



THE PANTHER CHANGES: Bobby Seale, Black Panther leader, above, speaks at the National Conference Against Fascism, which the party sponsored in Oakland, Calif., last week. In a change in approach, the Panthers are now looking for wider support from young white radicals, one of whom, below, addressed the conference.

Panthers

They Are Not the Same Organization

SAN FRANCISCO—It has been slow and quiet and to some, barely noticeable. But there is no doubt that great change has taken place in the Black Panther party.

Part of the change is in the Panther approach. Seldom now do members show up wearing their black leather jackets and black berets. And the guns that were once so visible are almost never seen now.

The Panthers have changed in style, tone and language. While the change has been gradual, it seemed to be complete during last week's National Conference Against Fascism, which they held in Oakland, Calif.

It was visible in the approach they used in embracing white radicals. They talked of a togetherness, a united front in a common cause. And it was a quiet, almost methodical approach. Even the language was different: The four-letter words that had been so much a part of the rhetoric just a few months ago were gone.

Change in Ideology

For the Black Panther party these are not minor changes. Not too long ago, the party was compared with street gangs and it was said that its approach to politics smacked of gangsterism. But much has changed.

The Panthers have always recruited heavily off the ghetto streets, taking in the young blacks who in other times might have joined youth gangs instead. These kids come to the Panthers angry and looking to make change. They look at what is wrong and they blame whitey.

It's different around the party's national headquarters in Berkeley, Calif., too. It's a formal, crisp businesslike operation. There are also more whites visible now around the office.

But perhaps the most signifi-

cant change is in ideology. The enemy is no longer just whitey. The Panthers define the enemy now as capitalism and imperialism and racism. The youths who used to view the problem as merely one of race, talk now of "a class struggle," and of "people's programs," and people's solutions."

Panther leaders do not deny the change. In fact, David Hilliard, the party's chief of staff, says that the organization will continue to evolve and change. He says that growth and self-analysis are essential to the party.

But that has not always been the attitude. Not too long ago, the Panthers simply would not acknowledge mistakes. Any analysis was kept in the party's most private councils. This change now appears to be part of an effort to widen the party's base and at the same time insure its survival.

In recent weeks, the Panthers have been subjected to police raids across the country. Dozens of their leaders have been arrested and jailed. This loss of leadership has had an impact. It has left the party with only one major program, its breakfast-for-children project.

Fringe Benefits

But while the raids and arrests have cramped the Panthers' style, they have produced fringe benefits in that they have strengthened the organization's credentials, particularly among militant blacks and white radicals.

"Most groups would have packed it in," one observer close to the Panthers said last week. "There are not very many organizations that could stand the kind of pressure the Panthers have and remain out there."

Although the Panthers have

trimmed their activities, pulled off their uniforms and put their guns away, they do not appear to be attempting to slip underground. Last week's National Conference Against Fascism is prime evidence. The Panthers not only pulled the conference off, but wound up counting impressive gains. The conference drew 4,000 young radicals, mostly whites, from across the country. The turnout was greater than expected and solidified the Panthers' appeal to radical forces.

Back Together

"What other group could bring these people together?" a black delegate at the conference asked. "I don't know of another single group."

The Panthers used the occasion to make many points, but none came through more clearly than the message to black militants: "Black racism," Bobby Seale, chairman of the Black Panther party's central committee said, "is just as bad as white racism." Mr. Seale made the point again and again and often in blunt language. It was seen by many as his open rebuff to those black militants who have been saying that whites should do their own thing and stay out of the black community.

The Panthers not only put out the word on black racism but actually took the thousands of whites enrolled in the conference into the black community in Oakland and held conference sessions there.

"The Panthers need allies," another observer explained, "and the most obvious ones are the young white radicals. They need each other. The whites need a vanguard group and the Panthers need to stay alive."

—EARL CALDWELL



Stephen Shames