

Civil Rights, The Black Panthers, Anarchism And Today

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An Interview with Anarchist Community Organizers Lorenzo KomBoa Ervin and JoNina Abron

In May 2000 two anarchist ex-Black Panthers from America did a British speaking tour. Lorenzo KomBoa Ervin and JoNina Abron talked to groups ranging from white anarchists to mass black meetings on police racism. Between them they have 70 years of political activity spanning lives that have included everything from teaching at a revolutionary community school to hijacking a plane and taking it to Cuba. They conceded to being interviewed in sunny Brighton after a record-buying spree (for their pirate radio station) to dazzle the gods. Both are now involved in the Black Autonomy Network of Community Organizers.

Perhaps you could tell us how you both got radicalized?

JoNina: The thing that actually got me was the assassination of Martin Luther King in April of 1968. At that point I was at college. When he was assassinated, it really began to make me think. It was suddenly obvious the way he was going about things was not going to work.

Right after he was assassinated, I went with some other students to Zimbabwe—which was then still Rhodesia. I was very naive. I knew nothing about international capitalism or imperialism, nothing. Now I was so naive as to think that Africa was a continent that was controlled by African people. I got over to Zimbabwe and we were out in the countryside and I saw this sign saying Coca-Cola. So that was really the beginning for me to understand the role of the United States and Western imperialism.

Lorenzo: In my case, it was the beginning of the student sit-ins in 1960. The sit-ins swept the South that year. I was ten years old at that time. It was Chattanooga round about in March when we had the demonstrations there against segregation. Black youth actually fought it out on the streets with the Ku Klux Klan and the white racist cops. The resistance was really widespread. For a young black kid at that time to see the entire community rising up against these racists; that really affected me, radicalized me.

The people came, led by the youth; they challenged the white power structure, the years of abuse. The youth weren't controlled by the black or white adults. We were the ones that had the demonstrations, led the sit-ins, and did the grassroots work. We shook that town up the way it's never been shook up before. We had occupations of the premises of white racists: stores that wouldn't serve black people. We'd go in, demand to be served, and, of course, they would ignore you or just outright tell you that they weren't going to serve you. "We don't serve niggers here." I remember one of the kids threw back the line "Well, I didn't come to buy a nigger, I came to buy a hamburger!"

The sit-ins were the initial act of resistance that propelled the whole generation of student and youth protest. It went on all through those years of the 1960s into the '70s, including the Black Panther Party which was, in many ways, a transformation of the students and youth themselves as well as the movements that they were becoming part of. At first, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was made up of all the groups of youths that had been involved in the earlier sit-in campaigns.

The Birth of Black Power

Could you tell us about the birth of the Black Panther Party (BPP)?

JoNina: The Party was started in 1966. It was part of the whole Black Power thing, it was just one of many Black Power groups.

Was it a seamless transition, or was the emergence of the Black Power movement a reaction to some of the earlier stuff?

Lorenzo: No, it was very much competition between old and new forces. King had a group called the Southern Christian Leadership Congress. There was another group, ACT and the Congress for Racial Equality. All those groups at that time were in opposition to Black Power. Certainly King. He was shocked by it. There was a confrontation that occurred in the June 1966 march through Mississippi. That was the one where 'Black Power' the concept was made public. It was a march with all the factions-one of the few times in the Civil Rights movement when all the factions had come together. There was a great deal of resentment and fear on the part of King about the Black Power movement and the youth. King and his organization had always been in conflict and competition with the youth. At any rate, that so-called 'March against Fear' in Mississippi is where the confrontation between Stokely Carmichael (who was at that time the chair of SNCC) and Dr. Martin Luther King became direct.

