

# **The 6 Panther Ps: Tools for the Poor Organizing the Poor in the Fight to End Poverty Now!**

**By Willie Baptist and Phil Wider  
(Originally published in 2000 by the Annie Smart Leadership Development  
Institute, Kensington Welfare Rights Union)**

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

When most Americans think of the Black Panther Party, they imagine a black gun-toting radical group out to kill white people. This was the image created and promoted by the media, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and its Counter Intelligence Program (COINTEPRO). By promoting this image, they could isolate, infiltrate, and destroy the Panthers.

In response to this misinformation campaign, Black Panther Party Chairman, Bobby Seale, stated:

“The Examiner made a report...in last Sunday’s paper that we were anti-white. That we hold no bones ... about being anti-white. This is a bold face lie! We don’t hate nobody because of their color. We hate oppression. We hate murder of black people in our communities. We hate the gross unemployment that exists in our communities. We hate black men ... taken off into the military service to be fighting for a racist decadent America promising us ‘freedom’.”

The fact is that the Panthers fought fearlessly and worked tirelessly for the economic security of all people. More than any other organization of the times, they championed the demand, “All Power to the People!” Yet, they were condemned as a threat to national security.

Their effective *Free Breakfast for Children Program* was later copied by various state legislators. These survival projects, along with other projects such as the *Free Health Clinics*, and *Free Rides Programs* for the poor to visit friends and relatives in prison endeared the Panthers with the needy. Yet COINTELPRO condemned these projects as dangerous, “nefarious” activities, and local FBI agents were directed to break them up. Their bold and creative protest against economic and police injustice and for their legal and human rights captured the imagination of the youth. For these activities, they were declared “criminal” and “terrorists.”

True history has proven that the anti-Panther conspiratorial practices of the FBI were illegal, inhuman, and unjust. Time history has also spoken against an economic and political system of a society that leave whole groupings of its people prey to the deadly violence of poverty and police repression. When the true history of this period is finally written, the Black Panther Party will be given its proper and just place.

## **II. PANTHER’S HISTORY TEACHES**

No social movement can succeed without learning from history. Today's newly emerging movement to end poverty in this land of plenty can and must learn many lessons from the historical experience of the Black Panther Party of the later 1960s. There must have been something that the Panthers did effectively to capture the imagination of the poor and command the attention and attacks of illegal governmental authorities.

In studying the history of the Panthers, we must come to understand the similarities and the differences between conditions then and conditions now. There are two fundamental economic conditions we need to understand about then: 1) the shift in southern agriculture from manual labor to mechanization, and 2) the beginnings of a shift in the urban economy from mechanization to electronics. The result of these shifts was a tremendous number of poor, unemployed, black youth concentrated in urban centers. They became the social base of the Black Panther Party. Everything it did, from protests to projects of survival, was based on these facts.

Today, the fundamental economic condition we need to understand is the continuing, expanding, and increasing shift from mechanization to electronics in all aspects of the economy. The result of this shift is the vast growth of structural unemployment and poverty of not just black urban youth, but of people of every color, every age, and every geographic area. These people are the social base of the new movement to end poverty.

Though there are parallels, we must recognize that the situation today is far more complex. Therefore, we must assess our objectives and find in the Panther's history those concepts that would help us to reach them today.

We have found in their history, the "6 Ps" around which the Panthers were organized. They are:

- (1) Program
- (2) Protests
- (3) Projects of Survival
- (4) Press Work
- (5) Political Education
- (6) Plans not Personalities

The work of the Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party, led by Fred Hampton, shows a most advanced expression of the "6 Ps". These "6 Panther Ps" should be studied so that they can be applied to our current situation.

### **III. 6 Ps AS TOOLS AND STUDY GUIDES**

- (1) Program

The purpose of the Panthers was described in their *Ten Point Platform* program. This program expressed the burning social, economic, and political needs of the section of

the population in which they were based. For example, Point #2 – “We want full employment for our people...”; Point #4 – “We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings...”; and Point #7 – “We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of black people...” all expressed their aims to end the desperate poverty and police repression suffered by the people they represented.

