

SAN FRANCISCO BRANCH DISCUSSION
ON THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY

Meeting of July 31, 1968

DISCUSSION BY SWP AND YSA NC MEMBERS

Asher Harer (San Francisco Party NC)

Comrades, it's possible to use dialectics very formally. It's been done in the movement quite a number of times. You can make a completely erroneous and artificial separation between form and content. That's been done in this discussion, also.

According to Hegel, and agreed to by Lenin, form makes the content what it is and content equally determines form. The form of something is not merely imposed upon it from the outside, but reflects what is inside.

Lenin, again and again, makes the point that it is important for Marxist analysis to have an all-sided view of things. That's absolutely correct. But all-sided means that you must have an all-sided analysis in order to determine the dynamic and the motion of what you're trying to examine.

The BPP is moving in the following directions, according to my way of looking at it: independent of the ruling class, it constitutes the beginning of a black vanguard, the most important one in the United States today. Its program is faulty in that it starts out very well but doesn't go far enough. In its actions and many of its statements, it's quite ultra-left. But the fact that it is running for office is a very progressive thing as against those black organizations that have tried to fight the capitalist class but have never moved into the electoral field where you have a direct contest for power. It's one of the places where you can contest for power, as well as the streets, of course, and the various other things that you use. But in this period, this is a very important place to mobilize your forces, in the electoral field. And they're moving in that direction.

We want to work with them. We want to make contact with them in every way we can. There's been a lot of talk around the branch by people who say we shouldn't give critical support to the local BPP candidates saying that we always endorse the form. The form in which the electoral contest takes place is decisive. It must move the class, or some sections of the class, forward in the way of independent political action. And if it doesn't do this, the form -- it's quite separated from the content, the reality of the thing -- that means that we cannot possibly support it.

You can take the electoral alliance of the BPP with the PFP, which we do not support, that alone, and isolate it from everything else and you come up with an absolute criterion. Because they have

this electoral alliance, because the PFP is filling a vacuum in bourgeois politics, therefore we cannot endorse them.

But that is isolating only one aspect of the question from everything else. Actually, those who want critical support for the BPP do not support the form in which the alliance takes place. We do not. That is precisely what we're critical of.

What do we support? We support the direction of the BPP. We support their militancy, their independence, their confrontation with sections of the capitalist state. We do not support the electoral alliance and that is precisely what we're critical of. I see this as a bypass, a sidetrack from the general direction of the BPP, something that we criticize.

Let's understand what critical support is. Some comrades seem to think critical support is the same thing as support. In other words, you give critical support and that means you're going to go in and work for the PFP, enter into joint committees and so forth, and eventually you get into support for Eldridge Cleaver. That's not so. Critical support goes all the way from 1% support and all the rest criticism. That's what Lenin talks about when he talks about the rope supporting the hanging man. Or, it can be 90% support and 10% criticism. It goes all the way. It depends on the nature of the group.

Critical support is a tactic that we take towards organizations that we hope to influence by that tactic. It is a political tactic; that's all it is. By no means does it mean we support that organization all the way. It means that we want to reach this organization through the tactic of political support. And if we are friendly towards the organization like we are toward the BPP, it means that our tactic would be mostly support and less on the critical side. And the critical side is precisely their electoral alliance with the PFP. What we support is the direction of the BPP, what it is, where it is going.

You have to look at the real relationship of forces between the BPP and the PFP. In that alliance, the BPP is the strongest force. It has the direction that is in consonance with history, not the PFP. PFP is going contrary to the general thrust of history. PFP tends to lean on the BPP. Of course, it wants to take the BPP and move it into the field of electoral politics. It wants to tie BPP up with people like Dave McReynolds and others of that ilk. Because that's the kind of people that are in the PFP, mostly unreconstructed Democrats that are opposed to the war and so forth. Most of them came out of the Democratic Party and many of them will go back in. But I do not believe that the BPP is going in that direction. And we want to intervene precisely to try to help it not go in that direction. That is the meaning of critical support; it means nothing more than that.

We have all sorts of terms being thrown around here rather aimlessly which are foreign to my lexicon. Third partyism, for example. We're falling into third partyism. Third partyism must always be defined. There is no such term in our movement as third partyism. It's bourgeois third partyism.

A labor party is a third party. The BPP is a third party. We're in favor of those. We're not opposed to third parties as such. We're opposed to certain third parties. We're opposed to the PFP and any bourgeois third party. We are not opposed to the BPP.

