

Robinson Block

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HIST 4394 - Civil Rights History

### People's Party II

*The pigs assassinated Carl in an attempt to destroy the party, but their attempt failed because pig brutality and murder is one of the phenomena that brought the party to birth. The oppressive conditions that Black people and all poor people suffer from is the reason why the party managed to stay together and it is because of these conditions that it will continue to get stronger – James Aaron, Chairman of People's Party II*

For my paper I have attempted to at least partially dig up the history of People's Party II, an organization in Houston based on the Black Panther Party. I was unable to find any scholarship on the People's Party II, and the activists I spoke with are also unaware of any scholarship on the local organization. What I have put together here is based on some of the news articles I have been able to find, and the testimony of activists in and around People's Party II and the Black Liberation Struggles that took place in Houston.

Peoples Party II began early in the 1970's as Black Panther Party chapters were being established all across the United States. The success of the Voting Rights Act and other legislation that was won by the civil rights movement was largely viewed as inadequate to young urban blacks, and youth generally. Many participants in the civil rights movement were beginning to become impatient with the slow pace of reform and the tactics of non-violence which were closely associated with the activism of groups organizing and mobilizing for civil rights in the south. One group that presented these frustrations and made much more radical demands quickly became the vanguard of the black power movement; The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.

Started in Oakland California by Oakland Community College Students Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in October of 1966, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense created a ten point program demanding employment, housing, and end to police brutality and self-determination for black people in

the United States. The Black Panther Party was inspired by the a a number of revolutionary movements and largely Marxist and Maoist political philosophy. They organized as a cadre formation, creating social programs like free breakfast programs, clinics, and armed community patrols to help defend the black community from police harassment and brutality.

Both the aesthetics, militancy, and revolutionary ideas of the Black Panther became very popular with Black urban youth, particularly men and chapters began to pop up all across the country. The Panthers ideas also became very popular with revolutionary youth outside of the black community, such as the Puerto Rican Young Lords in Chicago and New York, the Mexican American Brown Berets in California and Texas, the Asian Red Guard in California, and White formations like the White Panthers in Detroit, Young Patriots in Chicago and others, who all modeled their groups on the Black Panthers.

The first establishment of a Black Panther Party Chapter in Houston ended up being very controversial, and limited the appeal of the later People's Party II. The founder, Willie "Iceman" Rudd is widely believed to have been an agent for a law enforcement agency. Rudd had traveled to Oakland to get permission to establish a chapter in Houston. He was accompanied by the wife of Lee Otis Johnson, a black activist in Houston that had been sentenced to 30 years for giving a marijuana cigarette to an undercover police officer. With this high profile companion, Rudd received permission from the National office to start a chapter in Houston. When Rudd returned to Houston, he reached out to black activists already organizing at Texas Southern University and th University of Houston.

Eventually many people became suspicious of Rudd, who claimed to be employed by the AFL-CIO, but had an expensive car and endless free time. Following numerous suspicious events, there was a meeting following a speaking event of Bobby Seale, where Rudd was confronted, and Seale dissolved the Houston Chapter.

This made the reception of Carl's Hampton's efforts to organize a chapter of the Panthers in Houston very cool. Carl grew up in Pleasantville in east Houston. He moved to California in his teens,

and when he returned to Houston in 1969, he was determined to establish a Black Panther Party Chapter. His efforts to recruit membership from the TSU and UH campus was not very well received due to the recent problems with the Party under Rudd. With little support from students, Hampton set up in the middle of the working class neighborhood of Third Ward, opening an office on Dowling street.

The Growth of popularity of the Black Panther Party had lead to new chapters opening all over the county, at this point in 1970 when Carl Hampton began organizing, the National Office in Oakland was not approving new chapters. Not having permission to open a BPP chapter, he called the organization People's Party 2, seeing the Black Panthers as the first people's party. Despite having a different name, Hampton and the other young men and women that began organizing in Houston envisioned People's Party II as aspiring to be Panthers and do the work of the Party.

Hampton was inspired by the work of the Black Panther Party in Chicago, including the Rainbow Coalition, an alliance of the Young Lords, Young Patriots, Students for a Democratic Society, and the Blackstone Rangers street gang. In the very early stages of Carl Hampton's organizing in Houston, he met with Robert E Lee Jr. a Panther who grew up in Jasper Texas and organized with Fred Hampton and the Chicago Black Panther Party.

