

The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution: No lessons learned

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Valuable footage combined with deeply flawed and sometimes vacuous commentary add up in the case of *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* to a film that provides an incomplete and misleading account of a vital period in the history of social struggles in the US.

Filmmaker Stanley Nelson is known for documentaries such as *Freedom Summer* (2014), *Freedom Riders* (2011), *Jonestown: The Life & Death of People's Temple* (2006) and *The Murder of Emmett Till* (2003). For his latest venture he has obtained and utilized newsreel and other video accounts covering the short and turbulent existence of the Black Panther Party.

Much of this is riveting and raises important issues, but the talking heads, including many of the surviving leaders of the Panthers, set the tone and draw very shallow conclusions. They falsely imply that the Panthers in some way represented a revolutionary alternative. Today, older and wiser, they suggest that history proves it is necessary to work "within the system." They are wrong on both counts.

The Panthers, founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, were responding to pervasive police brutality and deepening poverty in heavily African-American Oakland, California, when they were founded in 1966. Nelson's film highlights their black nationalist rhetoric and ability to attract media coverage. Basing themselves on the legal right to carry loaded weapons as long as they were openly displayed, the Panthers developed a paramilitary style, patrolling city streets on the lookout for police misconduct.

However, there is not nearly enough political and social context provided along with this footage. The Panthers struck a chord among black youth for definite historical reasons.

The postwar capitalist boom had left out tens of millions of workers and the poor, and the poverty rate remained stubbornly high through the 1960s. African-Americans were disproportionately affected, as they still are today. The Great Migration from the American South had brought millions of workers to the industrial north, where some were able to obtain jobs in the auto factories and steel mills. The

legislative gains and reforms won in the struggle against Jim Crow in the South revealed all the more starkly, as Martin Luther King, Jr. himself acknowledged, the profound issues of class exploitation and inequality throughout the country. The Northern ghettos exploded in rage beginning in 1964.

These were the conditions under which the Panthers attracted support from many thousands of black youth. The movement spread like wildfire around the country, and its leaders were totally unprepared for the massive influx of members that began in earnest by 1967. The Panthers' membership reportedly reached a peak of 10,000 by the end of the decade, with its newspaper achieving a circulation of some 250,000.

The new members, many of whom were politically raw and untrained, also included numerous police and FBI informants. The political disorientation, the uncritical enthusiasm, is echoed today in the generally superficial presentation of this history by filmmaker Nelson. He interviews ex-Panther leader Ericka Huggins, for instance, who declares, "We were a phenomenon!"

As the documentary shows, the Panthers advanced a program that was a mixture of black nationalism and Maoism. Amidst the growing movement against the Vietnam War, they also attracted sympathy from thousands of student protesters, many of them white, who identified with the struggle against racism and opposed the attempt to frame up Panther leaders. Many of these students, however, were either ignorant of or hostile to the movement of the working class.

Among the strongest parts of the film is the depiction of the murderous state repression that played a significant role in destroying the Black Panther Party (BPP). While they were far from representing a genuine revolutionary threat, the capitalist state recognized the danger in any movement that attracted the support and sympathy of masses of youth, students and unemployed. This was a period of growing political awareness among broader sections of workers and youth, and not only among African-Americans.

Police murder squads were unleashed against the Panthers.

The FBI set out, using its notorious Cointelpro program, to stir up divisions within the leadership, a task made easier by the Panthers' political confusion and petty bourgeois adventurism.

The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) was particularly infamous for its activities, and some of the retired cops involved are shown in the film bragging about their exploits.

It was during this period that coordinated police raids took place against every significant Black Panther office around the country. Shootouts and mass arrests were used to instill fear into Panther supporters. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, in one of the film's most revealing moments, is shown explaining that, "justice is incidental to law and order."

Perhaps the most infamous crime was the state killing of Chicago Panthers leader Fred Hampton. Hampton, Illinois chairman of the BPP, was considered especially dangerous because he hinted at the need for unity across racial lines. The film shows him at a meeting declaring, "We're going to fight racism not with racism, but we're going to fight with solidarity."

FBI informant William O'Neal, shown in video footage some two decades after the murder, when he confessed his role, provided keys and floor plans to Hampton's apartment. The Panther leader, only 21 years old, was shot to death in his bed by the police on December 4, 1969.

The ferocity of the raid left the walls riddled with bullets, only one of which had been discharged by the Panthers, and that one accidentally by someone on guard when the police shot him. The residue of Hampton's blood streaming down the steps of the apartment building brought hundreds of mourners to the site over the next few days.

Attorney Dennis Cunningham described the scene as a "shoot-in," not a shootout. He explains in the documentary that the police death squad was under the direction of Chicago mayor Richard Daley, but the crime was set up by the FBI. O'Neal received a \$300 bonus for his work. The murder of Hampton, a direct victim of police and FBI terror and conspiracy, followed on the assassinations of Malcolm X in 1965 and Martin Luther King in 1968, all efforts to suppress opposition to the existing order.

The combination of ruthless repression and the Panthers' own political bankruptcy led to a rapid decline of the BPP beginning in the early 1970s. Much attention in the film is focused on the bitter break between Huey Newton and Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver. Newton, along with Bobby Seale, initiated the Panthers' Free Breakfast Program. Cleaver, who had fled into exile in 1968, first to Cuba and then Algeria, met with various bourgeois nationalist figures and was identified with racial rhetoric and fraudulent "Third World" revolutionary phraseology.

Former leaders of the Panthers such as Kathleen Cleaver and Elaine Brown, interviewed at some length, speak of the personal failings and "mistakes" of 40 years ago. Left out of this is the fact that the Free Breakfast Program and Cleaver's reactionary nationalism were two sides of the same coin. Whatever tactical and bitter personal divisions existed among them, all of these leaders were hostile to the working class, black as well as white. "Power to the people" and similar slogans substituted vague populism and nationalist demagoguery for the struggle to unite the working class against capitalism.

By the early 1970s, the Panthers were already embarking on an electoral strategy, and Bobby Seale ran unsuccessfully for mayor of Oakland as a Democrat in 1973.

Newton became increasingly erratic. He was to die in a drug raid in Oakland in 1989. Cleaver returned to the US in 1975 and declared himself a born-again Christian, later becoming a supporter of Ronald Reagan and a fanatical anti-communist. Seale, the only one of these three who is still alive, declined to be interviewed for the film.

There is little attempt in the documentary to make sense of this history, which is both tragic and sometimes sordid. It cannot be understood apart from broader historical developments. While the Panthers' leadership must be held politically accountable for their record, their difficulties also have to be placed within the context of the international influence of Stalinism and Castroism, the criminal role of the unions in keeping the US working class tied to the Democratic Party, and the role of the petty bourgeois radicals, including the ex-Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, in keeping the massive anti-war movement sealed off from the working class as a whole.

The whole middle-class protest movement collapsed ignominiously amid this confusion. Some of the middle-aged and older ex-Panthers in this documentary sound very much like their fellow ex-protesters and ex-radicals, who have repudiated their youthful illusions and have now become supporters of bourgeois politicians like Barack Obama and Bernie Sanders. These middle class and pseudo-left layers are among those drawing parallels between the Panthers and the Black Lives Matter protests of today. They seek to channel the justified anger at police killings and violence back into the Democratic Party or into forms of race-based identity politics.



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