I feel that what we would say to the BPP in the process of giving them critical support is what is wrong with their alliance with PFP. That in this alliance they must publicize the PFP, they must support liberal, pacifist candidates of the PFP. They have to run on a two-program platform. They have not only their program, but they're almost forced to support also the PFP's program, at least in the case of Eldridge Cleaver. These are the things we would point out. They should be moving in the direction of an independent black party.

In order to be in a position to tell them this, to talk to them, you have to be in a position to have dialogue with them. Not only in defense of Huey Newton, but also on the question of the electoral arena. That's why I feel that the tactic of critical support is the correct form. Because it puts you in a position to actually talk to them positively, not on the outside in a negative position where you're merely criticizing. It's better to be in there supporting their candidates.

One final point. Critical support not only can be from 1 to 99%, but the form it takes, even where you're in support of them, can mean many different things. It can mean that you merely make a statement in your press. It could mean that you would actually go out and campaign for them while you campaign for your own candidates. It could mean that you would go into joint committees with the BPP and work with them in support of their candidates. We don't know what form it will take. First we have to make the political decision of are we going to give them critical support. Once we do that, we can then decide on the exact form that support will take.

Bob Chester (San Francisco Party NC)

It seems fairly clear that most of the comrades have pretty well made up their minds one way or the other on this question. The arguments are beginning to repeat themselves. Each person takes the section the most vital and significant and emphasizes that point. I, for example, feel the weight of the evidence is toward

the independence of the operation of the BPP and that critical support is warranted.

If it was only a question of discussing the pros and cons of support or non-support on the basis that you could agree on a certain tactic, that wouldn't be any serious problem. But this discussion has taken a different turn. It began ostensibly on this question, support or non-support, on the basis of a tactical evaluation. But it has developed now into a question where one side calls it a tactical evaluation and the other side calls it a principled question. We are not arguing on the same grounds anymore. It's two different, isolated, separate questions.

You don't have any possibility of even compromising on that question. That's essentially the reason for all the heat that was engendered last week. The differences were being posed on a fundamental principled question: Can you support anything that's got the name of a bourgeois third party or formation of that type? Or, is it possible to just split away a section and call it independent? It's no longer a tactical question.

On that basis each person has to make his choice. Is it a fundamental question or is it a tactical question? On the basis of that choice, you have to then decide and vote. I don't think we can get too much further here in our discussion.

I've been thinking about this considerably since the last discussion. It's clear to me now that whatever new piece of information that comes up -- if it's Eldridge Cleaver accepting the PFP nomination or something else -- each side is going to make a completely different evaluation of that new event. So that you're in the position constantly of reaching a point of principled opposition on each little new incident that arises. That becomes a dangerous situation. I felt it important to turn the stress here away from the pros and cons of the issue to a broader extent. This will go from here to the PC which will make a final decision and will carry out that decision.

Then at each new stage, we're going to have a new argument arising. That's what's in the cards if this present discussion continues. So that we could, if we're not careful, become embroiled in a long, extended wrangle that will harden the branch into mortal combat over a long period.

So I think what is in order here is that the comrades make their evaluations on the basis of this discussion. I don't think anybody will add too much new to it now. But once that decision is made, we operate on the basis of as much restraint as possible and as much consultation between the people that carry opposing views as possible and try to work out a system of carrying out the basic activity of the party which is still the election campaign.

Nat Weinstein (San Francisco Party NC)

I just want to say a word on the example of the American Labor Party that was given last week and the Farmer-Labor Party. One thing comrades should understand is that it is not parallel for several reasons.

First, the ALP was an independent organization running in its own name. It was an organization based on the trade unions. It did not run on some other party's name. It did not run on the Democratic Party line; it ran on the ALP line. But even more important, it contested the Democratic Party candidates statewide. It fought for power with the Democratic Party in New York State. It ran its gubernatorial candidate against the Democratic Party. It differentiated itself from the Democratic Party in that way.

Asher said this tonight, other comrades have said it, and this has been a theme running through all of the statements of comrades in favor of critical support. We can support them and where we criticize them is precisely on this point. We're all in agreement on criticizing the coalition with the PFP.

It's precisely this coalition with the PFP which takes the form of an electoral alliance which is the form -- and I maintain because of the Cleaver candidacy, the essence -- of the BPP campaign. It's tied together with the Cleaver campaign and with the PFP. What you're proposing is that we support the BPP and criticize precisely the only viable reason why we could give them critical support. They're not independent. Their campaign is inextricably interlinked with the PFP. What you comrades are saying, really, is that what you want to support when you want to support the BPP local candidates is not independent black political action. What you're proposing to support is black political action. It's not the same thing.

