

REPORT ON PEACE AND FREEDOM PARTY NATIONAL CONVENTION

by Jon Britton

Betsey and I attended the first national convention of the Peace and Freedom Party held in Ann Arbor, Michigan August 17-18. While at the convention we had a chance to talk at some length with two secondary leaders of the Black Panther Party. Betsey will report on what we learned about the Panthers from them.

Attendance Figures

A little over 200 voting delegates from 20 states met in Ann Arbor.

The number of voting delegates allowed from each state group was not based on membership. Rather it was determined by the formula of one vote per thousand PFP registrants or signatures on independent nominating petitions with a minimum of five votes for any recognized PFP group.

The size of the delegations gives a rough indication of the relative strength of PFP groups in the various states. Of the 20 states represented at the convention 14 had the minimum 5 voting delegates (actually some of these states, Washington being a case in point, didn't have 5 delegates physically present but 1 or 2 people casting 5 votes). Of the remaining 6 states California had 71 votes; New York 25; Michigan 19; Pennsylvania 16; Massachusetts 10; and Illinois 8. Clearly the main base of the PFP is in California.

Observers were present numbering about 50 during most of the convention but going up to 250 or so Saturday night when Cleaver and Gregory addressed the convention. Anyone could get in as an observer by paying \$1.

The overwhelming majority of the delegates were young, in their twenties. There were no more than 20 black people present except for Saturday night when a dozen or two Afro-Americans came up from Detroit to hear Cleaver and Gregory.

Political Composition

There were three main political groupings participating in the convention. They were approximately equal in strength in terms of the votes they controlled -- 50-60 votes each.

Furthest right politically was the Communist Party which worked through the Gregory caucus. The CP's intervention was definitely a serious one -- not token or just for the record. Gil Green, N.Y. state chairman of the CP, was in charge.

The furthest left grouping was the Radical Caucus led by unaffiliated Maoists like Bob Avakian. Most of its supporters were California delegates.

Occupying a vacillating center position was the Draperite Independent Socialist Clubs of America.

Progressive Labor which had been active in the PFP on the local level in the Bay Area and New York had few people there and played a negligible role.

About a dozen Black Panther Party members attended the convention including Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver and Bobby Seale. There was no black caucus at the convention.

Credentials Fight

The CP tried to get the New York Freedom and Peace Party given voting rights on the same basis as the ISC dominated New York Peace and Freedom Party. A motion to this effect was introduced by a member of the CP controlled Pennsylvania delegation and seconded by another delegate in the name of the entire Gregory caucus.

In the brief discussion that followed Bobby Seale took the floor to denounce the Freedom and Peace Party for trying to "mess up the coalition" between the Peace and Freedom Party and the Black Panther Party.

Carlos Aponte from the NY PFP got up to accuse the FPP of simply being a third ticket effort and not a serious effort to build a permanent new party.

The motion to credential Freedom and Peace was defeated by voice vote.

Presidential Nomination

Both Cleaver and Gregory were present to give acceptance speeches as they did at the two California conventions the weekend before. They were the only ones proposed as the PFP presidential candidate.

Both Cleaver and Gregory made militant, anti-capitalist speeches. Gregory concentrated on attacking and ridiculing the system which he did quite effectively and quite humorously. Cleaver, on the other hand, directed most of his remarks to the question of building the kind of machinery in the white community and the black community needed to overthrow the system. He said his presidential campaign would serve to link up the machinery in the black community with the machinery in the white community and accelerate the process of building a revolutionary movement in this country.

Gregory, while he pledged to help build the PFP if nominated, made clear that his write-in campaign was more an act of individual protest than a vehicle for building a movement.

Before the balloting started a Pennsylvania delegate announced that Gregory was already on the ballot there and because of "legal requirements" couldn't be replaced with any other candidate. A Vir-

ginia delegate then moved to nominate both Cleaver and Gregory leaving it up to the individual states as to which one would be put on the ballot. This was quickly defeated.

After all the delegates had been polled the vote totals were announced: Cleaver 161½; Gregory 54; McCarthy 3; and Dr. Spock ½.

This was the high point of the convention in terms of enthusiasm, spirit and unity. Practically everyone joined in a standing ovation for Cleaver. It was downhill from this point on.

Policy Statement Fight

The next point taken up was the adoption of what was variously called a statement of principles, organizing principles, minimum program and transitional program. Three proposals were put forward, discussed and voted on.

The Radical Caucus introduced a statement which included support to the NLF, support of armed self-defense, and replacement of our present economic system by "social ownership" of the means of production.

The ISC backed the same type of "minimum program" they have previously pushed which is really just a series of slogans including immediate withdrawal from Vietnam, support of the black liberation struggle (whatever that means), support to the right of armed self-defense and creation of political institutions independent of the establishment parties.

