

The Polynesian Panther Party

New Zealand experienced an economic boom in the 1960s. Many migrant workers from the Pacific islands were drawn to New Zealand due to the promise of higher wages. They were providing cheap labor to the country during this economically prosperous time. The government subsequently turned a blind eye to the expired working visas and illegal migrant workers until the production boom dwindled in the mid-1970s.

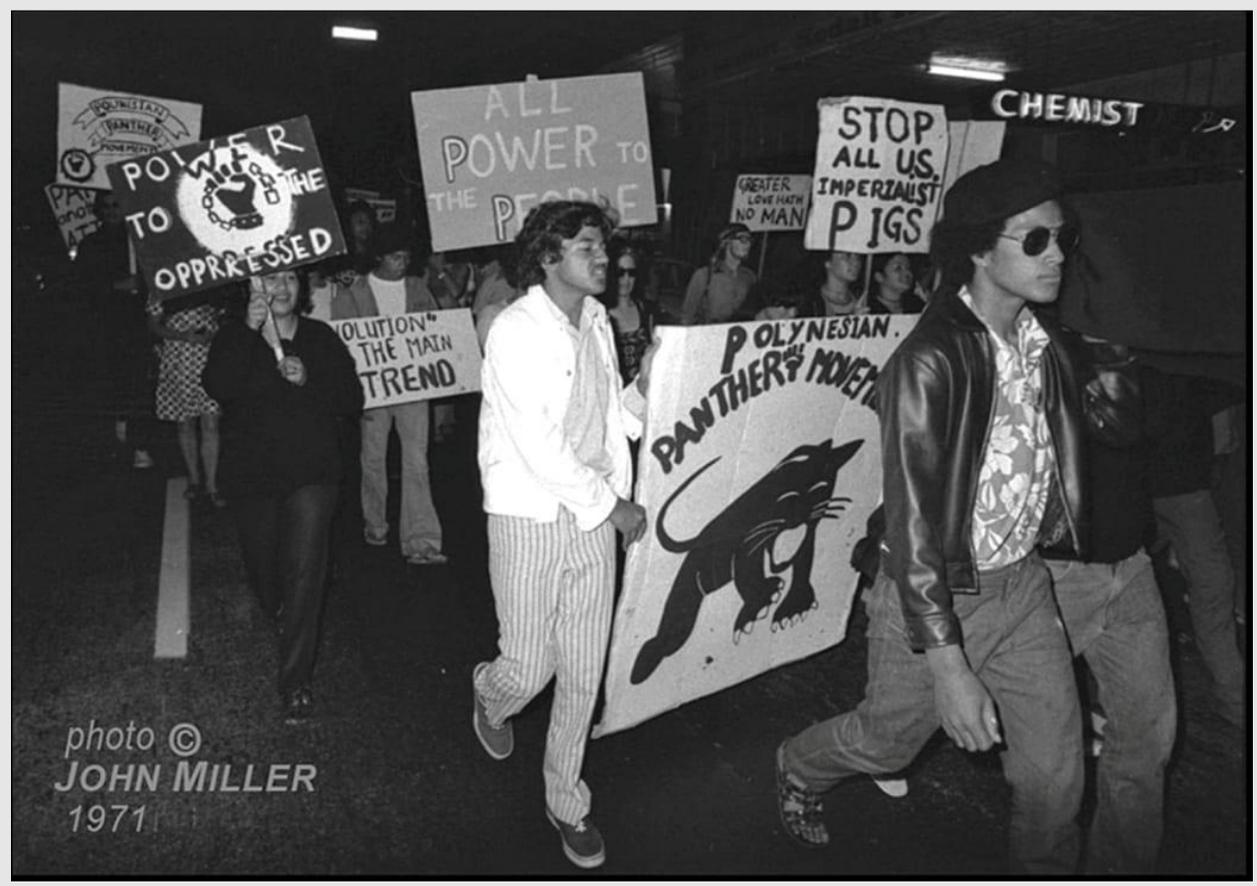
The Pacific Islanders were enduring poor living and working conditions during this time and often had to face racism and police harassment. Harassment from the police was common even from 1974 to the late 1980s. Pacific Islanders were

routinely stopped by police and those who weren't holding papers showing their legal status in New Zealand were arrested. The extent of police harassment was such that Pacific Islanders made up 86 per cent of all prosecutions for overstaying their visas.

The fortunes of many Pacific Islanders, who had uprooted their families and lives to work for wages less than the average New Zealander, took a turn for the worst as the economy started a downward trend. The government also established the Special Task Police Force with the objective of "cleaning up the inner city of Auckland". They specifically targeted areas with a strong Pacific Islander presence. When arrested, the Pacific Islanders were usually unaware of their legal rights such as the basic legal right to a lawyer. The only form of transportation was the city bus as most Pacific Islanders did not own cars. Due to poverty, the exploitation of their landlords and other day-to-day expense, few Pacific Islanders had bus money and had to travelled on foot daily. With certain laws in place, the police were entitled to arrest those who were not carrying any money on them, this tended to be the Pacific youth.

