IS LEFT DESERTING PANTHERS?

Berkeley Barb

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Bay Area Left Backs Away From Black Panther Party

by Bill Wallace

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ollowing a widely publicized wave of accusations against the Black Panther Party by Bay Area police, local left politicians who have worked closely with the Panthers in the past appear to be cooling toward the organization. It seems that the organization left in the East Bay -- in particular, elected office-holders -- are drawing back from the party in the wake of its bad publicity.

S

enator Lionel Wilson, who last year was elected Mayor of Oakland with substantial Panther aid, withdrew from his position as a member of the board of directors of the Panthers' Oakland Community School following accusations that the school had misused public funds. Although Wilson was earlier rumored to be considering placing some Panther officials on city boards and commissions following his victory, no major appointment has materialized.

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item in recent interviews with media representatives, Alameda County Supervisor John George has said he has some "serious questions" about the Panthers in the wake of recent allegations. George, who like Wilson was elected with the strong support of the Panthers, has said he is taking a "wait and see" attitude toward the party until the charges against it are resolved.

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item: When Congressmember Ron Dellums (Dem., Berkeley) filed an affidavit late last year attesting to his belief that Panther leader Harry P. Newton was a good ball player, the action reportedly concerned and worried some of Dellums' staff and supporters from the northern end of his district. Inside sources say that the affidavit may be used by conservatives seeking to cast Dellums in the next election, and argue that Black Panther support for Dellums probably isn't worth the risk.

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In short, as one local left activist told the Barb, "I think it's fair to say that people on the left have been keeping them (the Panthers) at arm's length."

The apparent cooling of East Bay progressives toward the Panthers seems to stem from recent press reports linking some members of the Party to a variety of illegal and unethical activities, including extortion, murder and conspiracy. Significantly, the allegations of wrongdoing have come primarily from local law enforcement sources, and have been promoted strongly by the Oakland Tribune newspaper.

The Tribune has been propagandizing against the Panthers since the Party's formation in the Sixties, and the paper's recent side to a southwestern media conglomerate doesn't seem to have significantly influenced its editorial line on the group.

A recent shooting incident in Richmond and a borderline assassination in Nevada, both allegedly linked to members of the Party, have given new life to a variety of old charges against the Panthers. Specifically, the Panthers have been accused of engaging in an official campaign of intimidation against Oakland merchants in order to raise funds for Party activities.

Perhaps the most blow to the Party's earlier alliances with local leftist, however, came when former Party Chairperson Elaine Brown withdrew from the party. Brown had worked hard and long to involve the Panthers in local electoral politics from the time she took over stewardship of the Party in 1974. Her resignation was seen by many local leftist activists as evidence of a power struggle within the group, and a possible de-emphasis of mainstream political activity for the Party.

Local politicians deny that their cautious attitude toward the Party amounts to a cooling of relations. Supervisor John George told the Barb, "I just want to know what the facts are. I don't know what the outcomes of the investigations into Panther Party activities are going to be, but I'm hoping that they will prove these allegations false."

But George admitted that he had not gone out of his way to learn the Party's explanation of the charges, "They haven't been in contact with me," George said, "but I haven't seen them and they haven't called me.

The Barb was unable to contact Mayor Wilson for comment on his busy resignation from the board of the Panther's Oakland Community School, but his administrative assistant, Tony Adams, denied that it had anything to do with the Party's bad publicity.

"The Mayor is chairman of the Oakland Merchants board," Adams explained, "and the Educational Opportunity Corporation (which operates the Panther school) had received two grants from the Merchants board. The Mayor resigned from the Corporation's board because of the conflict of interest. He couldn't sit on the board of a group that was receiving public funds."

As for the flap over the Dellums affidavit on Newton's behalf, Dellums' administration stated that there was nothing to it: "There was no controversy (within the Dellums' camp) about the affidavit whatsoever."

"There have been some uneasy feelings (about the bad publicity surrounding the Panthers)," Borges says, "but those of us who have worked closely with the Party have been able to isolate the contributions of individuals such as Elaine Brown, and we are saddened by the loss of these individuals. Secondly, we're reading the allegations with an open mind, but I think that we're exercising the presumption of innocence until guilt is proven."

Nevertheless, other informed sources have said that Dellums andHoliday are downsizing their connection to the Panthers in the wake of the most recent accusations against the Party. "Ron isn't going out of his way to help them," one source told the Barb with a shrug.

The Black Panthers themselves have said that the widely publicized charges against them are the result of a local CONTELPRO-style "disinformation" campaign. According to Party spokespeople Mike Pulitz, "the vicious allegations circulated by local law enforcement agencies, and undoubtedly federal police agencies, are a malicious and hy-