Independent Panther UK: Black separatism is not the answer

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"Free at last, free at last!? proclaims the front page of Panther under the headline ?A declaration of independence?. The freedom and independence being celebrated are from Panther?s connections with Militant Labour.

The split in Panther UK came, we are told, after ?a year long protracted debate on the crucial issue of whether the group should develop as a genuinely independent Black and Asian organisation with the perspective of becoming a party at a later stage, or whether it should operate as a campaign group, with the objective of recruiting the best elements to the Militant?.

Central

The political results of Panther?s new found ?freedom? are contained in a reformulated programme. Reading this shows that the differences were not simply over Panther?s independence, or its relationship to Militant. They were over central questions of the strategy for black liberation.

Under Militant?s control, Panther drew up a programme that bore all the hallmarks of a centrist method. By this we mean an approach that represents a half-way house between reformism and revolutionary politics.

Until 1992, Militant used to present itself as the organic left wing of the Labour Party. Instead of challenging the ideas of reformism head on, they adapted their programme to these ideas.

A revolutionary programme must include the ?ght for reforms and for immediate improvements in the conditions of the working class. But it links every struggle to the need for the working class to organise the ?ght for political power. Above all, it makes it clear that the capitalist system cannot be transformed by peaceful, constitutional means. The armed power of the state, its apparatus of coercion and oppression, will have to be smashed by the working class and replaced by the rule of democratic and accountable workers? councils defended by a workers? militia.

Militant abandoned this approach. Instead they included no link in their programme between the ?ght for reforms and the need for revolution. On the contrary, they even went so far as to argue that socialism could be introduced peacefully by a Labour government.

When events knocked Militant out of its forty-year groove of adaptation to Labourism, it looked for other movements and false ideologies to adapt to. One of those ideologies was black separatism, which was on the increase as a layer of black youth rediscovered the ideas of leaders like Malcolm X.

So instead of adapting to Labour, they adapted their politics to black separatism. Just as Militant dubiously tried to claim the heritage of Labour?s founder, Keir Hardie, so Panther claimed to continue the tradition of US Black Panther leaders, Bobby Seale and Huey P Newton. Just as Militant separated the day to day
struggle from the final goal, so Panther, argued for justified demands against racism, but failed to link these systematically and practically to the struggle for socialism. Crucially they failed to explain that only through uniting the working class to carry out a social revolution could black people achieve liberation.

Militant conceived the launch of Panther as a tactic. Ultimately its aim was to build a black movement politically allied to and led by Militant. There was nothing wrong with this goal. Revolutionary socialist parties should always strive to carry out special forms of work, with special organisations and papers, amongst the socially oppressed.

What was wrong, in addition to their programmatic adaptation to separatism, was Militant’s dishonest way of carrying out this work. The leaders of the original Panther continually denied any formal links with Militant in public. Many black Militant members did not even sell Panther.

This dishonest fusion of centrist ?Trotskyism? with black separatism could not last. Its inner contradictions have now exploded to create, in the shape of Independent Panther UK, a genuine black separatist organisation.

Included in Independent Panther?s programme are demands for full employment, equal pay and equal access to education, an end to discrimination in the courts and trade unions and self defence ?by any means necessary?. These are all demands that revolutionary socialists support and ?ght for. But when it comes to dealing with the racist state, Independent Panther proves no more revolutionary than its Militant-controlled predecessor.

One of the hallmarks of Militant was its commitment to democratising the existing capitalist state. While Marxists advocate democratic demands that weaken the ability of the state to repress the working class, black people and youth, we do not hold out the dangerous illusion that this state can be reformed to meet the needs of the working class. So in the face of police violence we always argue for self-defence organisations, as the ?rst practical step in the here and now towards the construction in the future of a workers? militia.

Brutality
Independent Panther?s answer to police brutality falls far short of that. It demands:
?a) a community controlled complaints authority to investigate cases of assault on our community, with the power to give compensation and bring criminal charges against police of?cers
b) policy and operational control of the police by democratically elected representatives from the local communities which they serve
c) the immediate disbandment of the Instant Response Unit and other specialised units used to terrorise our communities?

Every one of these demands would, if enacted, limit the powers of the bosses? state. But for precisely that reason they will never be achieved without a ?ght to smash that state and replace it. The idea that the working class can ever control the bosses? police force like this is a utopia. No matter how many pictures you stick alongside your programme of Huey Newton with a gun , it is still a reformist utopia.

Another reformist and nationalist utopia is Independent Panther?s programme on the cancellation of third world debt.

