

Persecuting Panthers

The San Francisco 8 and the ongoing war against the Black Panther Party

by Kiilu Nyasha

Last year, the Black Panther Party celebrated its 40th anniversary, garnering incredible media coverage of its history and the positive impact it had on communities here and around the world. Numerous activities across the country preceded a very successful Oakland reunion that drew Panthers from as far away as Tanzania. One of the most notable events was "The Black Panther Rank and File" exhibit and series of forums at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. It ran from March 17 to July 2, 2006, and turned out to be the best attended exhibit at the Center since its opening.

Little did we know that the same forces that attacked and destroyed the Party were busy planning still more attacks on its former members. (Note: The BPP no longer exists, but in keeping with our slogan, "once a Panther, always a Panther," I'll not be referring to our brothers as "ex-Panthers.")

Three months after the 40th anniversary celebration, on Jan. 23, 2007, the police in New York, Florida and California arrested Francisco Torres, Harold Taylor, Richard Brown, Richard O'Neal, Ray Boudreaux and Henry Watson Jones on charges related to the 1971 killing of a San Francisco police officer – and also charged two political prisoners, Herman Bell and Jalil Muntaqim (Anthony Bottom). They're both parole eligible after over 30 years in prison.

Ten brothers would have been arrested had it not been for the fact that one, Ronald Stanley Bridgeforth, has not been seen or heard from in over 30 years and is still being sought. And John Bowman, known as JB, one of the five Grand Jury Resisters, is deceased.

JB died last Dec. 23 of terminal cancer that went undiagnosed by this medical system until in its advanced stage. The FBI literally hounded him to his death and beyond; they sought to open his casket – there wasn't one; he was cremated – they interrogated family members and the funeral director and they even visited the crematorium voicing suspicions that he had escaped. Unbelievable!

We must be clear that this witch hunt, part of the war on terror, is really a war on resistance to an increasingly fascist, imperialist government. It's a war on the best of our kind, heroes and sheroes who resist racist repression and fight for the survival and liberation of our people.

One such hero was JB, who joined the Party in 1967 in San Francisco, where he grew up. I met him in '69 or '70 in New Haven and grew to respect and love him dearly. Warm and caring, he was truly dedicated to serving and uplifting Black

people and did so for 40 years. A founder of All of Us or None and the Committee to Defend Human Rights (CDHR), he was a community organizer in Oklahoma City until his death.

The four other Grand Jury Resisters – Brown, O’Neal, Taylor and Boudreaux – were subpoenaed in 2003 to testify before a San Francisco grand jury in what was the opening salvo of this bogus case. Refusing to testify, they were all jailed for the jury’s duration.

Upon release, in view of the Abu Ghraib torture scandal and the ongoing violation of their constitutional and human rights, they felt compelled to alert the public to the similarity of tortures perpetrated behind walls in the U.S. So they founded CDHR and began touring the States to educate people about COINTELPRO, the Patriot Act, and this latest witch hunt.

Earlier witch hunts of Panthers included the capture and framing of Geronimo ji Jaga (Pratt) who suffered 27 years in California prisons until exonerated in 1996, winning a subsequent lawsuit; Dhoruba bin Wahad (Richard Moore), who did 19 years before exoneration and a million-dollar settlement in 2000; the NY 21, who were all found “not guilty!”; Jamil Al-Amin (H. Rap Brown), now a Muslim imam, doing life in a Georgia state prison while appealing his wrongful conviction; Kamau Sadiki (Freddie Hilton), sentenced to life in 2003 after refusing to cooperate in the pursuit of **Assata Shakur**, now living in Cuba, the exiled mother of his daughter. In 2005, New Jersey’s governor increased the bounty on Assata to \$1 million!

Nor can we forget the state’s plot to execute Mumia Abu Jamal who has been locked on Pennsylvania’s death row for 25 years for a murder he clearly didn’t commit. He would be dead – death warrants have been signed twice already – were it not for the power of the people. Not to mention countless other Panthers imprisoned for up to 40 years.

The original investigation of the Ingleside murder of Sgt. John Young began with the arrest in New Orleans, in 1973, of JB, Taylor and Ruben Scott. Two San Francisco detectives interrogated and supervised their torture by New Orleans police for several days.

