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January 3, 2010

Of Black Panthers, Prisons, and a Life in Struggle for Social Justice -" Review of "The War Before"

By Dan Berger

Mention the Black Panthers, and Safiya Bukhari is probably not the first person most would think of. Yet perhaps she should be. Bukhari was a dedicated and tireless organizer from the time she joined the Black Panthers in the late 1960s until she passed away in 2003. Thanks to Laura Whitehorn, a former member of the Weather Underground and now a journalist, new generations of activists and others can learn of Bukhari through the essays, interviews and speeches Whitehorn has gathered in "The War Before: The True Life Story of Becoming a Black Panther, Keeping the Faith in Prison, & Fighting for Those Left Behind" (The Feminist Press, February 2010). The book also features an introduction by Angela Davis and an afterword by Mumia Abu-Jamal, each powerful statements in honor of Safiya's lifelong commitments against mass incarceration and political repression. Bukhari was not a "writer" per se, but a tireless grassroots organizer who occasionally wrote along the way. She joined the New York Black Panthers out of respect for the work it was doing feeding children in black communities and standing up to police violence. When state repression and internal strife debilitated the organization, Bukhari went underground with the Black Liberation Army. She served eight years in prison, escaping once for several months and using the subsequent trial as a platform from which to protest the medical neglect at the prison. Later in life, she was a leader in the black nationalist group the Republic of New Afrika. But above all, Bukhari was a stalwart organizer for political prisoners. She was a founder and leader of The Jericho Movement and of the NYC Free Mumia Coalition. Her unending commitment was legendary; Whitehorn describes how Bukhari consistently wrote, visited, and agitated on behalf of those people who found themselves

imprisoned for their activism from the 1960s and 1970s. Whitehorn writes how she, too, met Safiya while in prison in the 1980s, knowing from that first meeting that she had made a lifelong friend. Bukhari's unwavering dedication to freeing political prisoners, which she lived until her death at 53, raises the question of whether she worked too hard without taking care of her own health enough. Her daughter, Wonda Jones, describes seeing her mother's tireless organizing, and how she went from resenting to respecting and admiring her mother's efforts.

As the essays in this book eloquently reveal, she gave all of herself to the movement to free political prisoners. She was especially committed to her fellow Panthers, who have received the longest sentences and have faced the stiffest opposition to their release. She watched too many people die--from police violence, white racism (one of her BLA comrades was stomped to death in front of her by store owners in Virginia), intra-movement conflict, and imprisonment--to give anything less.

Safiya, as the book so perfectly captures, was an organizer, not a martyr. The book is a wonderful expression of all of these aspects of Safiya. It is, above all, a deeply human book. With passion and humility, Safiya was self-critical of how the movement's weaknesses enabled state repression to tear the movement apart. She routinely challenged the ways radicals perpetuated such violence, rejecting self-righteousness or posturing while remaining focused on the greater violence carried out by the government. She asked that social justice movements get smarter and more compassionate in their efforts. In this book, as she did in life, she eloquently describes how the movement needed to overcome the post-traumatic stress disorder that was the legacy of the internal and external violence that befell the Panthers and other revolutionary movements. In capturing the arc of her life's work, this book is a manual for long-haul radical struggle.

"The War Before" deserves a wide audience--by activists and academics, history buffs and political neophytes. It is a fantastic contribution to the burgeoning history of the Black Panthers, all too rare in its grassroots spirit and emphasis on (re)building movements strong enough not just to withstand state violence but to overcome our own egotism and individualism. It is one of few books by a woman member of the Black Panthers, and we see her

trajectory from community service provider to revolutionary organizer, along with the many steps in between. Following Bukhari's path enables us to tease out the legacy of the Black Panthers, from organizing inside America's ever-growing prison system to the myriad battles for racial and economic justice in the twenty-first century. Her writings are both passionate and practical in their emphasis on movement building and freedom for those behind bars. To top it off, the stunning introduction by anti-racist activist and former political prisoner Laura Whitehorn brought tears to my eyes, weaving together her own story with Safiya's in a model example of Amilcar Cabral's dictum, "tell no lies, claim no easy victories." Such expressions of honesty and humility are perhaps the greatest legacy that Bukhari, in her life and through this book, left us.

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