geronimo were "regrettable" and "should not have taken place." He said that the expulsions were the responsibility of David Hilliard, the party's Chief of Staff, and called for Hilliard to be expelled.

The next day, Newton angrily expelled Cleaver and the Algiers section. Several days later, in the March 6 issue of the Black Panther Newspaper, the Newton faction published a long statement by Elaine Brown, Minister of Information in California, which accused Cleaver of having beaten Kathleen Cleaver, his wife, and of keeping her a prisoner in Algiers. Elaine Brown also accused Cleaver of murdering a Black Panther Party member in Algiers.

On March 1, the New York Chapter held a press conference at its Harlem office. They said the expelled New York Panther defendants should be reinstated and declared Hilliard "purged from the Black Panther Party for life."

The statement accused the party's national leadership, (located in Oakland, California, where the party was founded) of behaving in a dictatorial manner without allowing democratic "criticism within its ranks."

The New York chapter also accused Hilliard of “drugging Huey to the point where his influence over the man is unquestionable.” The drugs, they say, are for a nervous condition which “is totally visible to people who have seen Huey on speaking engagements or who have spoken to him for any length of time.” They said he has given Newton “deliberate misinformation about inner party matters.”

On March 11, Michael Tabor and his wife, in a tape from Algiers, charged that Newton and Hilliard had squandered money while members of the party “were starving to death.” In her statement Mrs. Tabor said that all accounts—money from speaking engagements, donations, newspapers and equipment—“had to come through central headquarters. All the money was lavished on the West Coast for the best of everything.”

Within the party, she and her husband said, “Panthers were becoming more and more disillusioned.” There was a “complete halt” to revolutionary activities, Mrs. Tabor said. “The only thing that the party could use was a paper seller. If you could not be a paper seller, there was absolutely nothing for you to do.”-

For two years, the New York Panthers have seemed somewhat uncontrollable to the national party headquarters in Oakland. For example, when they first started organizing in New York, the local’s announced policy was to use force against people who control the flow of hard drugs into the city. Newton favored a legal approach, organizing the black masses to expel the drug pushers.

Both factions of the party still support all Panther political prisoners, including those expelled. Newton spoke at a March 5 Oakland rally for Bobby Seale and Erika Huggins, on trial in Connecticut for murder, and made no mention of the split.

The split in the Black Panther Party is as publicity-oriented as was the Panthers’ rise to national prominence. (The Newton faction sent copies of Elaine Brown’s statement to hundreds of underground papers.) The blame for this lies in part with the underground press itself and the white movement which built up the Panthers as the vanguard party before they were ready for such a role. The white left’s “pop star consciousness” has made heroes of several of the Panther leaders and led them to cultivate support among radical whites at the expense of organizing mass black support.

This buildup has also had the function of focusing police violence on the Panthers. The police persecution, which has killed over 25 Panthers and put hundreds in jails, has had a large part, of course, in reducing the effectiveness of the party and causing the split. Most energy has had to go for lawyers and bail money instead of community programs.

The primary criticism that must now be directed at the Panthers is the means by which they are resolving their disputes—public charges and countercharges in the establishment press, charges of wife-beating, graft, elitism and even murder.

What are the effects of charges such as these? For most whites, they are thoroughly confusing, coming from a party previously so united.

Their effect in the black community, where the Panthers have some mass support, will probably be to discredit them. Reactionaries and “black capitalists” will be able to win many blacks to their ideas after such a public display of radical disunity.

In addition, with their own party split in this fashion and confusion weakening their base of support, Panther defendants currently on trial are sure to receive even harsher “justice” than before.

The Panthers and their followers have fallen into some of the same traps as the Weatherman underground. They have concentrated more on media publicity than on organizing mass support; they have tended toward elitism, isolating themselves from the people and from democratic criticism. They have also both used more violent rhetoric than they could back up with mass actions. An important difference is that the police have made an all-out racist effort to smash the Panthers, while the Weathermen who have been caught have usually gotten off with light sentences.

Despite their errors, both groups still wield great influence. The Weathermen have captured the attention of many young people with their daring and high group morale; the Panthers have done much to heighten militant black consciousness, especially among youth. The Weathermen recently advocated that people engage in mass actions rather than relying on bombing as the sole tactic; the Panthers are now split over the same question, with the Newton faction favoring legal action and mass demonstrations and the Cleaver-New York faction favoring violent underground activity.

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