The brothers were isolated from one another, stripped naked and handcuffed to a chair, covered with boiling hot blankets and plastic bags tied over their heads threatening suffocation. Cattle prods were used to inflict electric shocks to their genitals and anus, and they were brutally beaten with blackjacks and other objects. Taylor described being kicked in the back of the neck unconscious, then kicked back awake four or five times in an hour.

All tolled, the prolonged tortures left the brothers with permanent injuries, including damaged ear drums, chronic pain, knee problems, arthritis and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms such as trouble sleeping and nightmares.

At that time, they all made torture-induced confessions, but such "evidence" is neither credible nor legal. So in 1975, a San Francisco judge dismissed the case. It's outrageous that these same charges are again being brought against eight elders ranging in age from 55 to 71, all of whom face conspiracy charges on the Ingleside incident and numerous other activities between 1968 and 1973.

It was during this very period that 41 FBI field offices were advised by a memo from the FBI director to "be alert to have them arrested" on virtually any charges they could trump up ... the same period when Panthers were struggling to meet people's basic needs through free breakfast programs, clothing drives, health clinics, sickle cell testing, alternative schools, organizing against rent hikes and substandard housing, and advocating for community control of local police to stop them from murdering and brutalizing our people.

This resurrected case must be understood through the historical lens of the FBI's Cointelpro (counterintelligence program) working in concert with local police departments. These forces, led by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, targeted the Panthers for neutralization (incarceration, assassination or isolation) with an official reign of terror encompassing 1968-1973, or until the Weather Underground raided FBI files and exposed its illegal operations.

Under the leadership of the late Sen. Frank Church, hearings were held resulting in passage of the Freedom of Information Act of 1973, allowing individuals to obtain copies of their secret files. This prompted lawsuits against the government and others. For example, I was one of numerous plaintiffs in a wiretap lawsuit settled out of court in New Haven against the City, the FBI, the Chief of Police and the phone company. Today, that wouldn't be possible, because wiretapping is legal under the PATRIOT Act.

By 1969, 28 Panthers had been murdered by police and by 1973, at least 32 Panthers, including Field Marshall George Jackson, had been killed by so-called law enforcement. The most blatant was the premeditated assassination of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago. A million-dollar civil lawsuit was won, thanks to Attorney Dennis Cunningham, but not one policeman who participated in the predawn deadly assault on the Panthers was ever even indicted.

Fast forward to 1985, when Philadelphia police bombed MOVE's home, killing six adults and five children of the Africa family. A lawsuit settlement but no indictments. To 1999, when New York police murder innocent, unarmed Amadou Diallo with 41 shots. Not one conviction! To 2007, when three unarmed Black men were shot, Sean Bell fatally, in a hail of 50 police bullets. Manslaughter charges. And we could go on and on documenting police murders of innocent Black folks, often with complete impunity, only paid suspensions (vacations) for the murderers and payoffs to grieving families.

Cointelpro under Nixon has regrouped under Bush with Attorney General John Ashcroft's new, legal counterintelligence program, the PATRIOT Act, to begin anew the persecution of Panthers. In fact, before leaving office, Ashcroft sought to reopen all cases of police killings dating back to the '60s.

Who are the SF 8?

Collectively, the San Francisco 8 are a group of Black community activists who served the people in the BPP activities mentioned above. They are fathers, grandfathers and even great grandfathers.

Richard Brown, 65, has worked for decades right here in San Francisco's Fillmore District. "He was at community meetings at night, on boards, in the neighborhood, working for affordable housing. His job was never 9 to 5." said the Rev. Arnold Townsend, who has known Brown for 40 years. Employed for 20 years as a program coordinator at the Ella Hill Hutch Community Center, he's also a founding member of the African American Police Community Relations Board and several other neighborhood organizations. "He has a fantastic rapport with the young people," Jim Queen, a commissioner with the city's Juvenile Probation Department, told the San Francisco Chronicle. "He grew up there and had a special way with the kids, a stern tough-love way. He demanded high standards and made sure he was always available to them."

