Safiya Bukhari on U.S. political prisoners: excerpts from “The War Before: The True Life Story of Becoming a Black Panther, Keeping the Faith in Prison & Fighting for Those Left Behind” (New York: The Feminist Press, 2010)

“Every time a freedom fighter comes home, it’s like a part of us is out there again, it’s like a ray of hope for everybody else. But when you leave, and you leave those others behind, it’s like you leave part of you inside the institution. So you have to continue to do the work, because as long as there’s a political prisoner—any prisoner—inside this country, that means that you’re not truly free.”

* Safiya Bukhari, speaking at welcome home party for a recently released political prisoners, New York City, August 15 ,1999

“On the Question of Political Prisoners”

Safiya Bukhari

*Support for political prisoners became increasingly central to Safiya Bukhari’s work in the years following her own 1983 release from prison. After this essay, written sometime later than 1984, Safiya returned many times to the subject and integrated it into some of her other writings. Over time in these essays, Safiya grappled with the problem of how to generate popular support for the prisoners—people who ended up in prison for their participation in earlier phases of the Black liberation struggle, when militant, revolutionary politics and strategies were embraced more widely than at the time she was writing the essays.*

*In 2001, Safiya repeated some parts of this essay in one she wrote for New York journalist and longtime activist Herb Boyd. He had requested that she submit a chapter for his book, “Race and Resistance: African Americans in the 21st Century” (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002.) Although he was unable to include the essay in the book, Boyd wrote, the piece showed “her profound insight and the passion she possessed for her comrades [in prison], a situation she knew first hand.”1*

There is no question that support for political prisoners and prisoners of war should and must be an integral part of any movement for liberation. There is no question, that is, for people who have dedicated their lives to the struggle for freedom in this country. Such people realize that it is not possible to talk about a movement for liberation if you fail to liberate people who are incarcerated as a result of that liberation struggle.

What is called into question, therefore, is whether or not we are serious about revolution and liberation.

I remember sitting in the back room of the Harlem office of the Black Panther Party on Seventh Avenue and listening to political education class where Mao Tse-tung’s “Red Book” was being discussed.2 This particular day the passage under discussion was “Tell no lies and claim no easy victories.” I interpreted that to mean, Go to the people, organize the people, work among the people and tell no lies about what we want and what we’ve done and what we have accomplished. We have to build a strong bond of trust with the people and show them by example that we’re different from the politicians and corporate businessmen and others who say anything and do anything to get the people to go along with their program.

This lesson has been the cornerstone of my understanding of what this struggle is supposed to be about. If we take the “tell no lies” approach to organizing, then we take the time to build the foundation for a movement that is destined to bring us the victory we say we’re fighting for. Then there would be no need to organize separate programs to educate the community to the existence of political prisoners. No. Because while we were working to organize rent strikes and take control of abandoned buildings—to create decent housing in our community through our sweat equity—we would be talking about how Abdul Majid and others organized tenant associations such as the Ocean Hill- Brownsville Tenants Association in Brooklyn. While we’re organizing around the issue of quality education that teaches our true history and role in this society, we would be talking about Herman Bell and Albert Nuh Washington and their work with the liberation schools. While we’re organizing food co-ops and other survival programs, we’d be talking about Geronimo Pratt, Sundiata Acoli, Robert Seth Hayes, and all the other political prisoners and prisoners of war who worked in the free health clinics and day care centers—and who went to prison as a result of their active participation in organizing efforts around issues that directly affected the Black and oppressed communities.3

Because our “movement,” for lack of a better word, has deteriorated to the point that the majority of our organizing is done through demonstrations, rallies, conferences, and press conferences, the only way we feel we can talk about the issue of political prisoners is when we drag them out for show-and-tell or when we need to legitimatize what we are doing. This raises the question, “Are we serious about struggle, or are we just profiling?” If we’re not serious, then we need to let our political prisoners off the hook and tell them, “Do what you think is best for you.” If we are serious then we need to stop ego-tripping, stop profiling, stop rabble-rousing, and get down to the serious work of organizing. Talk is cheap, action is supreme.

Political prisoners didn’t become political prisoners out of a vacuum. They went to prison, for the most part, as members of political formations. There are more than 150 political prisoners in jail across this country. The majority of these brothers and sisters are serving upward of twenty-five years to life and at least one, Mumia Abu-Jamal, is facing death. At the time the majority of these people went to prison there was a thriving movement on the street. They are sitting there now and the movement is totally fragmented and in a state of disarray. They are being pulled in a lot of different directions by fragmented organizations that are more interested in posturing as the “van- guard” and jockeying for position than they are in doing the work of organizing people. I constantly wonder why it is necessary for them to be fighting among themselves to be the titular vanguard of a movement when there are millions of people that have to be organized. If they all got down today to the task of organizing New York City—or any of the other communities across the United States—there would still be room for more help. We wouldn’t even step on each other’s toes and would be glad to share the work because that’s how much work there is to be done. That is, if we were serious about the job of organizing for liberation.