Hampton and Lee met at the apartment of Mickey Leeland, a black activist who later became a Democratic congressman for Houston. They watched the film American Revolution 2, which documented the establishment of the Rainbow Coalition in Chicago.

Carl Hampton was fascinated by the possibilities of organizing with white youth, particularly the Young Patriots, who used the confederate flag as there logo. This inspired Hampton and People's Party II began to work with the Mexican American Youth Organization (or MAYO) and the John Brown Revolutionary League, a white revolutionary group that grew out of Students for a Democratic Society. These groups worked together in opposing police brutality in Houston, such as the killing of Bobby Joe Connor, a black youth who was stomped to death by Galena Park police in April of 1970.

The Rainbow Coalition also worked to show opposition to the Vietnam war.

The area of Dowling Street where People's Party II had set up was a working class and lumpen neighborhood there were a number of commercial businesses, as well as a open air drug market (reportedly robitussen was very popular) in the alley behind Wolf's department store and apartment and shotgun houses crammed with a high population density. They regularly interacted with the residents of the neighborhood winning support from many of the young folks, but also earning some ill will from the drug dealers and pimps who's business was were viewed as exploitative form of predatory capitalism and destructive to the black community. The Panthers would work to help victims of theft or burglary locate their stolen goods from pawn shops. PPII began to work in esablishing survival programs such as clothing and food programs.

The time that People's Party II spent organizing on Dowling Street came to an explosive point in July of 1970. A black teenager selling the Black Panther paper on Dowling street was stopped and hassled by 2 white police officers. Carl Hampton arrived on the scene and intervned on behalf of the youth. Hampton was open carrying a automatic pistol, which was legal at the time, but provoked an angry response from the Police officers. The Police attempted to arrest Hampton and guns were drawn by both parties. Party Members from the office emerged with weapons and the police moved to their car and radioed for backup. The scene quickly became a standoff.

A large contingent of Houston Police arrived quickly and attempted to negotiate the arrest of Hampton who had moved into the fortified office on Dowling street. A large crowd of Third Ward residents gathered in the street, press reports claim as many as 2,000 people, many moving in between the police and the People's Party Headquarters. Many people present had witnessed the initial confrontation and the crowd was outraged with the over the top police response. Ester King recalled many members of the crowd arriving with firearms and other things that could have been used as weapons.

With the situation escalating rapidly, the Houston Police Department decided to temporarily

withdraw. The crowd viewed this as a victory, and as word spread of the confrontation people from black communities all over Houston, and activists from across the city descended on Dowling street to offer their support. A number of black youth joined the party on the spot, and plans were made for an around the clock armed defense of the PPII headquarters.

Many activists expected a quick and brutal response from the police department to move into the neighborhood and attack the parties headquarters and anyone else who was in the vicinity. Many expected a response like the police attack on Texas Southern University where 300 police marched from the Jefferson Stadium (now Robertson Stadium) onto TSU's campus and opened fire on protesting students. More than 400 students were arrested and 5 were tried for the death of a Houston Police officer who was shot and killed, but were later acquitted when it became clear that the officer was killed by a bullet fired by the police.

The police department began to prepare and elaborate operation to attack the radicals that had occupied the heart of third ward. Houston's Police chief at the time, Herman Short, had taken the role of chief in the early sixties. He was a very conservative and supportive of the Jim Crow status quo. George Wallace of Alabama made statements in support of appointing someone like Short as the director of the FBI if he was to be elected president. The city's white elite was very nervous about the perception of a growing black power threat, and Short was supported by Mayor Welch and most other city officials in aggressive, possibly illegal tactics against black activists in Houston. According to Dwight Watson's book *Race and the Houston Police Department 1930-1990*:

“Herman Short saw Black Power as an egregious assault on the police and on the moral order and decency of the city. He received the green light to control the Panthers and other radicals from a citizenry worried about their potentially violent nature. He and the police CID commanders used surveillance and informants to detail every move of the panthers.”

