

The (original) rainbow coalition



Photo Credit: S. Shames

Bobby Lee moved to Chicago in the late 1960s as a VISTA volunteer, and joined the Black Panther Party. He was instrumental in bringing together the first Rainbow Coalition—a teaming of the Puerto Rican Young Lords and the white Young Patriots Organization. This is a short excerpt of a longer interview with Lee, for an upcoming book on white working class New Left groups.

In Chicago, you formed the first Rainbow Coalition with the Young Lords and the Young Patriots Organization. Was this controversial in the Black Panther Party? I don't think it could have been easy for Black Radicals to accept working with whites who wore the Confederate Flag on their uniforms.

First of all, the Patriots' leader William "Preacher" Fesperman was one of the best human beings I have ever met. He was originally from North Carolina before he moved to Chicago. However, many of the Panthers left the group when we built alliances. Some didn't like the Patriots, some just didn't like white people in general. They were heavy into nationalism. To tell the truth, it was a necessary purging, except for these niggers took themselves out of the organization. The Rainbow Coalition was just a code word for class struggle. Preacher would have stopped a bullet for me, and nearly tried. Once, I was in a meeting up in Uptown, and I decided to leave by myself. I immediately determined that the police were following me. I made the mistake of leaving alone. The cop called out "You know what to do," and I put my hands up against the wall. Preacher came outside and saw what was going on, and in the cold of winter brought the men, women and the children

outside. The cops put me in the car and they totally surrounded it, demanding my release. The cop called someone and they must have told him to let me go. Iâ€™ never forget looking at all those brave motherfuckers standing in the light of the police car, but staring in the face of death. Looking back, was there enough basis for unity? Hell, yeah! When I went to Uptown Chicago, I saw some of the worst slums imaginable. Horrible slums, and poor white people lived there. However, two organizations prepared the way for the Rainbow Coalition, without them there wouldnâ€™ have been a chance of forming one. Rising Up Angry (rua) and join Community Union. The uptown neighborhood was prime recruiting zone for white supremacists. Most of the cats who were in the Patriots also had at least one family member in the Klan. Cats like Mike James and Jewnbug, and Tappis worked hard to fight that mentality. Mike James and rua drove a wedge in that bullshit, that white supremacist bullshit, their groundwork was just amazing, out of this world. When did you first meet the Young Patriots? It was at the Church of the Three Crosses. There was a meeting, and it was the one recorded in the movie American Revolution II. After the crowd left, the Patriots were still there. We asked the Minister if he could let us have his office. We asked the Patriots if they could work with the Panthers and they said yes. I didnâ€™ even tell Fred for the first three weeks of meeting with these cats. It wasnâ€™ easy to build an alliance. I advised them on how to set up â€œserve the peopleâ€ programsâ€ free breakfasts, peopleâ€™s health clinics, all that. I had to run with those cats, break bread with them, hang out at the pool hall. I had to lay down on their couch, in their neighborhood. Then I had to invite them into mine. That was how the Rainbow Coalition was built, real slow. Then I contacted Cha Cha Jimenez from the Young Lords.

A lot of accounts have Fred Hampton inventing the Rainbow Coalition, but it seems you did a lot of the organizing.

Fred Hampton got the idea of the Rainbow Coalition right away. He had been involved with the naacp as a youth, so he already had worked with white people, knew they werenâ€™ all bad. It seems to me that a lot of the real intense government repression didnâ€™ happen until the Black Panthers started building coalitions. Once the party departed from the â€œhate whiteyâ€ trip and got serious about building real politics, we were a threatâ€ plain and simple. The FBI were always watching us. But the Rainbow Coalition was their worst nightmare. It was Daleyâ€™s worst nightmare too.

How did the movie American Revolution II help build the reputation of the Rainbow Coalition?

Even though he was following me around with a camera, I wasnâ€™ friendly with Mike Grey until after the movie came out. I really feel that in AR II each and every human being was a starâ€ that showed what was so special about Chicago. Mayor Daley tried to shut down that movie. He used his influence with the Screen Projectionists Union to make sure that no theater would screen it. It took Hugh Hefnerâ€™s money to finally show it. Then Roger Ebert gave it four stars. One of the Patriotâ€™s allies, John Howard, took the movie down to Virginia, where his family was from. The racists there killed him for that. Iâ€™m told it changed your life as wellâ€ how so? After AR II came out, one of the filmmakers, Chuck Olin, was contacted by Saul Alinsky. He told me that Alinsky wanted to meet with me, and would I like to meet with him. I said hell yeah! He had an organizing school and wanted me to be a part of it. Thatâ€™s like meeting Moses! Moses was one bad motherfucker. The book of Exodusâ€ all it is about is organizing, gaining power. He was raised in the Pharaohâ€™s house, knew the Pharaohâ€™s ways and knew how to take down the Pharaoh. Alinsky thought that the Rainbow Coalition was something close to what he had always wanted to see in Chicago, but could never pull off. Alinsky told me to meet him at his office at 8 am. I got there at quarter to eight. I took Dianne Pratt with me. One hour passed, then it was ten. I knew he was testing me. I learned how to stop assuming importance early on in life, when I was a track racer. Once my name was announced, Robert

E. Lee, everyone would boo me. That just made me run my ass off. Finally, at 11:30 he called me in. I noticed that Alinsky had an 8x10 picture of Malcolm X. He looked like a Harvard Professor. He looked dead at me and said "When do you want to start?" I told him tomorrow. He had selected six of us to come to the Industrial Areas Foundation. We heard so many speakers"Stoughton Lynd, many journalists. I still think there are three people who have influenced me the most: my father who ran numbers from his nightclub, Saul Alinsky and Mao.

Are you resentful about Jessie Jackson's use of the term "Rainbow Coalition" for his own work?

Actually, Jessie Jackson pulled our little idea out of the trash bin, dusted it off and gave it a new set of legs. It wasn't the same, but it was something. I do resent the idea that he could never admit where it all started, could never give credit.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Black Revolutionaries on Chicago's West Side: A History of the Illinois Black Panther Party by Jon F. Rice, Northern Illinois University, Department of History PhD Dissertation, Dekalb, Illinois 1998

Getting Ready for the Firing Line: Organizing in Uptown in the '60s. Remembering join Community Union. by Michael James, originally published in Heartland Journal No. 51, Summer 2005, reposted September 1, 2006 at: <http://antiauthoritarian.net/NLN/?p=11>

Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity (Reconfiguring American Political History) by Jeffrey O. G. Ogbu

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