



FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TRACKS

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When it became known this past spring that SNCC and the Black Panthers had "merged," the news was greeted with much excitement. It was the most logical move that could have been made to strengthen the black movement. SNCC was the one organization most responsible for the ideology of the black radical movement. The Panthers were the one organization working to concretize that ideology in the ghetto.

With the coming together of SNCC and the Panthers, the talk of black unity became more than talk. A merger between the two laid the basis for the creation of a national black radical organization at a time when the black community most needed it. Such a merger seemed to mark a new maturity on the part of the black movement. That "merger" existed, however, more in the minds of those who heard about it than anywhere else.

Earlier this month, SNCC informed the Panthers that the SNCC central committee had voted to terminate the "merger" on the grounds that it had been made by individuals inside SNCC rather than the organization as a whole and that the exact nature and mechanics of the merger had never been fully discussed. (SNCC's Rap Brown and James Forman, who had been elected minister of justice and minister of foreign affairs of the Panthers, resigned from the Panthers. Stokely Carmichael, Panther prime minister, who was recently fired by SNCC, will probably work full time for the Panthers now.) These were SNCC's official reasons for terminating the "merger," but these were mere technicalities. The actuality is that no functional merger between the two organizations ever existed and the possibility of there being one was remote from the beginning.

The first talk of any kind of merger began last winter when SNCC's James Forman returned from a visit to the Bay Area with the idea of an alliance between the Panthers and SNCC. People in SNCC were cool to the idea because they knew very little about the Panthers. Stokely Carmichael had been drafted by the Panthers for one of their cabinet positions in 1967. There was some feeling in SNCC that the move to draft Carmichael should have come through the organization's central committee and not directly to Stokely, as Stokely was the spokesman for the organization; not only a public figure. Stokely and SNCC could not be separated, many in SNCC felt. Carmichael accepted the position with the Black Panthers. A few in SNCC felt this was a tactical error. The Panthers, then a young and virtually unknown organization nationally, might be trying to use Stokely to build themselves. SNCC, however, did nothing to prevent Carmichael from joining the Panthers.

SNCC, which has always lacked the ability to discipline its members, did nothing, either, to stop Forman from making an alliance with the Panthers. The formal announcement of the alliance was to have been done officially at a Free Huey Rally on Feb. 17 of this year in Oakland. Forman, Carmichael and Rap Brown were to be present, as well as the Panther hierarchy. However, Eldridge Cleaver, Panther minister of information, broke the news on Feb. 11 at a

Peace & Freedom Party forum at which he made observations about SNCC which did little to improve the "merger" prospects. In that speech, published in the March 16 issue of the Panther newspaper, Cleaver stated, "What we have done is worked out a merger with SNCC. The Black Panther Party for Self Defense and SNCC are going to merge into a functional organization. . . ." This was news to SNCC.

The organization was under the impression that it was only entering into an alliance with the Panthers, which to most in SNCC was little more than good public relations. The "merger" was something SNCC first learned of when word of Cleaver's speech reached them. SNCC sought to clear the matter up and Cleaver is reported to have said that what he meant by "merger" was alliance. Yet, at that Free Huey Rally in Oakland, Feb. 17, he repeated that a "merger" had been made and continued to speak thereafter of the relationship between the two organizations as a "merger."

Cleaver further jeopardized SNCC-Panther relations when he stated in that same Feb. 11 speech that, "It is very important to realize that SNCC is composed virtually of black hippies. . . of black college students who have dropped out of the black middle class. . ." Possibly he meant it as a joke, but SNCC did not find it funny. It was not only a put-down of SNCC, but of black college students as well. The fact that he would so describe SNCC was questionable and to do so before a white audience did not endear him or the Panthers to SNCC.

Cleaver continued his speech to imply strongly that the ideology which SNCC's spokesmen, Stokely and Rap, preached, had, in actuality come from the Panthers: "Most people don't know this, but a lot of the rhetoric you hear from Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown these days. . . was adopted precisely because they had come to the West Coast and spent a little time with the Black Panthers out here. . ."

It was remarks such as these that fed the suspicions of many in SNCC that the organization was being "husted" by the Panthers. Whether or not this is true cannot, of course, be ascertained. Yet, the question was asked by many in SNCC that if Cleaver and the Panthers thought so little of SNCC as publicly to call them "black hippies," why then would they want to "merge" with them? In his Feb. 11 speech Cleaver gave an answer: ". . . what they [SNCC] have done is made their apparatus available to us and there's no hangup; we can move into that." Many in SNCC felt that that "apparatus" was having the names Carmichael, Forman and Rap officially associated with the Panthers.

Many Panthers were also suspicious of the "merger." They viewed SNCC as a dying organization which was simply trying to exploit the Panthers to keep alive. Undoubtedly, SNCC was having serious internal problems, but SNCC did not see a "merger" with the Panthers as the solution. With each organization questioning the other's motives, suspicion and distrust merged in both groups before any other kind of merger had a chance.

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At its staff meeting in June, SNCC reaffirmed its independence from the Panthers by voting not to adopt the Panther 10-point program as its own. It was thought that the Panther program was more reformist than revolutionary. This decision on SNCC's part did not help matters between the two groups and everything came to a head within the past month at meetings held between representatives of the two groups. It is reported that the Panthers threatened SNCC leaders and at one point, several Panthers went for their guns. The shoot-out was averted, fortunately, but there was no doubt in the minds of any members of either organization that whatever merger or alliance may have existed was finished. One SNCC member stated bluntly: "I can't work with anybody I don't feel right turning my back on." All that was left at that point was for one of the organizations to inform the other that their formal relationship was terminated. SNCC took that step the first week in August.

