An interview of Dr. Phyllis Jackson

Written by Mzuri Pambeli

Sis Phyllis Jackson is a professor at Pomona College and former member of the Black Panther Party. Through this interview, we better understand why this sister and many people joined the struggle, gave their lives for the struggle of liberation and came out better for it.

When did you join the Black Panther Party?

I joined the party in July of 1969. I joined in Oakland California. Actually, I wasn’t from Oakland but was from Tacoma Washington. I was in Oakland for the summer after my first year of college. I was going to college in Allensburg Washington where there was only 42 people Black people in the whole town. I decided to visit my sister in Oakland and on the streets I met a man selling Black Panther newspapers. They were advertising in that issue for a conference that was going to be held July 17-19, called the United Front Against Fascism conference. I had gotten involved in the BSU in college and was becoming politically aware. I had gone to college as a colored girl but I left a Black woman. I was completely and totally apolitical. I joined the Party in 1969 as a result of the United Front Against Fascism.

Was there a program for recruiting/training women?

There was no notion that a revolutionary needed to be either a male or a female. It was about the person willing to stand up against injustice and capitalism. The party did not target either. It was a program of attraction not promotion. The focus was on attracting people to the work of the party. It was about raising people’s consciousness so that they could choose to make decisions on their own. To make decisions to get involved or not get involved to bring about a more just society.

When women and men came into the party, they received the same training and same treatment. It wasn’t about male or female, in 1969. When I joined the party in 1969, 50 percent of the people in the party were women. The majority of the people in leadership were men, but there were lots of women in the party and even more as time went on. Rather than it being a gender based issue, it was more of a skilled based issue. If you came to the party and you had skills such as typing, driving, photography, the party used you based on the skills you had.

So many of the women who joined the party came from the campus, they often had more skills than the brothers and so many were used to write or develop the newspaper.

Why weren’t there more women in leadership?

When I joined there was already a sister in Boston running the party there. Depending upon where you were in the party geographically, the ratio of men to women was different. And the way in which the gender politics played out, that had some impact.

I joined at the central hub of the party in Oakland and thus party practices, policy and strategy was followed more stringently. When I joined, it was about day to day work, during the height of the breakfast program.

Also, the party had a structure called democratic centralism.
up arms. It was completely opposite from what was taught in this society. The party ideology changed all of that.

**How did the BPP change your life as an African Woman?**

I grew up in a working class family. My father worked two full time jobs. Part of that was that although they were working class, they had middle class aspirations. I was in the church and choir. I was a really good girl. I never skipped school, never broke the rules. But it was that first year of college and taking a black studies course that for the first time I heard of black leaders like W.E.B. Dubois and Malcolm X.

I still thought of myself in very traditional ways. The goal during that day was to go to college and find a boyfriend and get married. But to instead marry the revolution and the Party changed my life in ways I can’t even enumerate.