Sick of the continuous Police harassment and being branded the "trouble maker" and "criminals" of society, the Polynesian Panthers group was founded in Auckland on June 16th, 1971. Its' membership consisted of a large mix of Pacific Islanders,

including Samoans, Tongans, Niueans and Maori. It's founding members were six young Pacific Island men: Fred Schmidt, Nooroa Teavae, Paul Dapp, Vaughan Sanft, Eddie William and Will 'Ilolahai. The majority of the founders were high school students. All were between 17 -19 years old and most were from working class families. These young students were inspired by the Black Panther Party's founder Huey P. Newton and his concept of Black unity. They were motivated by the Party's efforts of providing basic human rights to the Black inner-city communities. These efforts included free breakfast and education programs for Black children. The Pacific Islanders were impressed with how the Black Panthers



strongly encouraged political power and pride in their own Black heritage.

Reverend Wayne Toleafoa, who is now a member of the Northern Presbytery Council, joined the group and became its 'Information Minister'.

"You know it's wrong that we should be addressed as 'black bastards' and that kind of thing, so we started to push back," Mr. Toleafoa explained.

While in the United States' problems with racism at the time have been well documented, he said it was also an issue in New Zealand.

"Here we are, the weakest group in society, we're being victimized and so we have to fight back, if you like. And that's the thinking of 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds, which is what we were, and we thought 'we're doing the right thing'."



Mr. 'Ilolahia, a founder of the Waiata Artist Trust and the Chair of the Pacific Island Media Association, said the group was modelled on a prominent group within the American civil rights movement, the Black Panther Party. He had read the book *Seize the Time* by Black Panther Party chairman Bobby Seale and seen similarities to what was happening in New Zealand, he said. The Polynesian Panthers adapted the American iconography, images of clenched fists in the leather gloves, the lines of civilian-soldiers in empowering uniforms of black polo-neck sweaters, impenetrable shades and black berets.

The Polynesian Panthers had simple rules for members to follow –

- A. No possession of narcotics or being under the influence of alcohol during movement time.
- B. No possession of weapons or any other harmful device.
- C. No using the name of the movement in public for self glory.
- D. Equality of the sexes.

The Panthers believed that they should organize families and visitors to the Paremoremo Prison as one of the many social justice programs to be initiated. Many of the parents did not own cars so they could not visit their own children in prison. Many inmates were there for the first time and were alone. These efforts greatly boosted the morale of the inmates with some of them specifically requesting visits from the Polynesian Panthers.



Education was key to many Pacific Islanders. However, many youth were performing poorly in school and the majority of parents didn't have the time to acquire more English language

skills to help their children with their studies. Thus, the panthers became heavily involved in homework centers. These were locations possessing simple tables, chairs and a quiet place so students could focus on their homework. The homework centers were run with the help of CARE (Citizens Association for Racial Equality). The tactic to get the children to come was allowing them to play pool and table tennis after their study session.

Other problems they endeavor to correct was exploitative landlords. Upon arriving in New Zealand, the Pacific migrants



were forced to live in houses that were a breeding ground for a multitude of social problems. For example, in many of the

homes the floorboards were rotten and there was no installation. In some cases, the landlord would hire security to come and evict the tenants from the home for not paying the rent. Or if the landlords cave into the tenants' pressure to fix a broken item in the residence, they would charge them double the price. The landlords were expecting migrants to keep quiet about the conditions and treatment they were receiving. The Polynesian Panthers were not going to tolerate that. Their many efforts included often barricading themselves in the houses with the tenants.

The Polynesian Panthers fought hard to raise the standard of life for the Polynesian community. They organized strikes in factories with substandard working conditions. Many Pacific Islander families simply did not know their rights or entitlements, and the Panthers ensure that knowledge was passed on to them and utilized.

The Polynesian Panthers supported Maori causes and political events, such as the 1975 Land March and Bastion Point occupation. They got involved in joint efforts with other groups such as HART (Halt All Racism Tours), ACORD (Auckland Committee of Racism and Discrimination), MOOHR (Maori Organization on Human Rights) and CARE (Citizens Association for Racial Equality).



Polynesian Panthers reflect on the past 45 years.

Some of the same issues which drove the group's creation remain relevant in New Zealand's society today. Their efforts in the areas of political activism, running food co-ops and homework centers, advocating for tenants, and promoting Pacific languages has been credited as a forerunner for much modern-day community activism in the country. The Polynesian Panthers are still revered today in New Zealand with many successful Pacific Islanders pointing to them as their motivation and inspiration.