King would get up and speak, as he would, used to call for Federal intervention and talking about voting rights and all that-which was, by then, passed. Willy Rix worked with SNCC, under Stokely actually. And he told him, "Man, the people in the streets are ready for Black Power, every time I say 'Black Power' they go holler and scream". Anyway, so Stokely, he got arrested the previous night. He was angry and he came out and gave a speech. King had just spoken. And he got up and just said, "You know, I'm just damned tired of this, I've been arrested too many damned times for this. Every time I show my face in Mississippi these damned cops just arrest me." He said "You know, we need to get our hands on some political power, we need some Black Power." All the people started Screaming "Black Power! Black Power!" And it shocked the shit out of the white press; it shocked the whole Civil Rights leadership. It really shocked the hell out of them. King was lost for words. Black Power came into existence, at least the public image of it-at that moment. And then shortly after that, in '67, was when Rix, Stokely and some others then became part of the Black Panther Party. Because Huey Newton wanted a merger between the Panthers and the much larger SNCC, The merger wasn't seamless at all. There were all sorts of forces inside each organization that didn't trust the other.

The Panthers Merge With SNCC

Tell us about your involvement in the Panthers?

Lorenzo: I went in with the merger. This is a curious situation, it's one of the few times, historically in the black struggle, where members of one organization were drafted (in the word used at that time) into a new smaller organization that had just been in existence maybe not even a year. Huey Newton understood what he had in terms of his own forces-young and inexperienced organizers, 'brothers off the block'. SNCC was an organization that had trained organizers and a method of struggle. Believe me, through the years we've learned if you've got trained organizers you can do a hell of a lot more than if you've got someone who just walks in off the street. Anyway, he wanted to bring in the SNCC organizers and he thought the way to do that was to recruit the three main leaders-Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown and James Foreman

Immediately from the inside of SNCC there was a firestorm of resistance, because all those guys inside SNCC had factions of support. Many raised questions about the idea of going into the BPP. They were saying, "Nobody consulted us! We didn't vote on this matter! This is undemocratic". What this did was really tie the tail of Stokely Carmichael because he was chairman. People said, "This guy is just taking powers in a way that SNCC has never done before". Up until that point SNCC had always been an anti-authoritarian organization. In fact, at one stage, in the early-mid 60s, Paul Goodman [editor of the anarchist magazine *The Liberator*] actually called it an anarchist organization. They had never had any kind of strong leadership and central committee until he got in power. So it was already rumbling about that-when he came into office he brought in a central committee and then he goes into the Black Panther Party-"What the hell is going on?" Inside the Black Panther Party there were those that were afraid that because SNCC was a large organization it would take over. So there was all this tension in both these organizations and that had a lot to do with what happened to me when I came in. It was in the middle of that, coming out of SNCC, that I went into the BPP.

JoNina: And the merger didn't last long. On the one hand there were personality problems, but of course the government were intent upon it not lasting. They did all they could do to sow discord. If they had been able to stay together it would have been powerful. With the talent and experience of the SNCC organizers and then with what the BPP had accomplished in its short period of existence. But it didn't last long.

Lorenzo: What's so amazing is that Newton understood it. Nobody understood it-even the guys he drafted in. They didn't understand what he saw in terms of what the government and police were going to do. They did exactly what he had suspected, they moved in on him. He was shot and almost killed after that. If it hadn't been for the merger there would not have been anyone to take the organization over at that time. People don't like to admit that at this late date, but it's true.

JoNina: Kathleen Cleaver was one of the people who played a really important role in Huey's defense after he had been shot and set up by the police, accused of killing a cop and severely wounding another, whilst he himself was seriously injured. Kathleen came out of SNCC herself, so she was an experienced organizer. She was able to take charge of that campaign and make it into an international campaign. If she hadn't, Huey might have spent many years in prison. She could do it because she was an experienced SNCC organizer before she had joined the BPP.

Lorenzo: Exactly. You could not overstate the importance of having SNCC at that stage, of Kathleen Cleaver pushing the 'Free Huey' movement, because the politics of the Black Panther Party was made known to millions of people. That's no exaggeration whatsoever. Millions of people worldwide heard of the BPP who wouldn't have otherwise. And it pushed it way beyond the stage when it started; just one of a number of Black Power organizations. It pushed it to the front the very front.

JoNina: After Huey was shot and put in prison, that's when the membership really began to swell. Because of the 'Free Huey' campaign and word got out you know, about this. So the membership grew, and grew rather quickly. It had been a very small group and then it started spreading to all of the major cities of the United States, and a lot of that had to do with what happened after Huey was shot. Incidentally, the police tried to kill him and frame him in October 1967.

