



Feeding the Revolution: On Climate Survival Programmes

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About Climate Vanguard

Climate Vanguard is a youth-led think tank empowering the youth climate movement to become a radical force of political-economic transformation.

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“Feed the youth and the youth will feed the revolution”
— The Black Panther, April 1969

Introduction

The Northern climate movement lacks a revolutionary eco-socialist politics that can build power with the oppressed masses of the world. Dominated by liberal ideology, the politics of the climate movement frequently centre on appeals to scientific objectivity, “smart” policy solutions, and personal consumption patterns (i.e. “drive less,” “eat less meat,” “consume less”).^{a,1} This is a self-defeating politics that fundamentally alienates working and oppressed people – the agents of revolution – from eco-socialist struggle.

Eco-socialism addresses people’s everyday challenge of reaching the end of the month in a manner ecologically consistent with preventing the end of the world. It speaks to the material interests of the global majority, including the working class in the imperial core.

To provide some direction on how the climate movement can build power towards eco-socialism, we turn to the survival programmes of the Black Panther Party (BPP).



Figure 1: Black Panther Party

a Pervasive liberal ideology is largely owed to the fact that the Northern climate movement is majoritarily composed of the professional class: scientists, journalists, legal professionals, NGO staff, and other college-educated knowledge workers.

What is eco-socialism?

Eco-socialism is a society where people's material needs, such as food, water, housing, energy, and healthcare, are met within planetary boundaries. It requires the democratisation of the means of production, the decommodification of the items necessary for survival, and global decolonisation. For more of an in-depth discussion, check out our [Ecosocialist Programme](#).

A Brief History of the Black Panther Party

The BPP was founded in Oakland, California, in October 1966, composing an important part of the broader Black Power movement in the mid-late 20th century. First established to patrol neighbourhoods and protect local residents from rampant police violence, the BPP evolved into a revolutionary party seeking liberation from capitalism and imperialism.²

While this more developed anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist line only took shape a few years after its founding, the BPP's original political vision, *The Black Panther Party 10-Point Programme*, illustrates the Party's revolutionary analysis. Key points include:

- **Point 2:** We want full employment of our people.
- **Point 3:** We want an end to the robbery by the capitalists of our black community.
- **Point 5:** We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society.
- **Point 6:** We want all black men to be exempt from military service.
- **Point 10:** We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.

In just a few years, the BPP developed from a neighbourhood group to a highly structured national organisation with chapters in most major U.S. cities, over 2,000 members, and emulators around the world.³

Of all the BPP's organising approaches, from voter registration drives to proletarian internationalism, perhaps the most effective was the BPP's survival programmes.

The Free Breakfast for Children Programme

BPP survival programmes met the material needs of black people that were systematically denied by racial capitalism. From 1967 to 1982, the BPP provided 65 different programmes, including: Free Housing Cooperative Programme, Free Ambulance Programme, Liberation Schools, Sickle Cell Anaemia Research Foundation, Free Clothing Programme, Legal Clinic, and the Free Breakfast for Children Programme.⁴

Established in 1968, at a time when 30% to 50% of economically marginalised U.S. Americans were experiencing hunger, the Free Breakfast for Children Programme (Breakfast Programme) became the Panther's most popular survival programme, reaching 45 chapters nationwide by 1969.⁵ The Breakfast Programme was simple: make breakfast free and available for all hungry children before school.



Due to its efficacy, the BPP, and its Breakfast Programme specifically, were violently targeted by the U.S. government, which understood the relationship between free food and free people. The night before the Breakfast Programme was set to launch in Chicago, police raided the church where the food was stored, dumped it on the floor, and urinated on it.⁶ There are also many records of police intimidating parents out of sending their children to the Breakfast Programme.⁷ In 1968, as a result of the Programme's growing popularity, the then director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, vilified the Panthers as "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country."⁸

Ultimately, the Breakfast Programme brought to the fore such a deep contradiction in capitalist society that it became the model for the National School Breakfast Programme – a federally funded breakfast programme introduced in 1975. This was “a tacit recognition on the part of the federal government that hungry bodies are often ripe for agitation.”⁹

The Breakfast Programme was effective because it was simultaneously politically unobjectionable and harboured profound revolutionary potential. By asking the simple question, “are we prepared to make a commitment, at least, to our children that we will not put a price on their lives by denying them food,” the Programme converted efforts of meeting an immediate community need – rampant child hunger – into a platform that politicised and organised economically marginalised people.¹⁰ We will now further expand this dynamic below.

The Material Process of Building Power



Figure 3: *The Black Panther*. (1969)

Huey Newton, a founder of the BPP, remarked that the people “don’t understand the nature of their oppression. They haven’t drawn the line from their condition to the system of capitalism.” This is, in many ways, *is the definitive barrier* to building the necessary power for eco-socialist transformation. So, how do we overcome it?

The BPP formula shows us that it is through meeting the people’s *material needs* that a contradiction within capitalism is demystified for the masses, raising their anti-capitalist consciousness, sense of agency, and desire for revolution.

