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This past weekend, the city of Oakland came alive as several hundred rank and file members of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense came to town to celebrate their 40th anniversary.

The atmosphere and overall mood was electric and moving. One can't help but have a greater appreciation for the types of sacrifices the Panthers made on our behalf. Keep in mind many of their members were 18, 19 and 20 years old when they joined and fearlessly went up against the police to put an end to police brutality. At the same time they selflessly served the community by setting up free health clinics and serving free lunch and breakfast in schools.

In these interviews we caught up with well known panthers like Bobby McCall who joined the Philadelphia chapter in 1970 when he was 20 years old. McCall who is father to Digital Underground member Money B noted that his son was just 6 months old when the Panther headquarters were raided under the leadership of police commissioner Frank Rizzo who he described as a racist fascist. He noted that the Panthers were made to strip naked on the sidewalk and were brutalized in front of the community. This backfired and caused the community to solidly get behind the Panthers. McCall noted that incident inspired him to join.

He explains the inner workings of the chapter and talks about the programs they launched. He also talks about the Panther's connection to Hip Hop. He recounts how he and others went out to raise money for the New York 21 which included 2Pac's mom Afeni Shakur. Bobby talked about remembering how she was pregnant at the time with Pac.

We sat down and spoke with Tareka Lewis who was the first female to join the Black Panthers. Tareka gives in in-depth run down of the intense racism that the Panthers were up against. She talks in detail about the Ku Klux Klan and their ongoing activities in Oakland. She talks about how the Klan used to hold meetings in Oakland and as time went on many of those racists and their supporters were recruited and joined Oakland and neighboring police departments. She also talks in great detail about the systematic dismantling of Oakland's and San Francisco's historic Black downtown districts under eminent domain laws around the time the Panthers formed.

We spoke with Ronald 'Elder' Freidman out of Los Angeles and he talked about the brutal conditions and police force that existed in

LA that lead up to the forming of the Panthers and the infamous Watts Riots. He also talked about the formation of LA's gangs and how they were born in reaction to white gangs like the Spook Hunters which used to terrorize Black folks living in South Central. He talked about how the Panthers worked to politicize the gangs.

We spoke with former panther Ayanna Adae to get an update on the plight of 2Pac's godmother Assata Shakur who is exiled in Cuba and has a one million dollar bounty over her head. We talked about the reasons the US government has been so relentless in pursuing Panthers 30 years after the fact.

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In part 2 we interview former Panther Malik Raheim out of New Orleans about the work he's done in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as well as the history of the Panthers in New Orleans. We start off the segment with a speech from H. Rap Brown

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In part 3 we talk with Chairman Fred Hampton Jr of the POCC about the current state of politics and how we should be honoring the Panthers. We also get an in-depth breakdown about the Panthers on the East Coast. We speak with several members of the Boston, New Bedford, and New Haven chapters

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For more info on the Panthers.. check out this article.

Remembering the Black Panthers An example of revolutionary defiance and militancy

By Carlos 'Carlito' Rovira

Forty years ago, in October 1966, the Black Panther Party was born. This was one of the highlights in the history of the U.S. revolutionary movement, and the Black liberation struggle in particular.

Young African Americans dared to stand up and challenge the rule of the capitalist state, to the point of arming themselves to demand an end to Black oppression. Their vision of Black emancipation evolved into a vision of the liberation of all oppressed people and the smashing of the capitalist system.

The U.S. government, terrified by the potential for revolution and the influence these Black leaders and freedom fighters were gaining, resorted to the most extreme violence to destroy the BPP. It is a campaign that is still felt today.

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, as the party was first called, was formed in Oakland, Calif., by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. The name—and the famous panther logo—came from the Lowndes Country Freedom Organization in Alabama which organized for independent Black political action with the help of Stokely Carmichael and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

The formation of the Black Panther Party was the culmination of a resistance movement over the long history that characterizes the oppression of African Americans in the United States, from the lashes of slavery to the beatings and murders by the police in modern times. It grew up in the aftermath of the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X—a powerful voice for militant Black self-determination and liberation. It drew inspiration from the Deacons for Defense and Justice, organized for African American self-defense against racist Klan and police terror in the South.

The Panthers recognized the need for an organization that was capable of addressing the racist violence that the Black masses faced. Every gain being made by the Civil Rights movement was being matched by violence and lynchings by racist cops and the Ku Klux Klan, in the North and South alike.

The right to armed self-defense

The Panthers won respect and admiration for their militancy and defiance in the face of the racist police state. For example, less than a year after their founding, on May 2, 1967, a group of 30 Black Panthers walked into the California state capitol building armed with shotguns and automatic rifles. The armed but peaceful demonstration was to protest the Mulford Act, aimed at prohibiting citizens from carrying firearms on their persons or in their vehicles.

As the Panthers walked towards the entrance of the capitol building, they were approached by television and other news media. They used the occasion to call upon African Americans everywhere to arm themselves against the systematic brutality and terror practiced by the power structure.

But the party's efforts went far beyond their call for armed self-defense and their patrols of racist cops. They also carried out consistent community work, gaining the confidence of the people not only in the Black community but among other oppressed nationalities as well.

Panther chapters sprang up in the African American communities of major cities from coast to coast. Wherever they established branches, they tried to set up outreach programs like free breakfast for children and free clothing drives. They used every one of these opportunities to expose the avaricious nature of the rich and powerful who exist at the expense of the poor.

The Panthers became a symbol of militancy and discipline in the Black community.

