

SAN FRANCISCO BRANCH DISCUSSION  
ON THE BLACK PANTHER PARTY

Meeting of July 24, 1968

DISCUSSION BY SWP AND YSA NC MEMBERS

Nat Weinstein (San Francisco Party NC)

Comrades, I have a fourth motion. I haven't changed my position on the motion submitted by Bob Himmel and myself. But I think, in the light of some new information that I have which I want to present, in the interests of those comrades who find it very difficult to make up their minds, we owe it to them to postpone making a decision at least until the next issue of the Militant comes out. Then, after the comrades see what's in the next issue of the Militant which I am going to indicate, they can decide whether to postpone further. I think that after they see what's in the next issue of the Militant they'll want to postpone even further.

There's going to be a report in this coming issue of the Militant on the PFP convention in New York. Some facts that affect our decision will be in that issue of the Militant in connection with that convention. For one thing, a fight took place at that convention between the ISC forces and others. It's not clear in my mind; I got a very sketchy story of what happened. That's why I'm proposing that we wait until we see what the Militant reports. I have some pretty firm information.

The ISC laid down a set of conditions for Cleaver's candidacy before they would vote for Cleaver as the PFP's candidate for president. The conditions are as follows.

One is that there has to be a ticket balance. That is, a balance between the presidential and vice-presidential candidates. They say that the vice-presidential candidate -- and they want a commitment from the BPP on all these points -- be number one white, number two he be antiwar, number three that he be moderate as compared to the militancy of the BPP.

The second condition is that it be a PFP campaign and not a Cleaver campaign. They insist on this. They indicated what they mean as follows: A. It would be a betrayal of the PFP if the campaign was conducted in the manner of a Cleaver cult of personality. B. They insist that it not be a third ticket campaign and that Cleaver, running as the PFP presidential candidate, emphasize the permanent character of the PFP and the necessity of building a third political movement in this country along the lines of the PFP.

The third condition is that Cleaver unequivocally conduct a PFP campaign as against a BPP campaign. That is, he run on the PFP program, not on the BPP program. Subpoints in this third point: A. The

PFP welcomes other political formations in supporting the PFP campaign, but that it must be support of the PFP campaign. B. Political organizations like the BPP can nominate Cleaver, but it must be a PFP-BPP campaign.

I think I mentioned that Cleaver must campaign for building a broad third party and be firmly committed to it.

The ISC apparently informed the convention that the BPP agreed to this, but they weren't satisfied. They agreed to postpone the convention one day and they flew some of the Black Panthers from the Bay Area to New York so that they could indicate what their attitude is on these questions. Bobby Seale and somebody else from the BPP -- I don't know who the other person was -- went down and agreed to the essential ideas contained in these conditions.

Moreover, the senatorial candidate of the PFP in New York is Dave McReynolds. He's a McCarthy supporter, a social democrat. He was the leader of an anti-Humphrey, pro-McCarthy demonstration in New York very recently. He is on record right now as being opposed to any opposition to McCarthy's being the Democratic Party candidate. The vote took place with the Panthers present and they voted for Dave McReynolds as the senatorial candidate of the PFP in New York.

In addition, the Freedom and Peace Party candidate for senator is Herman Ferguson, the black victim being persecuted for an alleged plot to murder black leaders. The BPP has indicated its support for McReynolds as against this FPP candidate.

For the information of the comrades, the BPP in New York -- you've read about it in the Chronicle -- was organized through the FPP and the Stalinists. They were committed to the FPP. One of the reasons the [Bay Area] BPP was brought in was to influence these Black Panthers in New York. And Bobby Seale assured the convention of the PFP that those Panthers in New York would separate themselves and had cooperated with FPP because they were innocent and politically unsophisticated. And he indicated that he had explained what the real picture is and said he was in the process of convincing them not to participate with the FPP, but with the PFP.

This is the information. The Militant will have it in detail and if there were any inaccuracies in my presentation of these facts, you'll have to forgive me. But I think it's pretty close to the truth. I got a very sketchy report over the phone.

From the beginning of this discussion I've indicated that I think there is a principled question involved. I've indicated it in a way that has probably left some confusion. I've indicated that I think a principled question could become involved. I am convinced that a principled question is involved now.

I tried to do this by demonstrating that the PFP candidacies are a principled question for us. We cannot, in principle, give critical support to candidates of the PFP.

The problem that we had before us when this discussion began some weeks ago was what would be the content of the BPP local campaigns. Would they be independent or would they be dependent on the PFP? If they are dependent on the PFP, if there is such a close connection between the two, it is a principled question for us. By calling for a vote for the BPP candidates in this kind of a relationship, a popular front type relationship with the PFP, then we are violating principles. We are crossing the class line. Comrades owe it to themselves and to the party, owe it to the black revolutionary movement, owe it to political clarity to gauge this reality very carefully.