Learn From The Past

Do you have any thoughts on mistakes made by the Black Panther Party and what can be learnt from them?

Lorenzo: I would start at the structure of the organization. One of the things that always sticks out in my mind is how the BPP failed in terms of the leadership question. The leadership was not accountable to the membership. After it became obvious that Huey Newton was clearly disabled [to put it kindly-suffering from mental paranoia not helped by heavy amounts of cocaine and an overdose of power] we weren't able to remove him.

I think this whole question of cadre organizations as opposed to broad based structures-cadres are just the arms and eyes and ears of the leadership of the structures. Organizations should be broad based; based in and controlled by the community. I guess I'm more in favor of some of the SNCC politics. If you could merge the two and have a broad based organization with a politically focused and militant stand I think that you've got a chance to build a mass movement and stave off repression.

Clearly having a tight organization didn't stave off repression in the BPP. Part of the reason it didn't is because of the leadership. I mean, I can't lay everything at the leadership, we didn't carry our role in terms of challenging as a body what we saw was clearly wrong and was harming the organization.

What happens to the masses of people is more important than any organization. That was a lesson that was hard to learn. I was told that by Martin Salisbury, who was never in the BPP but was a black militant at the time and later was an important political prisoner. He was the one that said, "You know, organizations come and go, but the people are always there and the people are our promise." Now he was in the Young Lords organization at one point, when he got out of prison, because he was a black Puerto Rican. The point he's making as I understand it-and I thought about it for years and years afterwards-is that these organizations are not meant to live permanently, they're simply tools to get liberation. It's the masses that have to move, not the political party. Then there were things with women. There were always women in the organization. The Panthers were much more in advance, in fact, than most of the organizations of the day. That's something no one wants to admit. When they criticize the BPP, they're criticizing, at that stage, the most advanced organization. They were the first ones to come out in favor of the gay revolution. There were no other black organizations that did that, in fact I don't think many still have.

JoNina: Well, of course, there were a lot of black organizations that were against gay rights.

Lorenzo: ...and against Women's Liberation. So they made a number of mistakes there. But you have to look at that within the context of the time. So, I think really, in my mind, that was less of a problem. I'm not minimizing. I'm sure you wouldn't allow me to do that-no way! Women were not common enough in leadership roles, but if you look at them in comparison to the black movement organizations and the Civil Rights organizations... you know they were head and shoulders above it. Dr. King's organization had a terrible reputation for sexism and womanizing. Now SNCC had the best reputation over the roles women had, especially in the late stages.

JoNina: There was a struggle within SNCC too, about that whole question. About female leadership. All the organizations went through it at some time.

Lorenzo: So I think those areas are important. But in my estimation because they had a broad based organization with community support they could have resisted. I believe, I've always be-

lieved, that they could have resisted the pressure. What do you think?

JoNina: Well, yeah, I think if the structure had been different. I also think look at the state repression, what was done to destroy the organization. We did not understand how much repression we were going to get by telling the black community it should defend itself against the power structure. Even with our community survival programs, J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, at one point he said that out of all our activity our 'Breakfast Program' was the most subversive.

Subversive! We were feeding kids! J. Edgar Hoover was a racist, but he wasn't crazy. He understood the power of what we were doing in terms of radicals feeding hungry children. That was a really dangerous program, and that was one of the programs that the FBI 'went out to sabotage. [At its height the BPP Breakfast program fed 10,000 kids a day.]

We did not have a complete understanding of what scale of confrontation we were entering with the state at that stage already. We had these agents provocateurs sent in to disrupt us. We'd let anybody walk in off the street to join, so in came these infiltrators and paid informants. I think that was one of our main errors. We were young, we were basically kids, we didn't know. That just made it easier for the Counter-Intelligence Program to destroy us. I think that in the present day and time you have to do a lot more in terms of assessing people when they come to join you.

How to Avoid Repression

From the extreme experiences that you and your organization have been through, what do you think is the best way to deal with this problem of infiltration? I understand that the attempts to deal with it within the Black Panther Party led to so much in-fighting and recrimination that that, in itself, split the organization as much as the infiltration.