In the specific case of food poverty, it is through feeding hungry school children that hunger is denaturalised, politicised, and thrown into the fire of scrutiny. The actual fulfilment of children’s caloric needs prompted the people, in the words of Newton, to “ask themselves why the party can do so much with so little, and the capitalists so little with so much.”

What is materialism?

Throughout this brief, we have made consistent use of the word “material.” This is intentional, as it relates to the concept of materialism. Materialism is a philosophical tradition that suggests material reality – things we can touch, see, hear, and smell – are the origin of ideas, concepts, and beliefs, things which are fundamentally immaterial. As Karl Marx says, “the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought.” In other words, material reality gives shape to the ideas that make sense of it. Materialism forms the basis of the Marxist concepts of dialectical materialism and historical materialism.



Figure 4: Black Panther Party.

And if this material contradiction was not apparent enough, the Panthers would force the point by complimenting a delicious breakfast with an enlightening lecture. Such a lecture would analyse hunger in the context of capitalism, showing how economic precarity for the masses, especially for black and brown people, is not an anomaly but an *inexorable imperative* of racial capitalism.

By feeding the people, the Panthers raised the people’s consciousness. And by raising the people’s consciousness, more people joined the Panthers. The Breakfast Programme was thus a mechanism for building radical social power, the exact kind required for any type of socialist rupture. It also served a dual purpose of ensuring the people survived until such a rupture. As Newton describes:

“During a flood, the raft is a life-saving device, but it is only a means of getting to higher grounds. So, too, with survival programmes, which are emergency services. In themselves they do not change social conditions, but they are life-saving vehicles until conditions change.”

We might add that survival programmes are *vehicles to change social relations*, not just mutual aid programmes detached from a wider political project. Nevertheless, Newton’s quote, especially couched in such explicit ecological language, heralds important lessons for our own conjuncture.

Introducing Climate Survival Programmes



Figure 5: *Throwaway living*. (1955)

As was the case in the 1960s U.S., capitalism remains a system of mass exploitation that systematically denies people basic needs. For example, despite producing enough food to feed 10 billion people, one in three humans, approximately 2.4 billion people, suffer from food insecurity.^{b,11}

However, in our current conjuncture, capitalism is also rapidly eroding our planetary life support systems, which will only expand and reinforce the

artificial scarcity organised by capitalism. This too becomes evident in the case of food, as unmitigated global heating will decrease agricultural yields by 30%.¹² This is not just a future threat but a present reality for many millions of people. In 2021, climate-induced monsoons inundated 1.1 million hectares of cropland in Pakistan, reducing food crop yields by up to 80%.¹³

^b Ubiquitous food insecurity blows to smithereens the dominant liberal view of history, particularly its obsession with capital as a progressive force. It takes a light-touch empirical investigation to denude this liberal pretence for what it is: myth-making to legitimise the ghastly nature of bourgeois civilization.

In short, the need for Climate Survival Programmes, which can raise revolutionary consciousness and effectively organise people into eco-socialist struggle, is more pressing than ever.

Taking a page from the Panther's playbook, we see tremendous potential in food-based Climate Survival Programmes. One such programme could ensure that community members are nourished with free, healthy, plant-based food, especially during moments of climate disaster.^c Another could engage in urban commons gardening, where climate-blighted areas are reclaimed and collectively stewarded towards agroecological food sovereignty.

But there are many more programmes beyond food poverty alleviation that should be devised: think Weatherproof Housing Programme, Low-Carbon Commuter Programme, or Community Health Programme. As material needs of the masses swell, so too must the programmes that alleviate and organise against them.^d

Conclusion

The climate movement is faced with a world-historical task:

1. Short-circuit a way to gaining power before the biological foundation of organised human life is annihilated.
2. Democratically plan and implement an eco-socialist emergency response in the context of planetary destabilisation and counter-revolutionary reaction.

^c Climate disaster is often conceived of as a catastrophic extreme weather event with direct local impacts. But it can also be mediated from afar via the market, most acutely in inflationary pressure on key commodities like food. It is important to understand this market-driven metastasis of climate breakdown in the effort of forming an eco-socialist politics.

^d Climate Survival Programmes draw meaningful links to the concept of "disaster communism." However, Climate Survival Programmes are designed to confront the power of capitalism and build eco-socialism, whereas disaster communism – in our understanding – aims to build anti-capitalist societies in the ruins of civilizational collapse. In other words, Climate Survival Programmes try to prevent the conditions that disaster communism passively accepts.



Figure 6: Black Panther Party.

Our immediate task is point 1. If we do not build class power on an ecologically consistent timeline, then point 2 is little more than a thought exercise.

The foundation of point 1, building a revolutionary eco-socialist movement, is organising working and oppressed people. As we learned from the Panthers, a very effective approach for reaching people, raising consciousness, and organising them into vehicles of transformation is through meeting

their immediate material needs. This strategy will only become more relevant as accelerating climate and ecological breakdown increases people's material insecurity.

If the climate movement takes its revolutionary mandate seriously, Climate Survival Programmes should be considered an essential part of its organising toolkit.



Endnotes

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