By July 26th more than 2 weeks after the standoff began, many began to think that the police had given up on trying to violently move onto Dowling Street or arrest Carl. This Sunday was also the

Chicano Moratorium march in Houston's Magnolia neighborhood, and many of the Chicano and white activists that had been doing security on Dowling Street attended. This march demanding an end to the Vietnam war, and encouraging Mexican-Americans not to participate in the armed services. This was the day that Houston Police executed a large operation which by the morning of the 27th had killed Carl Hampton, resulted in the shooting of PPII member Johnny "Shotgun" Coward and John Brown Revolutionary League leader Roy Barte Haile, and caused the arrest of more than 60 people.

Earlier in the day 2 black activists patrolling north of the Dowling Street were arrested by Houston Police, a rally of around 100 people was held in front of the PPII headquarters to raise money for the bail of the arrested activists. At the same time Houston Police were setting up in the St Johns Baptist Church, just a block Northeast on Dowling Street. Someone in the neighborhood noticed white people on the roof of the church and notified the rally. Carl Hampton dismissed the rally in hopes of dispersing the civilians in the crowd, if the scene became violent. Hampton crossed to the east side of the street and walked up towards Wolf's Department Store to see what was going on at the church. As he reached the east side of the street he was shot several times by a sniper from the second story of the church and hit with dum-dum rounds.

A firefight began between People's Party II and their supporters and the Houston Police. Many of the residents of the apartment complex just south of St. Johns Church open fire on the police in addition to party members. Carl Hampton was picked up by a neighborhood woman, who Hampton had befriended in the past and worked as a prostitute. While under fire from the police in the church, she was able to drive out of the alleyway on Tuam where there was usually an open air drug market, in order to evade police checkpoints established on Dowling and Elgin. She took Hampton to Ben Taub Hospital, first taking off his beret and buttons that identified him as an activist, and checked him into the hospital with the ID of her husband. Hampton died in the hospital early in the morning.

The aftermath of the shootout was very messy. 64 people were arrested, and three were shot. There were lengthy prosecutions of Johnny Coward and Barte Haile, and near constant police

harassment for years afterwards. James Aaron, an 18 year old took over as the Chairman of People's Party II, and along with Charles Boko Freeman, were the primary leadership of the organization after Carl's death. While the death of Carl was tragic, as the man whose vision and efforts had put the Party in motion, it also served to steel the resolve of the members of People's Party II and gave them a higher level of recognition in the community.

There was a short lived black coalition after Carl's assassination that included a broad range of the black community, from radical activists to businessmen and athletes, that pressured the city for reform of the police department which continued to brutalize black brown and young people. The leadership of the coalition was Pluria Marshal of Operation Breadbasket and Earl Allen of Hope Development. This Coalition pushed for a boycott of downtown businesses viewing the white business leaders as those who really called the shots in town and hoping to pressure Mayor Louie Welch into taking action to end police brutality against the black community.

Also, 1971 saw some of the first electoral victories from black politicians, including the first black city councilor Judson Robinson Jr. Many of these black officials lobbied Welch to fire the police chief, Welch referred to these demands as “incoherent babbling” in the Houston Post.

This period of time saw widespread repression of the Black Power movement in the United States, the Black Panthers in particular. While it was largely unknown at the time, the FBI had began Counter Intelligence Programs (or COINELPRO), plans to disrupt and destroy the Black Panthers and prevent the rise of a “Black Messiah.” The militant and continual organizing by the panthers resulted in multiple arrests, prosecutions and incarcerations of Black Panther activists. As repression mounted, more and more energy went into trying to keep members out of prison and support those who had been incarcerated.

The Continued harassment of Black Panther Party Chapters by federal and local law enforcement agencies made it very difficult for them to accomplish many of their desired programs. Following Hampton's murder, efforts were made to open a clinic on Dowling Street, and later in 5th

ward, however neither ended up materializing.

There were many programs that did end up being fairly successful, the Panthers initiated a program to test for sickle cell anemia that took place on TSU's campus, and opened a Free Breakfast Program, in a church in Houston's Fourth Ward. Peoples Party II operated a 'liberation school' every Sunday in Cuney homes, a public housing project just north of Texas Southern University, providing childcare and education services to residents. One of their most successful programs was the Free Pest Control Program, where Party members would help residents in treating infestations of roaches, fleas and rats.

