



50th Anniversary of the Black Power Slogan and Its Significance

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1966 proved to be a turning point in the African American liberation struggle

On June 16, 1966, the recently-elected chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Stokely Carmichael, later known as Kwame Ture, was arrested and taken to jail in Greenwood, Mississippi for refusing to obey an order given by local police.

Law-enforcement officers had told marchers that they would not be able to erect tents at an elementary school where activists planned to stay overnight during the course of their journey from Memphis, Tennessee to the State Capitol in Jackson. During the early evening of Thursday, June 16, 1966, when the marchers arrived in Greenwood, and tried to set up a temporary camp at the segregated Stone Street Elementary School, Carmichael was arrested ostensibly for trespassing on public property. He was taken into custody for several hours and later rejoined the marchers at a local park, where they were able to establish a camp and hold an evening rally.

At this rally, Carmichael went to the podium and said "We been saying 'freedom' for six years. What we are going to start saying now is 'Black Power.'"



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The “March Against Fear” had been moving through the state from Memphis after the shooting of James Merideth, the first African American student to enter and graduate from the University of Mississippi at Oxford. On the second day of Merideth’s journey, he was approached and shot in the back of the head with a shotgun by James Aubrey Norvell, a white man. Merideth fell bleeding on Highway 51 and was later rushed to a hospital in Memphis. Unable to continue the march he would remain hospitalized for another two weeks only returning to the demonstration as it neared Jackson.

Leaders of SNCC, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), headed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Floyd McKissick of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), pledged to continue the march at a press briefing the day after Merideth was wounded. From Freedom NOW to Black Power

Willie Ricks, a SNCC field organizer, had informed Carmichael that the masses in the Delta Mississippi region were ready for the new more militant slogan and program advancing self-defense, self-determination and opposition to the war in Vietnam. Carmichael had only recently been elected as Chairman of SNCC with a clear objective of moving the organization towards a more radical nationalist political position.

Ricks had been using the slogan as he traveled ahead of the March Against Fear building support for the protest and mobilizing SNCC supporters throughout the region. SNCC had worked in Mississippi since 1961. In 1964, the organization spearheaded the Mississippi Summer Project that brought hundreds of youth into the state to work on voter registration and the building of an independent Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP).

After the Selma to Montgomery March in early 1965, Carmichael on behalf of SNCC went to the majority African American Lowndes County, Alabama to initiate another independent party. By late 1965, in cooperation with local activists, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) had been established utilizing the Black Panther as its symbol. Although Lowndes County was majority African American, almost no Blacks were allowed to register and vote. The Democratic Party of Alabama was a white supremacist organization even stating so on its emblem.

As a result of the national attention brought to Lowndes County, Carmichael along with his close comrades in SNCC was able to take control of the organization. The March Against Fear, which received broad media coverage on all of the major networks, catapulted Carmichael into the world spotlight.

Carmichael was initially resistant to raising the slogan but after the unjust arrest took the podium in Greenwood and said « We Want Black Power! » The enthusiastic response would usher in a new era in the African American liberation struggle impacting the political discourse for at least another decade.

Even prior to the March Against Fear, the work of SNCC and LCFO had prompted others to form Black Panther organizations in several regions of the country including Cleveland and Detroit where there had been rebellions in the Hough section and later on Kercheval Street on the eastside of the motor city. The August 1966 mini-rebellion in Detroit would be a precursor to the largest urban uprising nearly one year later beginning on 12th street on July 23, 1967.

Many African American youth and their counterparts within the Latino, Native American, Puerto Rican, Asian and white communities would form similar organizations as SNCC and the Black Panther Party (BPP). University and high school students supported by their parents demanded reforms in educational curriculums as well as community control of the police. What is the Significance of Black Power Today?

Five decades later many of the gains made during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements have been reversed by the courts, the federal government and corporate community. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 has been eviscerated stripping the law of its enforcement provisions.

Cities in Michigan with majority African American populations were put under emergency management where large-scale theft of public resources, educational services and basic bourgeois democratic rights have been carried out with the tacit support of the Democratic administration of President Barack Obama.

African Americans and other oppressed groups are brutalized and killed by law-enforcement agents and vigilantes on a weekly basis. During 2015, anywhere between 900 and 1200 people had fatal encounters with the police. In most cases these crimes go unpunished where the judiciary, prosecutors, the U.S. Justice Department and the corporate media claim that there is insufficient evidence to try and convict the perpetrators. Jobless rates among African Americans still remains twice as high as whites. Poverty rates among the oppressed far exceed those of the broader majority white population.

U.S. foreign policy continues on its imperialistic path with wars of occupation and regime-change taking place throughout the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America. The Pentagon budget is larger than all other states combined while the Obama administration is launching a renewed nuclear weapons program amid growing poverty and desolation inside the cities, suburbs and rural areas of the country. What Can Youth and Workers Learn From the Black Power Movement? Can any lessons be learned for the contemporary period in light of 2016 presidential elections amid a renewed struggle against racist violence, economic exploitation and poverty? Is there a direct relationship between the "Black Lives Matter" movement and the revolutionary upsurge of 50 years ago?

The lack of historical memory has been a major impediment in the present situation. Even though there was a president of African descent elected twice to the White House, fundamentally there has been no change in the power structure and economic relations of production within U.S. capitalist society. Consequently, a revolutionary movement encompassing various organizational expressions is necessary to address the current crisis. The limitations of spontaneous demonstrations and rebellions has been illustrated since 2013 when public sentiment against the killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Grey, Sandra Bland and others sparked mass protests and unrest.

Nonetheless, obviously absent from the present political landscape are organizations such as SNCC and the BPP which places people on the ground in communities and on the campuses to mobilize and agitate for revolutionary change. This is the major challenge of this period and it can only be addressed by the newer generation drawing upon the best in the social traditions among the oppressed and the working class

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