Revolutionary socialists always ?ght for the cancellation of third world debt. One of our strategic goals is an international programme of state investment to undo the damage imperialism has done to the third world. But in Independent Panther?s programme this is posed in a way indistinguishable from the nationalism of
anti-imperialist bourgeois nationalist movements:

We want the cancellation of third world debt and the setting up of a fair means of trade and exchange between countries. We believe that the poverty of the so-called third world countries is because the wealth is being stolen and misused by the developed countries of the world. We want financial and technical compensation for the centuries of colonial exploitation and destruction of these countries.

The international system of imperialist exploitation is not simply a matter of one country robbing another. Nor can it be put right by restoring ‘fair exchange’. Imperialism leads to the combined and uneven development of the colonial and semi-colonial countries. That is what causes poverty and debt. To overthrow this system we will need to overthrow the third world capitalists as well as the imperialist rulers. The whole world economy will have to be transformed in the sphere of ownership, not exchange. Then the fruits of the labour of the millions of workers and poor peasants will be in their own hands, not the multinational companies, the Western banks or their agents in capitalist third world governments.

Independent Panther’s whole emphasis here—and this is the only section of its programme dealing with international questions—is on squaring its programme with the reformist, nationalist utopias peddled by Malcolm X and Nkrumah. Even Pan Africanists like Walter Rodney, as the same issue of Independent Panther points out, were able to criticise bourgeois nationalism for ignoring class. But Independent Panther’s treatment of the imperialist system ignores class altogether.

**Linked**

Fundamentally, for Independent Panther, the struggle for socialism and black liberation are linked but separate. There is no explanation of why it is only socialism that can deliver freedom from oppression. Independent Panther deals with the link between oppression and exploitation with the same method as many ‘socialist feminists’: there is class exploitation and socialism is the answer to that; and there is social oppression and Panther’s programme is the answer to that.

Why else would Independent Panther set as its strategic goal the creation of an independent black political party?

Revolutionary socialists give full support to black self organisation within the workers’ movement. We fight for the right to caucus, including inside the revolutionary party, and for black sections and conferences in the Labour Party and the trade unions. This is something neither Militant nor the original Panther would ever fight for. Independent Panther’s programme says nothing about these demands either.

But revolutionary socialists do not fight for a separate black party. What different goals do black workers have that mean they need a different party, independent from white workers, to fight for socialism? If they have the same goals—a workers revolution, black liberation and socialism—they should be in the same party. That does not mean a working class party—even one committed to revolution?can’t be infected by racism, or that struggles won’t have to take place within it against instances of racism. Nor does it mean abandoning the tradition of revolutionary parties undertaking special forms of work among the victims of oppression. What it does mean is that the black working class—a small minority of the working class in Britain—will not be able to make a revolution against the capitalists on their own. For that a party must be built of black and white revolutionary workers.

What Independent Panther has outlined in its programme is a separate road to socialism for black and white workers. That is a road to nowhere.

The whole Independent Panther programme fights shy of class. For Independent Panther the working
class seems not to exist?instead ?oppressed and exploited? people will lead the ?ght for world revolution.

Panther says: ?We believe that black people and all other people will not be free until they determine their own destiny?. What ?other people?? The two words?working class?do not appear once in Panther?s programme.

In offering these criticisms of Independent Panther UK, Workers Power does not hold up Militant Labour?s approach as the one to follow. One criticism which Independent Panther levels at the left in Britain does ring true with regard both to Militant and the Socialist Workers Party:

?Instead of concentrating on the urgent task of raising the race consciousness of white workers left wing organisations spend all their time crudely trying to submerge the special problems of racism deep within the class struggle.? The source of this error is Militant?s and the SWP?s belief that united trade union struggle will spontaneously overcome racism, sexism and anti-gay bigotry. Marxists call this error economism.

Workers Power has consistently criticised the economism of the SWP and Militant in all the struggles of the oppressed.

Our aim is to unite the working class in struggle without ever downplaying the ?ght against racism within the working class. But if all black revolutionaries are separated off in a different party, how does that help white revolutionaries ?raise the race consciousness of white workers?? It doesn?t, and it is a guarantee that the ?race consciousness? of mainly white socialist organisations will get worse, not better.

Split
When Independent Panther split from Militant, demanding ?self determination?, they threw in their opponents faces a quote from the black revolutionary CLR James, quoted out of time and out of context. Here is another quote from CLR James which Independent Panther will have to learn from, unless they want to repeat all the mistakes of Malcolm X and the US Panthers:

?The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race would be disastrous, but to neglect the racial factor as irrelevant is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental.?