Judas and the Black Messiah: The 1969 state murder of Black Panther Party leader Fred Hampton

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Judas and the Black Messiah, the new film by Shaka King, is a serious dramatization of the abbreviated political life of Fred Hampton, deputy chairman of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party, who was brutally murdered in a Chicago police raid in the early morning hours of December 4, 1969.

This assassination was one of the most brazen crimes carried out by the American ruling class and its state machine. While the FBI and its notorious director J. Edgar Hoover were widely suspected of involvement in the murders of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. earlier in that decade—a suspicion that in the case of Malcolm has been confirmed by new revelations from his family this week—in the killing of Fred Hampton there was little attempt to disguise the operation.

This is effectively dramatized on screen in King's film. The cops, on the pretext of serving a search warrant, fire 99 shots, compared to one at most from the Panthers. The incident is described by one attorney as a "shoot-in," not a shoot-out. The 21-year-old Hampton (Daniel Kaluuya) and Mark Clark, 22, are summarily executed after Hampton's fiancé Deborah Johnson (Dominique Fishback), Hampton's lover and comrade-in-arms, eight months pregnant, is hustled out of the bedroom.

An extensive investigation, part of a wrongful death suit, shows that the FBI, as part of its COINTELPRO operation of infiltration and provocations directed against left-wing, antiwar and civil rights organizations, conspired with the Cook County state's attorney's office and the Chicago police department to assassinate Hampton.

The script, by King and Will Berson, reveals something of the political personality of the young Panther leader. Barely out of his teens, Hampton had an unusual ability to articulate the anger and determination of masses of young people fighting poverty, racism and police repression.

Hampton was the product of the growing militancy and movement of the working class. His family had moved to Illinois from Louisiana in the late 1930s, part of the Great Migration of African-American workers out of the South in the decades between 1915 and 1970. Hampton was shaped by the growing ferment in both South and North that would erupt in the mass civil rights movement and then the urban ghetto rebellions in Northern cities between 1964 and 1968.

The Black Panther Party was founded in Oakland, California, in 1966, in the midst of the social upheavals of that decade. It gave voice, in a very limited and distorted form, to both the growing confidence of workers and youth after the partial reforms won by the civil rights movement and the anger and disgust over continuing economic hardship and police brutality.

These upheavals were part of an international intensification of the class struggle, which reached a peak in the years between 1968 and 1975. In the US, the year of Hampton's increasing prominence also saw protests against the Vietnam War unprecedented in their size. As well, 1969 witnessed 412 strikes involving 1,000 workers or more, part of a massive strike wave that continued into the 1970s.

The Panthers attracted attention by patrolling city streets with loaded weapons, which was legally permitted in California as long as they were openly displayed. Thousands of youth joined local chapters of the organization within a few short years.

The Panthers, however, were unprepared to provide political leadership to their thousands of members. They offered popular free breakfast programs, along with a mixture of black nationalist and Maoist rhetoric.

In Chicago, Hampton struggled to appeal to a broad audience, to organize more widely and raise fundamental class issues, if even in a rudimentary form. The film dramatizes his meetings with Puerto Ricans as well as with a group of white workers and youth with roots in Appalachia and the South. The opening moments of the film are particularly important, with Hampton declaring, "We're going to fight racism not with racism, but we're going to fight with solidarity. We say we're not going to fight capitalism with black capitalism, we're going to fight it with socialism."

Words like these convinced Hoover of the FBI (Martin Sheen) that he was dealing with what he termed a possible "black messiah," a figure who could spark a broader rebellion. At one point, Hoover, hearing that Hampton may be sent back to jail because of a court decision, tells FBI agent Roy Mitchell (Jesse Plemons), "I want Hampton off the street! Prison is only a temporary solution. He needs to be eliminated."

This is where the role of "Judas" becomes vital. Bill O'Neal (Lakeith Stanfield), a petty thief, is recruited by Mitchell to work as an informant within the Panthers. In exchange, he will get some money and perks such as steak dinners in fancy restaurants, but above all he will be spared a prison sentence of up to 10 years. O'Neal was not the only agent sent into the Panthers, but it was he who played the key role in setting up Hampton's murder.

The film depicts O'Neal, who has quickly been promoted to head of security, as torn over some of the FBI demands, but complying without resistance. When Mitchell demands that he provide a floor plan of Hampton's apartment, the young Judas says, "I don't understand." "You don't have to understand" is the reply. "Are you

gonna kill him?" asks O'Neal. He proceeds to furnish the floor plan, and also passes Hampton something that will ensure he is fast asleep when the cops show up for the "shoot-in."