The Panthers were influenced by Malcolm X's rejection of "turn the other cheek" pacifism for the Black liberation struggle, as well as by the socialist movement in the United States and around the world. Their "Black Power" salute combined with street corner sales of Mao Zedong's "Little Red Books" of quotations.

The international situation during this period also contributed to the birth of the Panthers. The 1949 Chinese Revolution, the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the Vietnamese Revolution and the heroic struggle of south Vietnam's National Liberation Front against U.S. imperialism, along with the other national liberation struggles in Africa, Latin America and Asia had a great impact in inspiring revolutionaries in the United States, including the Black Panthers.

Their militancy and revolutionary politics quickly put them in the center of the African American liberation struggle, as well as in the growing mass movements that were sweeping the country.

Capitalism is the problem

More and more, the party put the blame for the plight of the African American people on the capitalist system. It rejected the view that the problems of racism could be solved within the confines of the exploitative system, or that it was possible to accumulate enough capital in the Black community to rival capitalism with "Black capital." Instead, Panther speakers called for socialist revolution within the context of the Civil Rights era. Their uncompromisingly revolutionary and anti-capitalist stance was the most prominent in what became a new trend within the Black liberation struggle of the 1950s and 1960s.

As part of the political training of its membership, the BPP studied Marxist literature like the Communist Manifesto and the writings of Mao Zedong.

The Black Panther Party was a disciplined and organized revolutionary political entity. The Panthers put forward the need for professional, organizational sophistication in building a revolutionary political party.

While the party's Ten-Point Program reflected its political views and line of march, it was the membership rules that ensured the internal discipline of the organization. Membership rules touched a range of matters, including mandatory collective study of revolutionary theory; respect for women inside and outside the BPP; and respect for the property of the poor.

Revolutionary multinational alliances

The Panthers advocated a united front of revolutionary organizations to guarantee the success of a revolutionary struggle in the United States. Their organizing efforts extended to Puerto Rican, Chicano, Asian, other nationally oppressed people and the white working class.

They forged alliances of various kinds, such as with the American Indian Movement and Cesar Chavez and the farm workers' movement. The Panthers stood in solidarity with the struggle for women's equality, especially supporting those sectors of the women's movement that were anti-imperialist and anti-racist. To the surprise of many, on the heels of the Stonewall rebellion, Panther leader Huey P. Newton publicly supported the struggle to end gay and lesbian oppression.

The Panthers perspective was toward building a multinational alliance of revolutionary organizations. Their most notable effort was the Rainbow Coalition, organized in June 1969 in Chicago by Panther leader Fred Hampton, which consisted of the Black Panther Party; the Young Lords, a U.S. organization of Puerto Rican revolutionaries; and organizations representing Chicanos, Asians and poor whites. Hampton's vision was to eventually merge these allied organizations into a single revolutionary entity, to forge a revolutionary organization with representation from the full spectrum of the working class.

Wherever their agitational work was conducted, on the streets, on campuses or at public events, the Panthers upheld the principle of solidarity with the liberation movements in the oppressed and colonized countries. At the height of the Vietnam War, the Black Panther leadership made an open gesture of internationalism by offering to send party members to fight alongside the National Liberation Front in their struggle against U.S imperialism.

Fierce U.S. repression

Faced with the Black Panther Party's tremendous growth and revolutionary orientation, the U.S. government struck back. It organized a massive political-military campaign, involving the FBI and police departments around the country, to destroy the Panthers' leadership.

In a now well-documented campaign called COINTELPRO, or Counter Intelligence Program, the FBI orchestrated covert operations—personally overseen by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover—to provoke conflicts between the Black Panthers and other organizations. They employed a network of infiltrators and provocateurs to disrupt the party's discipline and leadership.

Police attacks were common. Cops routinely raided party offices and the homes of Panther members. Dozens of Panthers were killed outright, often in cold blood. The most notable of these cop assassinations was the Dec. 4, 1969, murder of Fred Hampton in Chicago while he slept. He was 21 years old.

Dozens more Panther members and leaders spent years in prison.

The campaign to jail Panther leaders and activists long outlived the organization itself. Mumia Abu-Jamal, who at 16-years-old had been the minister of information in the party's Philadelphia branch, was framed up and sentenced to death in 1981. He has been in prison ever since, despite a worldwide effort to save his life.

The Black Panther Party ultimately could not withstand the government onslaught. The combined police attacks and covert operations compounded internal differences. Unable to withstand the tremendous repression, by the mid-1970s the Black Panther Party was essentially defunct.

Lessons for today

Bourgeois historians often try to downplay the role of the state in the destruction of the Panthers. When they do acknowledge the state repression, it is to discourage revolutionaries—especially from the oppressed nationalities—from taking action. Do not dare to struggle, you cannot stand up to the power of the capitalist state.

Revolutionaries draw different lessons. The rulers were not then and are not now invincible. The fact that the U.S. government relentlessly attacked the Panthers before they had a chance to steel the discipline of their rank and file only points to the need to build disciplined organizations of professional revolutionaries today in preparation for the battles to come.

As long as capitalist oppression exists, the rise of revolutionary movements, like the one that gave rise to the Black Panther Party, is a historical certainty. The Panthers showed that revolutionary ideology and organization, embraced by the most oppressed sectors of the working class, is what the ruling class fears the most.

Everything the Black Panthers did and the sacrifices they made will not be in vain. Those organizing for socialism in the United States embrace their history and strive to emulate their courage and revolutionary spirit.

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