

The Six Panther Ps



When people think of the Black Panther party they think Black. Some Black people who have some guns who tried to kill some white people. That they were declared by the FBI as the most dangerous bunch of Black folks trying to kill white folks. In actuality, the Black Panther Party was a group unique from a lot of the other groups who formed during the 60's. It was formed among the unemployed, ghetto sections of the Black youth, unlike the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which was an organization of ministers who were well placed in their communities. The Panthers formed their organizing on the basis of the bottom of society - the youth who had no job prospects, who had been hurled off the plantations and into these cities. Of course in that situation, they had a constant confrontation with the police, and the Panthers largely grew out of that relationship.

In the course of their organizing, we have identified six things they did (or did not do), "the Six Panther Ps" which we see as useful, which confirmed our experience in dealing with the unemployed, displaced people at the foundation of our movement. The Panthers were primarily in the Black communities, but we're seeing that the problem of poverty today is across color lines. It was a different period back then, but we saw in what they were doing something we can learn from. We've been testing them as a means of building these five ingredients and building a movement for power.

1: Program

A program indicates the values, goals, issues and interests of that segment of the population that you're focusing on. We believe that everybody should have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that that should not be reduced in any way. However at this stage of history the upper classes of this country have given up that creed. We think

everybody should have those rights, especially in a country that has the kind of productive capacity that this one has. These things should be non-negotiable. We think that our program is a program that is in the interests of the majority of the American people, and not the one that is pursued by those being controlled by the rich. We profoundly believe that, and have found that our experience corroborates that. Not only that, but we are being echoed throughout the world - throughout world people are having to take up this basic program, seeing its fundamental moral principles. We organize and unite around the program.

2: Protest

You cannot be hurting and don't holler. We believe that if you hurt, holler. You got to do something about it, you can't just accept the situation. The segment of the population that we're focusing on, upon which we're building a movement which includes all segments, is a section which has to move, has to protest, and can't accept business as usual. To stand still is to die. To stand still is to go backward. To stand still is to succumb to the kind of depravation that we're seeing. The idea of protest is key, and of course you see in the experiences of the Panthers and other such groups in the past, their ability to affect public opinion, their ability to get heard was based on continuing campaigning and activities around their basic needs.

3: Projects of Survival

This country and this economy can be characterized in one word, "surplus." It's a shame, but that's the reality. People can't acquire things, but there's surplus. They're throwing away food, but people can't eat. Downstairs [in the human rights house] we have more clothes than we can give away. There are surplus nurses, and not enough medical care. Surplus doctors, surplus lawyers! And yet, people are going without. There are 12 million empty luxury housing

units in this country. Look it up! Not run-down units, but luxury units. They are sitting there empty while we have six to ten million people who are living with their parents, or living on the grates, or in shelters and so forth who are all homeless. 12 million units is equivalent to the entire housing stock of Canada - surplus! So, the question of projects of survival is how do we develop a cooperative effort to procure those surpluses, and to use them as a lever for organizing. And we do, we have food distributions. The way we were able to solidify our position when we took over the church was that regularly we were able to get extra baby carriages (cause we don't have cars), fill them with food and go door to door with the carriages and talk to people about their issues and our issues and how we can unite. We get food from bakeries, from food places that are throwing it away. And the food's perfectly good, if you see it you'll see that there ain't nothing wrong with it. Projects of survival are especially significant in our organizing experience. Our organizing attracts people on the basis of their immediate needs - food, housing, childcare, etc. Activities like tent cities and housing takeovers, are designed to meet people's needs and build organization in the process. As we come together to meet our common needs, opportunities for political education and other key elements arise. We have tremendous strength by virtue of addressing the problems which people are struggling with day-to-day. However, we don't just try to meet people's individual needs - we use that struggle to fight for everyone's needs to be met. But that is how many people come into relationship with our organizing efforts. So projects of survival are absolutely key as far as our organizing method.

4: Publicity Work

We, through various forms, generate messages - through newsletters, through T-shirts, or posters, through speaking engagements, through the internet or other things. These are all very critical in terms of getting through our message, and talking to

each other and informing ourselves. You gotta have publicity.

5: Political Education

We're constantly engaging people in study of what their situation is, understanding what their situation is, so they can articulate what's going on and to educate others. Our basic motto is "each one teach one," and "the more you know, the more you owe," to pass on the message and so forth. The significance of this P should not be underestimated. Political education is essential for building resistance, which is at the base of all our efforts. Also, political education can deepen people's commitment to a struggle. It's important that political education isn't seen as something separate from organizing, but as an inseparable part of the process. When political education is irrelevant to the issues that people are struggling with, it's ineffective. It's more effective when it explains their experience, allowing them to gain clarity and insight into their struggles and the struggles of others.

6: Plans not Personalities

This particular P is a lesson from the panthers by way of a negative experience. The Panthers, in what they were doing was targeted by the FBI as the most dangerous organization to the natural security of this country. The FBI developed a plan to fragment, dismantle and destroy this organization. They recognized that that organization was organized as factions around personalities, around a leader. Through subterfuges, infiltration, fake letters and so forth the FBI was able to get these leaders to fight one another. Organizationally, the Panthers were based around these personalities more than a policy, plan or program. A sustainable organization is not dependent on a leader, but dependent on a plan, principles, a policy. We see that as very key.

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