Deborah (now known as Akua Njeri) gave birth to Fred Hampton, Jr. about a month after his father's death. Both mother and son are listed as consultants in the new film. The viewers are informed in the closing titles that a wrongful death suit was finally settled in 1982, 12 years after the assassination, for the sum of $1.85 million, divided among the mothers of Hampton and Clark as well as the seven survivors of the attack. No cops or other officials were punished for the state killing.

When the eight parts of *Eyes on the Prize: II*, the documentary history of the US civil rights movement and its aftermath, were broadcast on public television in 1990, they included interview footage with O'Neal, who did not openly acknowledge his role, declaring very ambiguously, "I was in the struggle." On the day the episode was broadcast in January 1990, O'Neal committed suicide.

As already indicated, there is much that is truthful and moving in this film, including some incidents of historical significance. One such moment comes in a scene in which a Panther visits the hospital where another member is being treated after being shot by the police. The visitor recites the beginning of " If We Must Die," the stirring poem written in 1919 by Claude McKay, then 30 years old. McKay, later known for his role in the Harlem Renaissance, hailed the Russian Revolution and in November 1922 attended the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in Moscow.

Recognizing the martyrdom of Fred Hampton, however, does not justify an uncritical evaluation of the Panthers. Their perspective was based not on the international class struggle, but more on the struggle of the "global South" against the advanced North, including the working class, as elaborated by Frantz Fanon in his *Wretched of the Earth* and others of that ilk. This meshed with Maoism, with its hostility to the urban working class and sloganeering claim that "All power comes out of the barrel of a gun." The Panthers oriented toward layers of oppressed youth, but excluded the decisive sections of the working class. They advanced a mixture of reformist demands and revolutionary incantation, rather than a socialist program to unite every section of the working class against capitalism.

Under these conditions, the Panthers were easily penetrated by the police and intelligence agencies. Provocations led to police killings and internal clashes based on suspicions carefully fed by the agents. There is one scene in the film that graphically demonstrates how political inexperience and false theoretical conceptions opened them up to great dangers. O'Neal, trying to prove his revolutionary bona fides, shows Hampton a car trunk filled with explosives and urges that it be detonated at some prominent location. Hampton looks at him suspiciously and then erupts in anger at the sheer stupidity of the proposal. He does not recognize it as a provocation, however.

The Panthers existed as a pole of political attraction, particularly for African-American youth, for only a short period of time. They appealed to growing anti-capitalist sentiment, including a turn toward Marxism, but they fell victim to police repression and to their own political weaknesses. Their fate must be seen, not primarily as the personal failings of figures like Hampton, but within the context of the wider international crisis of leadership of the working class in the post-World War II period, especially in the 1960s.

Stalinism, Maoism and Castroism, with the aid of the Pabloite renegades from the Trotskyist movement, were advanced as nationalist alternatives to the fight to build a conscious revolutionary leadership in the working class based on an internationalist perspective. The New Left was promoted as part of a systematic assault on the role of the working class. The trade unions completed their integration into the capitalist state, strangling the strike movement of that period. Only the Trotskyist movement, then organized in the Workers League, the predecessor organization of the Socialist Equality Party, defended genuine Marxism.

Fifty-one years after Hampton's death, the working class faces revolutionary tasks under transformed conditions. The challenges are indicated by a look at the events of the past 12 months: the pandemic, amidst capitalist negligence and incompetence, has brought mass death; continuing police killings, which in the case of George Floyd led to a massive international multiracial and multinational outpouring of protest and outrage; the economic devastation worsened by the pandemic and also increasingly by climate change; and the fascist insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6, presaging deepening crisis and the growing threat of fascist dictatorship.

Hampton's opening words in the film deserve to be repeated. Black capitalism is no better than white capitalism, and racism and racial appeals cannot be the answer to racism. Despite Fred Hampton's political inexperience and political errors, these words are an indictment of all those today who use the justified anger over police racism and violence to repudiate all that is positive in Hampton's message.

The black capitalism that he rejected today finds expression in Barack Obama and the promotion of African-American billionaires. Fred Hampton was murdered, while today's advocates of racial identity politics receive multimillion-dollar grants from the Ford Foundation. Hampton took his stand against the crimes of US imperialism overseas, while the advocates of black capitalism today serve in the Biden cabinet and pledge allegiance to the American military and its intelligence agencies.

Hampton's life and tragic death underscore the need for an international revolutionary perspective, including an understanding of the role of the capitalist state and all its institutions. These are the decisive issues that are raised by this film: the ruthless role of the state murder machine, and the urgent need for conscious revolutionary leadership to unite the working class under the banner of international socialism.