

# Legacy of Struggle

## Re-examining the “Survival Programs” of the Black Panther Party and the lessons to be taken for present day revolutionists

The Black Panther Party “survival programs” instilled terror in the U.S. national ruling class all the way to the head – at the time, Johnson and Nixon, and the fierce hand of J. Edgar Hoover. While many on the Left like to sensationalise the armed and bellicose aspect of the Black Panthers, it is really telling that their survival programs ranked so high in the threat scale in the minds of the ruling elite.

The Black Panthers survival programs started from the premise that, in order to be able to wage a struggle, people should first be able to live. As my Comrade Ian Martin puts it:

*“The BPP’s Ten Point Program was indeed a simple statement of desired reforms to strive towards. But again, the situation of African-Americans then (and now) was extreme, with extraordinary levels of violence, police brutality, infant mortality, poor health, and poverty common. As the Black Panthers conceived it, the Ten Point Program was a program for survival, to keep the community alive long enough to form some kind of revolutionary movement. Perhaps some may scoff at demands such as affordable housing that is not squalid, crowded, decaying, and in a horrible condition, or not having to be at the whim of capricious, uncaring, and greedy landlords, but to the poor, these things are essential. It is difficult for any human being to pay attention to and fight against relatively nebulous concepts like militarism and the State when they are forced to fight concretely for the very necessities of life everyday.”*

Ian Martin,

*From Reforms to Revolution*

A strategy of building a long-lasting movement able to wage a protracted struggle against the State must encompass both an element of destruction as well as an element of construction. Not only must we bring out the contradictions of capitalism to the forefront, we must also show that those contradictions and problems that capitalism cannot resolve are not unavoidable but can be resolved through collective means and a non-capitalist framework.

Institutions are based on needs, real or perceived. Institutions like the State, police and “the free market” are perverted creations that satisfy needs like the organisation of things, safety and delivery of goods and services. Our argument should not be that those things are not important, or that capitalism does not address those issues, but that they can be addressed better under a different system, in a more equitable manner so all will have those things, without sacrificing our freedoms and forgoing a fulfilling life. That we cannot have “pursue of happiness” under capitalism.

Constructive and destructive – our program must be both. Not in some future communist society, but presenting an inkling of what this future might look like and building today the capacity for self-organisation and self-defence of the working-classes.

The BPP’s “survival programs” had a two-pronged aim – to deliver where the State and capitalism was lacking, and as an extremely successful propaganda tool. The first aim we must put in the forefront, the second aim is a consequence.

These acts must be, however, built on the premise of *collective action*, not on revolutionary charity. People must be engaged not just on receiving the services but also in delivering it. As anarchists, we must build in people the idea for self-sufficiency and expose the waste of capitalism and the superfluousness of the State apparatus.

What does that mean? Programs like Copwatch and Food not Bombs are not revolutionary or reformist in nature. Neither is a strike, a riot or a march. Who is engaged in it, and the *process in which they are engaged* is what makes an act revolutionary or reformist.

What we must be for, then, is the expansion of the creative capacity of those inside the movement – to create a space for reflection and analytical development for those that in general do not have such space or that are led to believe that they do not have such capacity. We must be destructive towards the outside, constructive towards the inside. It is not the victory in and of itself that matters (although that is also very important) but that the participants have ownership of such victories.

It has been fashionable for a while, for example, to praise SEIU as a paragon of defending workers, because they engaged in highly successful organising drives. They were giving the union movement something it had lacked for a long time – victories. Yet many never looked at how those victories were achieved and the price that the labour movement paid for those victories to be achieved. The SEIU model of corporate unionism spread like a wildfire in the minds of many “progressive” elements of the union movement. If now the monster is being unmasked to many, it has to do a lot more with Stern’s own statements and power grabbing than with a clear analysis of the situation.

I’ll be visiting this subject again later. This text is long enough for now but the situation of working people in the U.S. is dire – much more now due to the “crisis”. Much like when the BPP created its survival programs, the need for programs that address the open spaces left by the State is ever present. While we must be in the defensive stage of the revolutionary struggle, any ground left open must be taken and held on to.



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