People are motivated to act because they are affected by problems that become issues. They seek out others similarly affected to address those issues. This is the basis of an organization. A program summarizes those issues, puts forth a solution demonstrates a plan to implement that solution. A program, therefore, unifies an organization around a common direction toward the solution, guiding all its activities. Thus it is a necessary political tool for the poor organizing the poor.

## (2) Protests

The Black Panther Party was not about “business as usual”. Their brave and pointed protest activities against political and economic atrocities are well documented. For example, after the careful registering of community sentiments and careful analysis and research of the conditions and laws supposedly governing police behavior and the rights of people, the Panthers conducted their famous and dramatic patrols of the police.

These and other protests caught the attention of the people and stirred their consciousness. These periodic protests helped greatly to swell the ranks of their membership and increase their impact on public opinion. Only a fighting organization organizes fighters. Well-thought out and continued protests are a necessary tool for the poor organizing the poor.

## (3) Projects of Survival

The *Free Breakfast Program*, *Free Health Clinics*, and other such projects carried out by the Panthers kept their members in constant contact with the community and deepened their love and understanding of the people. While helping to satisfy some immediate needs, the projects helped to politically discipline and develop Panther members. These activities also served as effective forms of protest and political education in themselves, by exposing the insanity and inhumanity of a system that produces extreme want in the midst of extreme wealth.

An organization in constant motion “gathers no moss”; it gathers members and influence. Protest activities start and stop, ebb and flow, while survival projects are steady operations. This keeps members in constant contact with each other and engaged as active members of the organization.

Poor people are necessarily occupied, minute-by-minute, with immediate questions of economic, political, and cultural survival. Survival projects partially meet these immediate needs. Participation of poor people in these projects brings them in regular contact with the organizers, enabling the organizers to regularly carry out the work of political education and struggle.

#### (4) Press Work

The Panthers' newspaper, THE BLACK PANTHER, was widely known and appreciated, and became a tool of organization, communication, and education. Estimates of its distribution range as high as 100,000 plus readers. Because of the nature of the activities that the Panthers carried on, they could neither trust nor rely on mainstream media to communicate their message. Therefore, THE BLACK PANTHER was used to communicate their message, and was religiously and regularly distributed far and wide.

The use of our own poor people's presses is especially crucial today in organizing the struggle against poverty. Presently there exists an all out media blackout and censorship of the nature of our plight and fight. A movement without a voice is an isolated, fragmented, and defeated movement.

#### (5) Political Education

The Black Panther Party constantly involved its members in political education of themselves and the public at large. The Panthers used every activity and opportunity to carry out political education and the meaning of its projects and protests.

Achieving the political purpose of organizing, sustaining and disciplining the movement, and developing leaders are impossible without effective and ongoing political education.

#### (6) Plans not Personalities

The history of the Panthers must be studied in terms of their shortcomings as well as their accomplishments. A major shortcoming of the Panthers was a strong dependency on the personalities of a few and not on plans – plans for political education, plans for developing survival projects, plans for carrying out protests, plans for press work and distribution, and most importantly, the shortcoming was in the lack of an integration of these plans into overall plans to carry out the organization's program.

The FBI's COINTLPRO took advantage of this weakness to tear apart the Panthers by pitting the internal factional groupings formed on the basis of personal loyalties against each other. The FBI did this through infiltrating spies and agent-provocateurs and by conducting campaigns of lies and false information.

"Cutting off the head of the snake" is an old doctrine for destroying a movement. A movement overly depended on the personality of a leader is an easy prey of its enemy. A commitment to planning and plans allows for the development of collectives of leaders. A movement with many leaders who unify or collectivize their leadership through plans is a broad, powerful, and deeply disciplined movement. Such a conscious movement is not easily infiltrated, divided, and defeated.

Today everyone talks about the need for "collective leadership," but such talk remains lip service without well thought out plans to ensure its development in deed. These plans should include considerations of the "6 Panther Ps."

**ADDITIONAL SUGGESTED READING MATERIALS:**

*Portrait of Leadership – Fred Hampton*, compiled by the Annie Smart Leadership Development Institute and Youth Unity: Evolution of Revolution!.

*Up on Madison Down on 75<sup>th</sup> Street*, by J.F. Rice.

*Eyes on the Prize*, segment on the Black Panther Party.