My tendency is to get very excited at the very powerful ideas that I think I'm presenting. I think that there's a tendency for the discussion to have gotten heated, and I don't think that's good. This is a plea on my part and an indication of what my feeling is. That is, we should try to avoid the discussion getting heated. We should try to come to a conclusion in as objective a fashion as possible. We should view this dispute as a very small part of the overall work that we have to do and the overall collaboration that we have to take part in among ourselves.

Jim Kendrick (San Francisco Youth NC)

I think Nat's point about the heated character of the discussion is a good point and we should bear that in mind in the tone of the discussion we carry out. The party's not going to divide or split after this discussion.

I think that Nat's done us a service in reporting the information about the PFP convention because that now makes it extremely easy for us to vote down Paul Montauk's motion. We very clearly do not support the Cleaver campaign. I assumed much worse. At least they didn't require him to support the Democratic Party, for example. At least they didn't require him to declare himself an integrationist.

Nat and the comrades who argue that critical support is a principled question seem to think that the question turns around the candidacy of Cleaver. I'd like to give four examples for the consideration of the body on why that's not the case.

We have had, and still have, standing critical support for the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, the original Black Panther Party. To my knowledge, we've never withdrawn our critical support to this organization. They continue to conduct what we consider an independent campaign based on the black community. It's more of a black campaign than a working class campaign. What are we going to do if

the Lowndes County Freedom Organization supports Eldridge Cleaver for president in 1968? Withdraw critical support?

Another example. Comrades have read about DRUM in Detroit, Detroit Revolutionary Union Movement, conducting a wildcat strike not only against the plant, but against the union. Suppose as a result of the experience they had with the union there and as a result of their experience with the bosses, they decide to run in a city election campaign in Detroit. And I think this is the kind of a formation that could really run a humdinger of a campaign and raise some good issues. It would be a big step forward. Suppose that in the process of this campaign, DRUM decides to support Eldridge Cleaver for president in 1968. It's not excluded. Would we then withdraw critical support, assuming we would give it to them before they nominated him. Or would we have to wait to make sure that they didn't nominate Eldridge Cleaver before we gave critical support?

Another example. Suppose in Memphis, Tennessee, where the garbage workers were on strike, as a result of this strike and their experience with the city administration which I would venture to say is a Democratic Party city administration, they decided to run an independent political campaign orienting itself to the problems of black labor and the black community in Memphis. Suppose in the process of this campaign, they decided to support a political figure like Robert Kennedy for president, or Rockefeller or McCarthy, because of their opposition to the war and because these candidates give a certain lip service to the black liberation struggle. Would we then not support that campaign? I don't think so. In fact, I think we would support and continue to support all three of these campaigns.

Suppose in San Francisco there develops a situation among a section of black labor such as culinary workers, construction workers -- in thing about this example I couldn't come up with an instance where there exists a concentration of black labor in one union. I just don't know concrete examples of it. Suppose hospital workers, which tend to be predominantly black, decided, as a result of their experience not only with the union but also in the black community, to run a campaign in San Francisco. And they went to the PFP and asked to use their ballot status and, furthermore, asked the PFP to help them run an election campaign. Would we support that campaign or would we not support that campaign? And if so, what if, in the process of this campaign, they decided to support Eldridge Cleaver for president? Would we withdraw our support to that campaign or not? I don't think we would. I think in all four cases we would support these campaigns as independent political campaigns despite the presidential nomination of Eldridge Cleaver for the PFP.

It has no bearing at all here on this. The key factor here is these local campaigns are independent. Eldridge Cleaver's bid for PFP presidential nomination has no bearing on the content of them at all. They're independent campaigns.

Carl Frank (San Francisco Youth NC)

I think we ought to look at what the party says and, better than that, look at what the party does in action in the history of our party.

I want to mark for the comrades attention that the key political task facing us is to try and achieve the realizable goal, propagandistically, of helping to form a mass black political party. That's one of our key propaganda tasks right now. And I think it's similar, to a certain extent, to the key propaganda task which we set for ourselves in 1938. That is, the job of building a mass party of the workers in this country. Something we hadn't seen until that time, a mass trade union party.

I want to go over some examples -- which I think are very important for comrades to note -- of how we actually used the tool of critical support to help build a political party of the working class.

In 1936, for example, our comrades in Minneapolis, with the agreement of the Political Committee, decided to support the local candidates of the Farmer-Labor Party, the party of Floyd Olsen. He's the same character who tried to smash our comrades, bringing the National Guard and the police in on us two years earlier. And on this party of Olsen's slate in 1936, when we were telling people to vote for the party of Olsen, was the name of Franklin D. Roosevelt. That's 1936. And the Militant of March 19, 1938 had an article characterizing the Farmer-Labor Party as "a cog in the wheel of the Democratic Party machinery." We supported that and we continued to support for some time the local candidates of the Farmer-Labor Party.