We're for independent black political action. The black Democrats are for black political action. Those who support Adam Clayton Powell are for black political action. But what we're for and what distinguishes us from everybody else and what we see as progressive in the BPP in their initial thrust is the concept of independent black political action.

Comrades have made the point that what is a principle for us is not necessarily a principle for other people. That's true, they may not be aware that it's a principle. Workers don't know that it's a principle not to cross a picket line. But it's a principle, nevertheless.

The whole idea of independent black political action is the idea of black people organizing independently so they can exercise their strength. And they learn in the course of their organization, from their action as an independent movement in an electoral effort, that they have the strength to change society if they organize

independently. But the coalition with PFP is of such a character that it will not be the lesson that is taught throughout the country. Whatever gains the BPP might appear to make would be undercut by the fact of their relationship with the PFP. And it's for that reason that it's unprincipled.

I said privately to some comrades that it wouldn't be a principled violation if there was an alliance between the BPP and us. Why is it different? It's because it would be an alliance of two propaganda groups on the principled basis of projecting the idea of independent black political action. We would be supporting them explicitly for that reason. It wouldn't cut across the purpose that they state, that they have projected for the black movement. It would aid it. For that reason, it would be different.

Think very carefully about this because our actions in giving critical support will speak much louder than any words we might say to explain how we support black political action that is not independent.

Paul Montauk (Oakland-Berkeley Party NC)

The question we're discussing here is whether or not the BPP is independent of the PFP, this party that's within the context of bourgeois politics. Take a look at it. The local BPP candidates are not running on the PFP program, but running on the BPP program, a ten-point program, as well as the main point of defending Huey Newton.

Some comrades claim that the BPP has become subordinated to the PFP. Let's look at this Militant article (Aug. 2, 1968) we waited a week for. In there, we find that the BPP didn't even show up at the convention of the New York PFP. Someone had to go out and find a Black Panther and drag him into the convention to make a statement. This guy, the National Headquarters Chairman, comes in on BPP electoral policy and then refuses to answer any questions from the floor from the PFP. Does this show that he has subordinated himself to the PFP? Does that sound like dependence?

Then we have one paragraph in the Militant article which says the PFP also agreed to seek ballot status for the BPP congressional candidate in New York. The way I would interpret that is that the BPP has gone ahead and announced their independence before the PFP and was running an independent campaign up until that point. I don't think PFP seeking ballot status for that candidate will change his essential nature.

We would give critical support to a mass black party that had the most thoroughly reformist program in the world as long as it was independent of the ruling class. What these comrades are saying who say we can't give critical support to the BPP campaigns is that

they are not independent of the ruling class. That's where I think the fundamental difference is. Are the BPP and its local campaigns independent of the ruling class? I think they are. I don't think either the Cleaver campaign or the ballot designation makes them dependent upon the ruling class.

Carl Frank (San Francisco Youth NC)

To decide whether we're going to give political support to a candidacy other than our own, we have to take into account the motion, the dynamic and the thrust of social forces and the overall political reality of a specific situation.

Let's look first at our understanding of the black struggle today in terms of the political realities of the American scene. I want to quote from an article by George Breitman in a new pamphlet from Merit Publishers called "The National Question and Self-Determination." He says: "The main defect of the liberation forces is the absence of an independent black political party, no matter what its name, which could mobilize and lead the people against the two capitalist parties both on the electoral field and in mass action. Most of the moderate leaders seek to keep the black people shackled to the Democratic or Republican machines."

Then he goes on to talk about opponents to a black political party among black militants and criticizes them on the basis of their apolitical understanding of the need for electoral activity. He concludes by saying: "The establishment of such a party would not only add a powerful arm to the Afro-American struggle, enabling its members to speak in a single voice and make alliances with other opposition forces, it could shake and break up the two party system that has long insured the stability of monopolist domination in the United States."

That's the general context. We want to try and break up the two party Democratic and Republican party machine hold over politics in this country. We know that the PFP can never do that. The PFP is like, as Stu Albert once said, going into the bathroom in order to come back into the Democratic Party. That's what the PFP is like.

Not to give critical support to the BPP is to say, in effect, that that is where we think the BPP is moving. That is, it's not moving to shake up that two party system. The BPP, building and organizing in the black community, can do that.