The term “political prisoner” means nothing to the average brother or sister on the block, because the terms “liberation” and “revolution” mean nothing. The words have no meaning for our people, no real meaning, because we have done no real organizing and educating for liberation. The lack of consciousness among our people, the lack of support for political prisoners, is a direct result of our lack of concrete work among our people. The day of people getting involved in struggle for great socialist ideas is long gone, if it ever existed. Our people require examples of the concrete changes in their conditions that will occur if we collectively fight for change. Once they are shown the example of what could be achieved, they are more likely to support struggle. When they are confronted by the way the state—the government, police, and other forces of repression— respond to people who dare to speak out and organize and educate against a system that has consistently exploited, brutalized, and oppressed them, they will be more likely to support political prisoners.

Some of us mistake the people’s anger, frustration, and distrust of the system as meaning they are ready for revolution. It is true that they possess a deep-seated anger at the system. It’s true that they distrust the system. But it’s also true that they have not made the connection between the source of this anger and distrust and creating a revolution. Our people are more inclined to participate in a race riot than a revolution. They would support a drug dealer before they’d support a revolutionary. Why?

For a number of reasons, chief being that the drug dealer is in the community constantly. He is known by the community and has picked up on a lesson that the revolutionary used to know. The drug dealer understands that he has to give something back to the community. He employs the local people and therefore, even if it’s pennies, makes a difference in the life of the community.

This is not an indictment of our people, but rather an indictment of the deterioration of the movement and our complete loss of direction. At some point we should have been able to stop and make an assessment of the state of the movement, especially following the major government offensives against the revolution—COINTELPRO and the destruction of the Black Panther Party. We seem to have forgotten everything we ever learned about revolution: that it’s about the people. It’s about making qualitative and quantitative changes in the conditions of our people. Revolution is not about gaining name or organizational recognition at the expense of building a foundation for a movement that will lead us to victory. In order to create the conditions for revolution, we must go back to basics and deal with the fact that revolution is protracted. It doesn’t happen overnight. Therefore we have the time to make sure we lay the correct foundation and build a strong movement based on work. This is the only real way we can build the necessary support to free our political prisoners and prisoners of war.

A final word, to our political prisoners: We used to know that prison was a microcosm of society. That is, we recognized the truism that the conditions of the people who came through the doors of the prison reflected the state of the society without. Think back to what was happening on the streets at the time you were incarcerated. Think back to the activities that were going on among the prisoners in the institutions. Now compare that to what the people coming into the prisons today are talking about and doing, and you can deduce for yourself the state of the movement. Just as we have a job to do out here, you have a job to do in there. Being in prison does not release you from your obligation to educate to liberate. Some of you seem to have forgotten that. What being in prison does is change the venue in which you organize. It changes the playing field.

I remember another class that took place in the Harlem office of the Black Panther Party. This lesson had to do with the Ten- Ten-Ten Program.4 This was a lesson on organizing. We had to learn the Ten-Point Program and Platform of the Party. We had to learn the Twenty-six Rules of the Party. We had to learn the Eight Points of Attention and the Three Main Rules of Discipline. We had to learn the motto and primary objective, then internalize all of it. We had to learn and internalize it for the day when the offices would no longer be open and available to us. We had to learn it for the day when we would be on our own without other Panthers, so that we could carry out the tasks of the revolution. Once we internalized these teachings, we were ready to go out and organize. The theory was that if each one of us organized ten people, and those people organized ten people, and those people organized ten people, then by the time the third group organized ten people each, we would number ten thousand people. It’s a time-consuming method of organizing, but it’s tried and true. This was the approach to organizing that I used in my section when I was in the Party. During the time I was incarcerated in Goochland, Virginia, the people in my section in the community stood by me and sent me packages and cards. They were there waiting when I was released from prison in 1983.

Organizations come and go, but we have to create within our people the spirit of struggle. We have to build a movement to liberate our people. The issue of political prisoners is part of that movement that we are building, and in building that move- ment we must understand that this is not a separate issue. It is an integral part of that movement. It can’t be put in front of the movement and it can’t be an afterthought. It must be woven into the very fiber.

Notes

1. “A gallant warrior and revolutionary passes,” New York Amsterdam News 94, issue 35, p. 6, August 28, 2003.

2. Mao Tse-tung’s “Red Book”: See chapter 6, “On the Question of Sexism Within the Black Panther Party,” note 7, p. 62.

3. Abdul Majid (Anthony Laborde) is a political prisoner in New York State, one of the “Queens Two.” He was arrested in 1982, badly beaten upon arrest, and later convicted of a 1981 incident in Queens in which a police officer was killed in a shoot-out. With his codefendant, Bashir Hameed (James York, who died in prison in August 2008), Abdul was tried three times because the first two juries did not find the Queens Two guilty. In 1985, the Queens Two were denied a new trial following an appeal claiming that the exclusion of Black people from the jury in their third trial violated their right to a fair trial.