A third proposed policy statement was introduced by a group calling itself the Cambridge PFP club which was reputed to be PL dominated. They termed their statement anti-imperialist as opposed to anti-capitalist.

Mike Parker, a West Coast leader of the ISC, led the fight for the ISC "minimum program." He repeatedly stressed the importance of orienting toward the McCarthy supporters, saying that the PFP should be broad enough so that people who weren't sure whether or not capitalism should be abolished could join, and broad enough so that pacifists wouldn't be excluded. He attacked the Radical Caucus statement for inclusion of the point on support to the NLF as something he himself couldn't go along with. The PFP shouldn't become another radical sect, said Parker, but "sects" should and could function within the PFP and recruit out of it.

Bob Avakian of the Radical Caucus said they too wanted to win over the McCarthy supporters but on the basis of making a real break with establishment politics. Avakian termed the Radical Caucus policy statement a "transitional program for a transitional party." The transitional party, he said, was "a tool for reaching people who presently don't understand that a revolution is necessary."

The Cambridge proposal was eliminated by a voice vote and then a card vote was taken on the two remaining proposals. The ISC-backed statement carried 109-60 with the support of the CP.

Vice Presidential Candidacy

The last major point taken up was the vice presidential nomination. This, not surprisingly, proved to be the most explosive issue at the convention.

Most of the delegates thought the vice presidential candidate should represent the white, antiwar PFP side of the "coalition." The ISC, in particular, wanted a politically "balanced" ticket attractive to McCarthy supporters.

When nominations were opened up it quickly became apparent that no deal had been worked out in advance between Cleaver and the ISC or between Cleaver and the Radical Caucus despite the fact that informal discussion had been going on for two months or more. One of the Panther members we talked to said that Cleaver had planned to leave the vice presidential choice up to the convention apparently assuming that the choice would be an acceptable one from his point of view. Corky Gonzalez, a leader of the Mexican-American community in Colorado, was nominated but later declined when contacted by phone. Another nominee was Peggy Terry, a middle-aged woman with the JOIN Community Union in Chicago and from a poor white background. She was present and accepted the nomination. Finally Jack Weinberg, the West Coast ISC leader, was nominated and immediately declined. No more nominations were forthcoming and the convention recessed for caucussing.

Cleaver attended the Radical Caucus meeting. When after a long discussion they couldn't come up with a satisfactory nominee they turned to Cleaver and asked him who he'd suggest.

Cleaver dropped a real bombshell by suggesting Jerry Rubin. Cleaver ended up storming out and the Radical Caucus voted to propose to the convention that the choice of vice presidential candidate be left up to the individual states.

When the convention reconvened in plenary session Jack Weinberg took the floor to announce that the situation had changed, that he had therefore changed his mind, and that he would run after all because, as he modestly explained, he was clearly the best vice presidential candidate available.

Shortly after Weinberg spoke Cleaver succeeded in getting the floor under a suspension of the rules. At this point the tension in the hall was so thick you could almost cut it with a knife. A mood of frustration and demoralization prevailed.

Cleaver proceeded to launch into a tirade against both the ISC and the Radical Caucus. He said he had previously had one foot

in the ISC and one foot in the Radical Caucus but now had no foot in either. What was needed he said was a new radical caucus.

He expressed his opposition to what he called an inclination to the right which had manifested itself in the convention debates. He attacked the orientation toward the McCarthy supporters as "taking us into the twilight zone."

He said that the basic thrust of the PFP had to be toward the left. Then, in support of his belief that there were significant numbers of people to the left of the PFP not represented at the convention he cited the recent Berkeley events and pointed out that the PFP was unable to decide a course of action until days after it was all over.

He ended by saying that Jerry Rubin could sell the campaign to the white youth of America.

Jack Weinberg then took the floor to oppose Rubin from the standpoint of building the PFP and made an apt remark (in light of Cleaver's remark about Rubin): "Eldridge has some illusions about what is happening in the white mother country."

Following some more discussion the motion to leave the vice presidential choice up to the states was passed 114-61 with the ISC splitting on the vote.

I should say at this point that Cleaver's suggestion of Jerry Rubin as vice presidential candidate appeared to be an impulsive act of desperation on his part - an irrational grabbing at straws so to speak because of his sudden at least partial realization that he had invested his time and energy, his prestige and authority as a leader of the black struggle in a completely rotten and unviable political formation.

During the convention many references were made to the need for non-electoral "local organizing" activities but little discussion as to what these should be. Also there was no point on the agenda, report, or discussion on Huey Newton defense. A motion was made under a point on "action projects" calling for national and international demonstrations in support of Newton and perfunctorially passed.

Some Generalizations

- 1) The P&F movement is in a state of serious disarray.
- 2) The "coalition" with the Panthers had been badly shaken.
- 3) If Cleaver doesn't extricate himself from this mess soon he will rapidly and thoroughly discredit himself in the eyes of black militants inside and outside the BPP.