The fact that it is moving towards becoming a political party in a political field, a contesting political party in the electoral arena, is a very significant fact. In the electoral platform, they can directly challenge, directly contest before the eyes of the masses the dominant political power in the ghetto today which is Willie Brown and liberal Democratic Party black politicians. The

fact that they're running a campaign is a big step forward in that direction.

There's a lot of talk about the criterion for critical support. I don't think anybody articulated it better than Bob Himmel in 1965 when he articulated our support for the Rev. Cleage campaign for the Detroit Common Council. Cleage, remember, had been a builder of the Freedom Now Party. But after that what he considered a failure, moved back towards Democratic Party politics. By 1965, he ran a campaign that was nominally independent for the Common Council. Bob said that we supported him in this campaign because he'd been able to maintain independence from the political machine of the Detroit power structure.

The BPP local candidates meet that criterion. Let's look at Kathleen Cleaver's campaign, which certainly should be the most suspect being that she's the wife of Eldridge Cleaver. In a statement on her candidacy published not only in the BPP paper but also in the PFP newspaper, the BPP said that the "BPP has every intention of destroying the hold of the Democratic machine on the black community. It is carrying this out by running its Communications Secretary, Kathleen Cleaver, in the 18th Assembly District. The ten-point program of the BPP is the basis of our campaign. The generous support we've received from all sections of the Bay Area community, both black and white, indicates the powerful leadership we have exerted and we will weigh this leadership against Sacramento in order to free the political prisoners Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver and further the liberation of the black community by any means necessary. We challenge Willie Brown to a contest."

The question we have to answer is -- is the essential thrust of the BPP campaigns towards a coalition with white middle class reformists? That's what Nat Weinstein said he thought would be the effect. Is their campaign telling people, let's get together with white liberals? If you believe that, you should vote against critical support because the essence of the campaign is not independent.

However, if you see the actions the BPP are carrying out and you see the central thrust is the support for Huey P. Newton, is for mobilizing support in the black community for black political prisoners, then you should vote for critical support.

The final thing. Milton said it's very difficult for us to tell people to vote for the BPP in this case because they're running on a PFP ballot designation. Well, how then can we tell black people to join the BPP? We can't tell them to vote for them. How can we tell them to join the BPP?

Bob Himmel (San Francisco Party NC)

I want to comment on the point which Bob Chester made before because it alarmed me a little bit. I hope what he's predicting is not so. He says, in effect, that minds are so locked up right now that no matter what evidence develops that this situation is going to persist for an extended period. That's the way I interpret what he's saying, that each side will view any further evidence as simply confirmation for their own position.

What we're dealing with here are two prognoses about a certain development. In my opinion, the weight of evidence at this point indicates that the BPP in its electoral policy -- note, in their electoral policy -- has moved from a position of seeming independence, even within their alliance with the PFP, more and more to a position of fusing their election campaigns with that of PFP, reaching its highest expression in the Eldridge Cleaver presidential campaign.

The other comrades say that there's some kind of an inexorable logic working here that's going to prove this prognosis false. Maybe there is. I'm going to keep my mind open. I don't make a fetish out of the formality of the PFP ballot status for these local candidates. There are circumstances -- if it can be demonstrated that they are really independent and different from the Cleaver campaign, really independent and different from the PFP and yet on the PFP ticket -- under which I could consider giving them critical support. And I will if that is demonstrated. I hope other comrades will likewise keep their minds equally open and watch, however the decision goes now, how the things develop.

Asher Harer -- I thought for a minute he'd switched sides when he quoted Hegel pointing out to us that form reflects content. For some strange reason, he then went on to use that as a take-off point to show here that form has nothing to do with the content. The form of the alliance between the BPP and the PFP is not the question. The content is different and the form doesn't express it, although it does in Hegel.

The point he makes is what we're supporting is not this coalition, the form, but the militancy of the BPP. That's not what is being proposed here, comrades. What's being proposed is that we support precisely the form, precisely the coalition, precisely the electoral campaigns. We all agree on supporting the militancy.

I'd like to comment on the Cleage phenomenon. This is important. I rethought that relationship and it's really instructive. Comrades make this point that electoral activity on the part of the BPP is a move in the right direction. That started me thinking on how I first met Rev. Cleage back in 1962. Rev. Cleage at that time was in the Democratic Party and was campaigning for what he called "vote three plus one." That's when we first came in contact

I cite this, comrades, because I don't think you should get hung up in this idea that we've got to do this because we've got to relate. The best way to relate is to be honest, in the long-run.