Herman Bell and Albert Nuh Washington are two of the New York Three, members of the Black Panther Party who were convicted of the 1970 killing of two New York City police officers. Jalil Muntaqim (Anthony Bottom) is the third. Nuh died of cancer in prison in 2000. Herman and Jalil remain in prison in New York State, having been denied parole several times, despite the support of the son and other family members of one of the policemen killed in the case. It took two trials to convict the New York Three; discrepancies in various pieces of evidence were never fully resolved.

Liberation schools were community education projects of the Black Panther Party.

4. In the early days of the Panthers, Huey Newton and others went door to door in Oakland asking community members to name the goals they felt would better their community. From this process arose the Party’s Ten-Point Program:

1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black community.

2. We want full employment for our people.

3. We want an end to the robbery by the white man of our Black community.

4. We want decent housing, fit for the shelter of human beings.

5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present day society.

6. We want all Black men to be exempt from military service.

7. We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of Black people.

8. We want freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county,

and city prisons and jails.

9. We want all Black people when brought to trial to be tried in court

by a jury of their peer group, or people from the Black communities,

as defined by the Constitution of the United States.

10.We want bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace. And as our major political objective, a United Nations–supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the Black colony in which Black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate, for the purpose of determining the will of Black people as to their national destiny.

The other items Safiya names were internal rules of the Party. In an undated pamphlet, “Notes on the Black Panther Party, Its Basic Working Papers and Policy Statements,” Safiya wrote:

“These basic documents are the foundation from which all the theory and practice that flowed from the Black Panther Party outward was produced. It is impossible to receive a clear and undistorted picture of what the Black Panther Party was truly about without an understanding of the politics that guided it.

“In developing the guiding principles of the Black Panther Party, much effort went into studying revolutionary struggles going on around the world. Particular study was given to Mao Tse-tung in China, Kim Il Sung in North Korea, Carlos Marighella and the Tupamaros in Uruguay, Amilcar Cabral in Mozambique, and Fidel Castro in Cuba. In our own backyard, the Black Panther Party saw itself as the collective ‘heirs of Malcolm X’ who now stood ten feet tall facing the ‘wrath of the racist pig oppressor.’”

**Lest We Forget**

The following paragraphs are taken from “Lest We Forget,” another chapter in “The War Before.” This chapter talks about and lists the names of 32 members of Black liberation organizations who lost their lives in the years from 1968 to 1981. When most of the deaths occurred, activists had not been aware of the FBI’s counterintelligence program that was behind many of the killings. COINTELPRO came to broad public awareness only in the mid-1970s.

,Safiya’s introductory paragraphs, quoted below, also sum up some of her thinking on political prisoners.

Constantly people of color are confronted with the reality that death is our ever-present companion. We’ve had to live with the conditions that make us more prone to high blood pressure, diabetes, high infant mortality, strokes, heart attacks, etc., for so long that we see these things as part of our heritage. It has become commonplace to hear that someone known to us or related to us was killed in an argument, gambling, or trying to take someone off. Even more commonplace is our spending our lives in the living death of prison.

We’re not shocked or surprised by this. In fact, we’ve become complacent with this as the status quo. We’ve begun to plod along, waiting for our number to come up. On a very real level we are the walking dead: people without a future and with an extremely chaotic past. We have been aimlessly wandering through life, purposeless, directionless—slaves to other people’s whims, ideas, and desires.

Throughout history, voices rose out of and above the quagmire and declared themselves men and women. Human beings with souls, who wanted to know how it felt to be free and live outside the shadow of death. Cinque, Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser, Harriet Tubman, Denmark Vesey—men and women who lived and died to the tune of “Oh, freedom, Oh, freedom, Oh freedom in my heart. Before I’d be a slave I’ll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free.”

There is no equivocation when we recall those heroes. Why? Because it’s safe to remember them. They are far removed from our day and time, so we can glory in their battles and victories vicariously with no threat to us.

While we are busy recanting the glory of our long dead heroes, new heroes are going forth into battle to carry our struggle for dignity, freedom, independence, and humanity one step closer to reality.

The past thirty years have seen some doors crack for Blacks and other people of color in America. These changes didn’t occur in a vacuum. They were political moves in an attempt to undermine the rising tide of Black unrest and our demands for civil and human rights. No concrete changes in the very real condition of Black people occurred. We’re still at the bottom of the totem pole.

With the advent of the twentieth century the Black man in America began to take a decided shift away from quiet acquiescence to our plight. We had begun, in massive numbers, to say, “No More.” Our leaders—Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X—articulated the determination of our people to wait no longer for the realization of people of African descent as human beings in the eyes of mankind.

The twentieth century became the time to take a stand. Four hundred years of racist oppression and economic exploitation were enough. Not one more century. Not one more generation without a collective, organized resistance. “Either/or” became the battle cry. America was put on notice: the choice is the ballot or the bullet!

Realizing that no concessions would be gained without a fight, brothers and sisters determined to lay down their very lives, if it became necessary, to achieve our freedom. Those unsung heroes have given the only thing that was theirs to give—their lives!

“The War Before” can be purchased at http://www.feministpress.org/books/safiya-bukhari/war