Peoples Party II had attempted to construct and operate a clinic on Dowling Street at Tuam, with support from radical whites. Due to very constant police harassment and arrests of whites on charges of prostitution and loitering, the Dowling Street clinic never became fully operational. In 1971, the Black Panther Party had acquired a building in Fifth Ward and appealed to black contractors to help renovate it. They received support from architect and contractors who donated supplies and labor, but never were able to make it operational.

While the Peoples Party and Black Panthers were largely viewed as fringe and extremist by the elites of Houston's black community, they were sometimes able to get support from the black community such as the support given by black contractors and businessmen for the renovation of a building in Fifth Ward as a clinic for the black community. They Panthers operated breakfast out of a Church in 4<sup>th</sup> ward and assisted Operation Breadbasket a project that had been started by the Reverend Jesse Jackson to provide food to poor families.

In the Fall of 1971 the national Black Panther Party in Oakland recognized People's Party II as an official chapter of the Black Panther Party, in no small part due to the sacrifice of Carl Hampton, and the name was changed from People's Party II to the Houston Chapter of the Black Panther Party.

The Houston police continued to direct large amounts of resources to monitoring and disrupting the activities of radicals in Houston, with Blacks, and People's Party II as a top priority.



This police harassment of the Houston Panthers, included a house raid in June of 1971 where 7 people were forced out of the house by police at gunpoint and arrested, including James Aaron, and Claude Frost. Subsequently, Charles Freeman and Johnny Coward were arrested the same day. The newspapers would print the names and addresses of those arrested, which surely intimidated people sympathetic to the cause that did not want their home address printed in the newspaper.

Earlier, in February of 1971 police arrested 4 Peoples Party II activists for fixing a car in front of the Peoples Party II headquarters, based on a law against doing work on a car's engine on a street unless its an emergency. The activists were fixing a flat tire. While in custody, police planted a matchbox full of marijuana on Charles Freeman, and he was later indicted on Felony possession charges. This reminded many of the Lee Otis Johnson case, the SNCC activist who was convicted in 1968 of giving a joint to an undercover police officer, and sentenced to 30 years. Johnson was eventually release from prison after serving 5 years after national outcry and a lot of work by progressive lawyers.

Freeman was eventually acquitted by an all white jury in October of 1971, because they did not believe the police testimony, after having to be bailed out of prison and undergo a trial being defended by Bobby Caldwell. This constant harassment drained energy, time and resources from People's Party activists.

According to Charles Boko Freeman, the Party was active in Houston until 1974, when the National chapter in Oakland dissolved the local group and recalled the membership to California to assist in work being done there. As the seventies wore on the strength and prominence of the Black Power Movement, and the Black Panther Party became a shadow of its former self. The FBI's counterintelligence programs had been successful in excacerbating a split between Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver, which resulted in many Panthers and supporters joining the Black Liberation Army, an organization dedicated to armed struggle which viewed the Panthers emphasis on survival programs as reformist. Dozens of Panther members were jailed or forced to flee the country.

At the same time the concessions of better political representation to African Americans served to temper the impatience of young people who wanted radical social change. In Houston the end of at large city and county elections allowed Black and Latin@ communities to elect their own representatives.

The legacy of the Black Panther Party is an important one in understanding the period of the 1960's and 70's as well as the efforts of revolutionary movements in the United States to study as a serious organizing effort towards radically transforming our society. Houston's local movement is still not widely known or documented, and there is still quite a bit of work that needs to be done in order to contextualize the time and place that People's Party was working in, and connect all the dots to other local and national events and struggles. Hopefully this will help scratch the surface.

#### Consulted Works:

Interview with Ester King, December 3rd 2008

Interview with Charles Freeman December 9th 2008

Videorecording of Black Panther Panel at Station Museum exhibit "Defending Democracy"

<http://Itsabouttimebpp.com> – contains documents from Houston Post, Forward Times, Voice of Hope and other periodicals

Race and the Houston Police Department 1930-1990, Dwight Watson, Texas A&M University Press

Gregorio Salazar Papers, MSS 369 [microform] 1966-1971