Likewise, the Chronicle noted that Richard O'Neal, 57, "who has two grown sons ... has worked for the past few years at the Southeast Community Center. ... People who work there said they were stunned by his arrest, recalling him as a kind and gentle man who always had a smile on his face and would at times stay late to fix lights or other things." Veronica Hunnicutt, the dean of the Southeast college campus, exclaimed, "Oh, my God, we're just utterly stunned. It's taken us all aback because he is such a nice man. He is a trusted employee who would do anything to help us. I hope they look at all of the information, because this man has been wonderful out here. He would take the shirt off his back to try to help you." O'Neal has only been charged with "conspiracy."

Ray Boudreaux, 64, a Vietnam veteran who resided in Altadena, Calif., was employed for the past 25 years as an electrician for the County of Los Angeles and did community work until his arrest. "People come to me sometimes as a peacemaker. And all of that has to do with all of my experience."

Herman Bell, 59, of Mississippi, and Jalil Muntaqim (Anthony Bottom), 55, of San Francisco, joined the Party in the Bay Area, where they began their long service to the people. Captured in the early 1970s, along with Albert Nuh Washington and Gabriel and Francisco Torres, they were framed for the killing of two policemen in New York City in May 1971. I saw Jalil and Nuh in the San Francisco court when they were arraigned in 1971. In 2007, it's déjà vu!

Originally the NY 5, their first trial ended in a hung jury. In a second trial, the Torres brothers' charges were dismissed, but perjured and coerced testimony – including that of Ruben Scott, tortured in New Orleans – resulted in convictions of the remaining brothers, who got 25 to life and became known as the NY 3. The trial judge had refused to hear any testimony about Cointelpro and its campaign to secure convictions by any means, including breaking laws. In April of 2000, after 29 years of incarceration, Nuh Washington passed away, ending a long battle with cancer.

Herman and Jalil have maintained close ties to their families here in the Bay. In 2000, Jalil was featured in an Essence magazine article on father-daughter relationships. Both continued to grow and contribute to society despite being locked up all these decades.

They earned bachelor's and master's degrees, tutored and counseled prisoners, and worked with community activists outside to organize the Victory Gardens Project, the urban-rural connection to plant, harvest and distribute free food to various 'hoods along the East Coast. This life-giving project enjoyed eight successful seasons. Jalil is also the founder of the Jericho Movement to free political prisoners.

Harold Taylor, 58, was living in Panama City, Fla., where he remained committed to his principles and community. He had joined the Black Panther Party in Los Angeles. In a 2006 interview with Harold and JB on KPFA, Harold described how the FBI "used a lot of informants, agents and provocateurs to entrap people." In fact, the FBI had infiltrated 67 agents into the BPP and deployed 700 informants nationwide. "In 2003 the detectives that were responsible for my torture [in New Orleans] came to my house to try and question me. I have not been the same since," said Taylor.

Henry W. (Hank) Jones, 71, of Altadena, a responsible family and community elder, was employed as a real estate appraiser before his arrest. "I [have lived] under the constant threat of another ... incarceration. In essence I have been robbed of peace of mind, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," said Jones when in 2003 he was subpoenaed to testify before the grand jury and resisted.

Francisco Torres, 58, was born in Puerto Rico and raised in New York City. A Vietnam veteran, he's been an activist since his discharge from the military in 1969 in veterans' and community affairs and has worked with troubled youth right up until his recent arrest and extradition to San Francisco from Queens, N.Y.

Six of these brothers are being kept in jail needlessly on bails of \$3 million each – reduced from \$5 million for equity! Where are all the wealthy Black entertainers and sports figures who claim to want to give back to their communities? Well here's a golden opportunity for you to give back to our community activists! They present no risk of flight, they're highly respected members of their communities

and they should be returned to their families as soon as possible. Equity in property can be used to secure release on bail without any permanent sacrifice of personal or community resources.

Hearings will be held in the next weeks to request a lowering of bail for these brothers, making it more realistic to secure their release during these lengthy "conspiracy" hearings. The next hearing is Friday, April 27, 1:30 p.m., at 850 Bryant St., San Francisco. A noon rally will precede the hearing. Join us!

For more information on the SF 8 and how you can help, please go to www.CDHRsupport.org.

Free the SF 8, Mumia Abu-Jamal and all political prisoners.