Lorenzo: I think, accountability within the organization. So that if someone is saying something, or someone is doing something, then there has to be some procedure in place to make them come forward and make it public to the entire membership of an organization or chapter. Also there has to be some kind of procedure so that you know a very basic thing-that is to know who's in and who's out of the organization. People will come up and say they're part of this and that and they'll set up an organization or chapter, and you won't even know who the hell they are or what their real intentions are.

So, I think what is really important is to have accountability within the organization. Have broad based coalitions that are accountable to the community as well as to the masses in the organization itself.

I think one of the weaknesses of this idea that if you create this tightly structured organization you resist political penetration-that comes out of the Leninist politics-I think it was proven with the Panthers and others that that's not necessarily the case. It's much more possible to isolate you and just destroy you. You don't have any assurances just because you've got an organization, a supposedly tight leadership and this, that and the other, that you're safe. No, they can come in. Even though it had the appearance of a tight organization people could come in and set up chapters! Can go from one place to another.

If there are contradictions inside the organization, air them; they cannot be allowed to fester. You have to make it a policy-you've something to say about somebody, bring it forward and make it public. And then if that person continues to do that then they have to be expelled.

JoNina: Also, just to have more democratic procedures.

Lorenzo: Yeah, that is part of it. You've got to have democratic procedures, but you've also got to have the ability to get rid of these people when you find that you do have enemy agents. You know, because some people will say, "You're expelling this person. Why, he's a good person. I've seen him doing..." You have to explain to them why you do it. You have to have procedures in place to do this. I mean, it's not a chore that's pleasurable.

JoNina: But, you know, in the Black Panther Party you could be expelled. One week you may be a really loyal, faithful member of the Party thinking you're doing a really good job and two weeks later you could see your picture on the front of the Panther paper saying: "Expelled for life: Enemy of the people". There might have been some cases when in fact these people were, in fact agents, but they were not government agents all the time.

Lorenzo: I think there are some things that are just basic to organization, such as being sure everything's done above board, being sure you've got accountability in the organization, being sure you've got basic unity and mutual respect. You know some of these things are pretty obvious. There are going to be people coming in with bad blood and, to be quite honest, there's going to be conflict, but there has to be a method that you've created inside your organization that can diffuse certain kinds of conflict. Otherwise you've got serious problems. Serious problems. It will split you right down the middle and if it doesn't do that, it will crush your organization.

Seattle & White Anarchists

I wanted to know your views on recent events like Seattle. What do you think of the white anarchist movement in America and across Europe? Where do you see black groups in America going in the next five years?

Lorenzo: The Seattle demonstration, the success of it, even the coalition, was very surprising. I don't necessarily see that as the way. Firstly there's the question of longevity-is it going to last more than a year or two, even that far? Secondly, in the inner cities most of the people there are black and brown and we don't see them as of yet. It's more than just a question of involving black people in the actual events, but also understanding that the same forces responsible for the debt and the impoverishment of 'Third World' countries are the same people who are responsible for the deterioration of the black community and the inner cities of the United States. They're responsible for mass homelessness; they are responsible for the unemployment that is bedeviling the inner cities of the United States. We also think there's weaknesses in terms of them being primarily middle class-even though they're progressive-they haven't got a working class base, white or black.

It was evident in Seattle that there was some union participation, more than there was in Washington DC which was just almost totally youth. In Washington DC-which is 85% black-the demo was almost entirely white. They had not raised the issues, which allowed them to connect with black working class people. These things are going to be a noose around their neck if they don't understand that they have to revise their politics and be more inclusive. Black people are not going to come and join that movement unless there are genuine attempts to correct those deficiencies. Having said this, the fact is that these kids are in the streets, fighting with the fuckin' police with an anti-capitalist perspective. This does remind me of the old Panther politics. They're broader in the sense that there are much larger numbers and they are an open coalition-which I don't think we could have afforded to have done back then. Obviously, we'll see the effect on

the situation when the secret police penetrates further-we'll see. Right now, we can just say, it's remarkable to see the success rate at this stage.

