

## Chapter 12

## Practical Internationalists

*The Story of the Des Moines, Iowa, Black Panther Party*

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Yeah my mother sent me to stay out of trouble, but while I was out there I met a guy named Bunchy Carter in Los Angeles that summer. Bunchy Carter was a leader of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party and was attempting to transform the five thousand member Slau-son gang into a revolutionary force.

—Mary Rem, founder of the  
Des Moines Black Panther Party,  
July 10, 2002 (personal communication)

The newspaper has always targeted me as the chairperson and I was never the chairperson, in fact, I was the organizer. For example, when the party started in Des Moines, it was a sister . . . Mary Rem, her name is Hadishar now. She was the one who actually started the thing and I joined. She had been to California and she talked with people. She actually was around recruiting and fighting against police brutality. I had been a VISTA volunteer and we met up on the street passing out leaflets. And that's how I joined the party.

—Charles Knox, Deputy of Education  
of the Des Moines Black Panther Party,  
August 21, 2000 (personal communication)

Leaving Des Moines, Iowa, in 1967 just after her high school graduation, Mary Rem headed for Oakland, California, and the headquarters of the fledgling Black Panther Party (BPP) for Self-Defense founded by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton in October 1966. While in California visiting relatives, Mary Rem ignored her mother's advice about "staying out of trouble" and began her life as a black revolutionary. She gained some political training in the Black Panther Party and was very much inspired by the example of another organizer, the legendary Los Angeles gang leader turned revolutionary Bunchy Carter. Mary Rem was searching for answers to the deepening urban problems she had experienced in her hometown in the Midwest. Looking at the Los Angeles model of organizing where Bunchy Carter had demonstrated his extraordinary aptitude for explaining political matters to ordinary people, Mary Rem observed his success at radicalizing thousands of youthful members of the infamous Slau-son Street gang through community programs and political education.

Rem began to think about taking those organizing lessons back to Iowa and founding a Black Panther Party in Des Moines. Although Des Moines did not have a major ghetto like Los Angeles, the heartland city had serious urban problems such as racial unrest, segregated education, and police brutality. Armed with that political training, the young Mary Rem returned to her hometown and began the work of door-to-door canvassing in her community in order to organize and politicize young people around several burning issues, including police brutality. Rem yearned for a new kind of organization in the Midwest that would organize for political change and mobilize against the oppressive conditions in the black community. While going door to door in Des Moines to solicit support, she met Charles Knox, who was working in VISTA (an anti-poverty program).<sup>1</sup> That meeting of Mary Rem and Charles Knox was the genesis of the Des Moines BPP in the heartland. By 1968 Rem would legally incorporate a Black Panther branch in Des Moines that was prepared to defend the black community against violent attacks whether by local police or by the paramilitary Minute Men, a right-wing terrorist group that would ultimately bomb the Panther headquarters.

In terms of the published history of the Black Panther Party, this story from the heartland is distinct and largely overlooked. For one thing, hurdling over the formidable gender barriers in a male-dominated arena of Black Power politics that excluded many women from political leadership and that marred their equal participation, Mary Rem became one of the