

Black Panther Party Legacy Targeted by Arrests

Written by Sérgio Rodrigues ID3268
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Arrest of former Black Panthers aims to erase revolutionary legacy By: Sérgio Rodrigues

On Jan. 23, police arrested eight men on charges relating to the 1971 killing of police sergeant John V. Young. Seven of the accused are former Black Panther Party members. Young was shot through the speaking hole of a bulletproof glass while sitting behind the visitor's window of San Francisco's Ingleside police station.

The men arrested were Ray Michael Boudreaux and Henry Watson Jones of Altadena, Calif.; Richard Brown of San Francisco; Francisco Torres of Queens, NY; Herman Bell, and Anthony Bottom, who are incarcerated in New York state; and Harold Taylor of Panama City, Fla.

Richard O'Neal, 57, of San Francisco, was arrested on conspiracy to murder police officers, but was not charged as a participant in the killing. Ronald Stanley Bridgeforth was charged in the case but has not yet been arrested. (Los Angeles Times, Jan. 23)

Taylor had been previously arrested for Young's murder together with John Bowman and Ruben Scott in 1973. However, the charges were dropped once evidence surfaced that they were tortured by cops to obtain phony confessions. New Orleans police used electric shock, cattle prods, beatings, sensory deprivation, plastic bags and hot, wet blankets for asphyxiation to extract confessions from the three men.

"There were people from the forces of the San Francisco Police Department who participated in harassment, torture and my interrogation in 1973," the late Bowman had said. "None of these people have ever been brought to trial. None of these people have ever been charged with anything."

Bell and Bottom, who together with Albert Washington are known as the New York Three, have been political prisoners since the early 1970s, after being falsely convicted of killing two New York City police officers. All three men were mentioned in documents of the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) as members of the Black liberation movement who had to be "neutralized."

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Boudreaux and Jones were arrested in 2005 after refusing to testify in the reopened Young case. Following their incarceration, the two men helped found the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights to draw attention to the abuses perpetrated by the government of the United States and law enforcement authorities in an effort to destroy progressive organizations and individuals. The two men have traveled the country denouncing such police tactics. Boudreaux had recently printed a pamphlet titled "Torture Methods Similar to Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib used against members of Black Panther Party." (Los Angeles Times, Jan. 23)

Not surprisingly, government officials have no inclination to discuss this history of torture and repression against Black activists.

Rewriting history

Following the arrests, the San Francisco Police Department's deputy chief of investigations, Morris Tabak, stated that members of the Black Liberation Army—an underground offshoot of the Black Panther Party—"were bent on creating terror and chaos by assassinating police officers" in the late 1960s and early 70s. Officials claim that the men were BLA militants at the time of Young's murder. (Los Angeles Times, Jan. 27)

Racist characterizations of the Black movement—as "terrorists" and "assassins"—which the capitalist media faithfully disseminates, are lies. It was the state apparatus that was "bent on creating terror and chaos" in Black communities well before the Black Panther Party or the BLA came into being.

Rampant police brutality against Black communities was one of the conditions leading to the birth and growth of the Black Panther Party. Originally called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, it responded to the urgent need for organizing Black communities against state violence.

The Black Panther Party soon found itself in the crosshairs of the FBI's COINTELPRO, like many other groups deemed too "radical" by the U.S. government. The persistent and often violent state repression against the Black Panthers through infiltrations, frame-ups, arrests and

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assassinations had a devastating impact on the organization.

Some Black Panthers came to the conclusion that aboveground work was not possible under such unbearable conditions and that an underground, armed organization was needed—an important factor in the formation of the BLA.

The Black Panther Party was considered "radical" not because of its support for armed self-defense, but rather because it exposed the bankruptcy of the capitalist system in a way that threatened its stability.

Actor Roger Guenveur Smith pointed out in Spike Lee's film, "A Huey P. Newton Story," that FBI director J. Edgar Hoover believed "It was not the guns, it was the [Black Panther Party's] Free Children's Breakfast Program that was the greatest threat to the internal security of the United States of America."

The Panthers strived to meet the needs of the working-class people in their communities—something that capitalism is inherently unable and unwilling to do.

The decades-old Young case was reopened in 1999 under the alleged discovery of "new" forensic evidence. Whatever rationale is used to justify the charges, however, the real motivation is undeniably political.

No amount of slander and smear has been sufficient to erase the legacy of resistance and struggle of the Black Panther Party.

Plagued by inconvenient revelations of torture during the first trial, state officials have decided to take another stab at locking up the Black activists, labeling them as "murderers" while shamelessly covering up the blood on their hands.