In 1938, as one of many examples, we supported the local candidates in New York of the American Labor Party. These candidates were running on the same slate as the candidates of the bourgeoisie, in this case the Democratic Party nominees for Senator and Governor of New York State. We supported the local candidates of the American Labor Party.

In 1940, we didn't run a presidential ticket. And we took a view of what attitude we should take towards the elections in 1940. I want to quote from an editorial in the Militant on our attitude towards the 1940 election campaign. We said: "We still support those candidates of the American Labor Party in New York and the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota who are not running solely as the candidates of the bourgeois parties. We seek their election while we sharply criticize the false opportunist programs on which they are running. Their election, it is clear, would be universally recognized as victories of the labor movement and would spur the movement to labor's own political party."

Who were the candidates of the bourgeoisie? Who was the Democratic Party candidate which the American Labor Party and the Farmer-Labor Party in Minnesota supported in 1940? Again, it was Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Look at this and try to judge the relationship to today. It's very clear that our tactic of giving critical support to the local candidacies is not based on the presidential campaign which those parties support. It's based on something else. Critical support, as these comrades seek to indicate, is given on the basis that there's a significant motion toward an independent political expression.

In terms of the Labor Party, we felt that if by registering a vote for the candidates of the American Labor Party and the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party workers were indicating a desire for independent political action, we could support such a vote. We wanted to support the working class struggle by bending over backwards to give support to any kind of partial form of electoral political expression that would raise the struggle above the limited economic struggle on which it had been carried forth up to that time. It's a very important thing, raising the consciousness of the workers of this country to the fact that they need their own political expression. And a political party carrying on an electoral campaign is such a vehicle.

In the same sense, we propose to support the local candidates of the BPP as an independent black political expression, in spite of the fact that the BPP makes certain mistakes. One mistake is accepting the ballot status of the PFP. Another is accepting and projecting the nomination of Eldridge Cleaver on the PFP ticket and as a PFP campaign. These are mistakes that the BPP has made.

In spite of that, we insist that a vote for Huey Newton, a vote for Bobby Seale and a vote for Kathleen Cleaver is a vote against liberal Democratic Party reformism and a vote for independent black political action taken by an oppressed national minority. We support such a vote because we think it will be understood -- and, in fact, it will be -- and signify an important step towards the formation of a mass black political party in this country.

Paul McKnight (San Francisco Youth NC)

Comrades, there are some very important political issues at stake in this discussion for our party. If some of the things I've read in the past couple days are true -- going back through the back issues of the Militant -- we had situations like an alliance between the American Labor Party in New York and the Democratic Party. In 1938, we critically supported the American Labor Party and its local candidates that were independent candidates while on the same ticket they had candidates of the Democratic Party for Governor and State Senator. And we ran write-in SWP campaigns for the two offices of Governor and State Senator.

The American Labor Party was nothing but a maneuver by the union bureaucrats and the political machinery in New York to set up a funnel to siphon labor votes into the FDR machine. But we gave critical support to the local candidates on this ticket. Also in 1936, the example Carl Frank pointed out, the party supported the Farmer-Labor Party which supported FDR.

The comrades who are trying to say that it would be unprincipled for us to support the three local BPP campaigns have yet to explain the principled difference between the present case of the alliance between the BPP and the previous cases of alliances between the American Labor Party and the Democratic Party where we have given critical support to local campaigns in the past.

It may be that these comrades think there's a principled difference between the American Labor Party and the BPP. Maybe that's where they see the difference is. Or is it that they see Eldridge Cleaver as more of a threat to independent political action than was Franklin Roosevelt? Or is it that in the past thirty years the leadership of our party has been making mistakes, doing unprincipled things? Have they been making unprincipled use of the tool of critical support by supporting these campaigns where there was an alliance between the Democratic Party and a labor party?

So we see that suddenly in 1968 some comrades in San Francisco discover a principle that makes it impossible to do what our party has been doing for the last thirty years.

As for the information provided by Nat Weinstein, I think it's very helpful. It makes it much easier for us to explain the difference between the three local BPP campaigns and the Eldridge Cleaver for President campaign. By giving critical support to the local campaigns and not to the Cleaver campaign, we can explain what we mean by independent political action.

Finally, just one sentence from the educational bulletin on "Independent Campaigns and the Tactic of Critical Support." It's in the part of the report on the Aptheker campaign. It says: "We don't negotiate with the party to which we give critical support. We do it for our own reasons and not for theirs." And I think in giving critical support to the three local campaigns of the BPP we would be doing it for our own reasons.