Then there's the question of the idea of the anarchist movement. You know for over twenty-five years I've been critical of the anarchist movement for its failure to involve itself in the struggles of blacks or other peoples of color. Anarchism has some strengths in terms of its theories, in its grassroots organizing style-which many movements can use and jump off with. Certainly some of that has been reflected in the Seattle movement. It also has some real serious problems in its inability to interact with peoples of color. I've seen everything from outright racism to condescension and pandering and everything in between. I've experienced that in my dealings with the anarchist movement in the States especially. One example is when I was working with Love and Rage, and I had submitted a written proposal, to allow us to build a semi-autonomous people of color organization within it. I received severe censure and chastisement by the main movers in that organization. I had to quit it. Same thing happened with the Industrial Workers of the World which I was part of, which is not allegedly an anarchist organization but has a majority membership of anarcho-syndicalist types. I felt the same thing, I wrote a proposal for black/people of color workers organizing group to bring in workers of color and broaden the agenda of the IWW and of course this was rejected as separatism.

Community Organizing

Lorenzo: I have these kinds of experiences, which have taught me that it's important for us to organize autonomously. We won't have to put up with this sort of garbage if we can organize autonomously. As an autonomous formation with our own base of strength in the black community, then we can deal with other organizations from a position of strength and get respect for our positions. That's just one of the realities. Or we can, if we so choose, stay in the community and just organize there and leave the white anarchists to their thing.

Now what we've done, we've created an organization, the Black Autonomy Network of Community Organizers, which is for sure a formative organization. However we think we've got potential to really reach deep into the black community with a practical program in addition to just a set of ideas. Another weakness with the movement is that it's got analysis with paralysis. It's got political ideas but it doesn't have a practical program to do grassroots work. So you therefore wind up with a bunch of white kids or some other youth base from the petit bourgeoisie. We think we've got a chance to build working class black and non-white support. We think we can reach in around the issues that are really important-the day-to-day issues of poor working class people. We can build that kind of alliance. But we can also come out of the community and raise issues that other forces outside will unite around. It's important to recognize, just as the Panthers did, that although issues might begin in the black community, they don't terminate in the black community. The point is to recognize there can be autonomy on the one hand (certainly for the black struggle and the women's struggle)-and at the same time there can be class unity.

The left doesn't mean shit in this period. The Black Nationalist movement doesn't mean shit in this period-they just represent a very small number of people, they're petit bourgeoisie to the core. Our approach has to be instead of worrying about all this garbage, do community work, win the people and all the other bullshit will fall into place. All of that really doesn't matter. And you know, our thing is to try and reach into the black masses, lift their level of consciousness. Grab a

hold of them and bring them into the work that we're doing around practical things. Things that really affect them-food, housing, stopping police brutality. This is what we're attempting to do. It has not been easy to get in a position to even build a strong group. We're trying to do that, it will happen. We think we'll break out of this whole stage. You know, it's the kind of stage the Black Panther Party found itself in too, at one time being one of a number of Black Power formations. It was able to break out of that. I think we'll be able to do that as well.

JoNina: I think one of the lessons — one of the things that Huey Newton used to talk about was that in the black community you really can't just be concerned with a political ideology. You really have to have programs that meet the concrete needs of people: food, clothing, housing, shelter, whatever. If you have that, then people can relate to you. If all you have is an ideology it's irrelevant to them. They're not going to deal with it. I think that was very important. Poor people, working class people, they want to know, "What kind of program do you have that will help me keep the police off my back, get a better school for my kids put food on the table, find me a job". Other than, that and you're irrelevant to the black community and you might as well not waste your time.

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You can contact JoNina and Lorenzo c/o Black Autonomy News Service, PO Box .19962, Kalamazoo, MI 49019, USA. Tel: (6.16) 337-7653; for news on the activity of ex-Panthers and prisoners of war read It's About Time... Newsletter. For copies send a donation in dollars to: It's About Time Committee & Black Panther Party Alumni Committee, PO Box 22110, Sacramento, CA 95822, USA. [This is an edited version of an interview taken from: YearZero Issue 3, \$4 from: YearZero, PO Box 26276, London W3 7GQ, UK. Web: <http://members.freespeech.org/yearzero> Email: yearzero@flashmail.com]
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