At this point it seems doubtful that the two organizations will work out their differences in the near future. In an interview in the August issue of *The Movement*, Huey Newton had a long critique of SNCC in which he stated that SNCC had been controlled by white liberals until Stokely's election as chairman. Anyone with any knowledge of SNCC history is aware that one of the unique features of the organization has been the fact that it has been controlled by blacks since its inception in 1960 and that whites were eventually expelled, not because they had too much power, but because they were ineffective working in the black community. Newton's analysis of SNCC's role in the black movement bore little relationship to the actual facts and further added to feelings within SNCC that the Panthers had never been interested in a real alliance or merger, but only in absorbing SNCC into the Panthers, and failing that, discrediting the organization.

That the two leading black radical organizations should regard each other with a suspicion and distrust that borders on hate really hurts. Perhaps the situation could have been avoided if SNCC had not allowed itself to be led into a relationship which it never really wanted. It is unthinkable that any organization would allow a few of its members to make a formal alliance with another group without anyone's approval. Yet, this is essentially what happened.

Thus, a merger which never took place has been terminated. That would be fine if the "merger" had not taken place in public view and black and white radicals were deceived into believing that something existed which, in fact, didn't. It is incumbent upon any revolutionary organization to act with integrity and never to abuse the faith and hopes of the people. SNCC and the Panthers were acting in their own interests and the people were forgotten. If anybody got hustled, it was not SNCC or the Panthers. It was Black America, which still waits for a revolutionary organization that will speak and act in its name.

Julius Lester

Cleaver responds to Lester article

By Robert L. Allen

Guardian staff correspondent

San Francisco

Black Panther minister of information Eldridge Cleaver confirmed that a deep rift exists between his organization and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

In an interview with the Guardian, Cleaver said that the six-month old alliance between the two groups was "definitely off." He attributed the immediate cause of the split to SNCC's effort to "torpedo" a Panther move to bring its call for a U.N.-supervised black plebescite before the United Nations and non-governmental-organization (NGO) status for the Panther organization.

Referring to the resulting near violence which erupted between the two black organizations, Cleaver said that "the feeling at that time was that a few of

them [SNCC members] should have paid for their treachery with their lives."

Discussing the article by Julius Lester published above, Cleaver contended that the root causes of the break could be traced on one hand to a contradiction which has ensnared SNCC and, on the other, to SNCC's problems with Stokely Carmichael. At one time SNCC was able to mobilize large numbers of people in the South, Cleaver asserted, whereas the Panthers have been "dealing with what we consider to be the primary focal point of the black liberation struggle: the large urban ghettos in the north."

SNCC was "non functional" in that area, he said. "The best they could do was to go around and exhort people and project an analysis which people, by and large, had already absorbed."

Cleaver argued that SNCC has "played a valid role historically, but we also

recognize that the task of our day is to organize people as opposed to awakening them. SNCC has floundered and died because it has been unable to make the transformation from a movement to an organization. This is the contradiction that has destroyed SNCC."

Last summer Carmichael and Rap Brown visited the West Coast and met with the Panthers, Cleaver continued. "It was very clear to me that Stokely and Rap were deeply influenced by Huey Newton and what Huey had to say."

Later Carmichael visited Cuba, and there, according to Cleaver, he spoke about "an upsurge in the use of revolutionary violence. He was not referring to SNCC. What Stokely had in mind was the Black Panther Party and similar groups around the country." Cleaver stated that upon Carmichael's return, "He met the hostilities of the State Department, LBJ,

and the central committee of SNCC." The SNCC people were angry, he continued, because Carmichael "hadn't informed them in advance of what he was going to say."

Meanwhile, Carmichael was drafted as the Panther prime minister "because we felt that he had an affinity for the position that the Black Panther party might take." In fact, within SNCC it was Carmichael who first developed the idea of a close relationship between the two groups, said Cleaver. But, he added, an anti-Carmichael faction centered around James Forman, had developed in SNCC. This faction argued, he said, that some kind of control must be exercised over Carmichael. When Carmichael returned from his trip abroad, a special central committee meeting was called. "The purpose of that meeting was to censure
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Cleaver . . .

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and discipline Stokely Carmichael for the trip that he had made and for the statements he had made," Cleaver said. Carmichael refused to attend the meeting.

When Carmichael moved to build a closer relationship with the Panthers, Cleaver stated, this presented a crisis for the anti-Carmichael faction. Either they must "go beyond Carmichael in pursuing the Panthers or denounce them as another of Carmichael's excesses." The latter course presented serious political difficulties, so the former was chosen, he said. These members of SNCC "thought that they were going to co-opt the Black Panther party," Cleaver asserted, "They thought that the party was full of ignorant niggers or a gang of bandits and they thought they could come in a provide leadership and guide us as they saw fit."

The original idea was for a full merger of the two groups, not simply an alliance,

Cleaver maintained, "but when SNCC found out that it was not going to be able to control the Panthers they began to back away."

Under these circumstances, why did the Panthers accept an alliance with SNCC? Cleaver replied: "We recognized that they had invested in them a lot of the heritage of the black liberation struggle," he said, and "we felt that we would receive a form of endorsement or certification by having the brothers in SNCC accept positions" in the Panthers.

Brown, Forman and Carmichael all accepted such positions, but the first two have now resigned. What about Carmichael? Cleaver declined to answer this but he said that he felt sure that Carmichael himself would answer the question the next time he makes a "major public speech." Carmichael was scheduled to speak in the Bay Area on Aug. 22 at Marin City and again at a rally in Oakland on Aug. 25.