

The 1984 Elections and the Black Community

By Linda Burnham and Phil Gardiner

The best candidate, with the most progressive program, has not been chosen as the Democrats' nominee for President. What now for the Rainbow Coalition? Work for a Mondale victory over Reagan or abstain? This is the debate that must be posed squarely and settled rapidly by the resistance forces in the Black liberation movement and by all those who have been active in the Rainbow Coalition effort thus far. We cannot afford a long period of confusion and hesitation.

Not surprisingly, the shabby treatment afforded Jesse Jackson by the traditional powers of the Democratic Party at the Democratic Convention and since has given rise to an angry response on the part of many Jackson supporters. In some quarters—particularly among those activists who only took up electoral work because of the progressive politics articulated by the Jackson campaign—this anger is rapidly translating into a position in favor of sitting out the fall election campaign and retreating in disgust back to local politics and grassroots community organizing.

This abstentionist sentiment reflects, without a doubt, a fully justified bitterness at the Democratic Party's contemptible treatment of the winner of 80% of the Black primary vote (and 20% of the total vote). At the San Francisco convention Mondale and Company marshaled all the resources at their disposal to tame this "political tiger" and his "rainbow radicalism," successfully stonewalling the four Jackson minority planks (except for a compromise on the affirmative action resolution). Both during the convention and after it, the Mondale/Ferraro ticket was slow to give Jackson the voice in the Democratic Party he had already won at the polls. Rather Mondale tried to shore up and promote those Black accommodationist forces who for decades have been the U.S. ruling class's faithful junior partners.

ABSTENTIONISM MEANS RETREAT

However, while the sentiments toward abstentionism might be understandable—and even righteous—they still amount to bad politics.

Abstentionism's main arguments run as follows: Blacks have already given the Democratic Party more time and energy than it deserves. There is no point in putting a lot of effort into getting Mondale elected, especially since he has yet to give any indication whatsoever that he will be accountable to the democratic rights and social and economic agenda urgently needed to improve conditions of life in the

Black community. Furthermore, some go so far as to argue that four more years of Reagan could be tolerated: after all, the Black community has survived pretty much everything else. Besides, it would teach the Democrats a lesson not to continue to take the Black vote for granted.

But, *under the particular circumstances of the 1984 election campaign*, an abstentionist line amounts to a costly retreat—when what is in order is a further burst of energy to consolidate the political initiative that resistance forces in the Black liberation movement gained in the course of the Jackson campaign. Abstentionism in 1984 is a prescription for political surrender in the face of the possible further shift to the right in the eventuality of a Reagan victory in November. It would also constitute an unwarranted retreat from the battlefield of Democratic Party politics at the very juncture when a mass-based, Black-led progressive front has emerged inside that party for the first time in decades. Let's examine these points one at a time.

The fact that the Black community would survive four more years of Reagan is not a serious debate. Black America's stubborn determination to survive in the face of incredible odds is one of the paramount popular achievements of U.S. history. But the opinion that implies that four more years of Reagan would be "no big deal" for the masses of U.S. Blacks constitutes the height of political irresponsibility and left phrase-mongering.

FOUR YEARS OF DISASTER

Four more years of Reagan would be a disaster. In his first four years in office, Reagan set back the civil rights struggle by a least a decade.

If Reagan gets back in the saddle after November, we can be sure he will continue his gallop toward the right—in the direction of fascism—as fast and as far as he can go. This would constitute a tragedy for all the masses of the U.S. But it is no secret that the fullest brunt of the political and economic assault would be carried by the minority communities—especially the Black community.

If given another four years, it is virtually guaranteed that Reagan would appoint four more ultra-reactionary Supreme Court Justices with devastating consequences for civil rights law; use appointments, regulatory changes and budget cuts to ensure that any civil rights laws that remain will not be enforced; continue with an economic policy that has already pushed the Black community deeper into poverty and unemployment; expand the war in Central America; further accelerate the nuclear arms race, and cozy up

even more closely to apartheid South Africa.

In the final analysis, Jesse Jackson's capacity to tap the latent energy among Blacks in the primaries was not simply the result of his personal charisma. It was the unleashing of political energy generated by the ravages of Reaganism. Any abstentionist line that calls for Blacks to passively sit out the election—and dissipate much of the political energy unleashed by Jackson in the primaries right before the decisive battle with Reagan—is capitulation pure and simple. Abstentionism at this point will only serve to fuel the mood of political despair that has long afflicted the more oppressed layers of the Black community—at the very moment when the Jackson campaign has begun to break it, much to the dismay of the entire U.S. ruling class.

Will the Mondale/Ferraro ticket really deliver anything substantial to the Black and other minority constituencies, to the forces for peace abroad and justice at home? The answer is no... and the answer is yes!

In the broadest sweep of things, Mondale and Reagan are cut from the same cloth. They are both fundamentally committed to defending the "American way of life," with all the racist, anti-working class and imperialist underpinnings that go along with that notion. Surely Mondale displayed on numerous occasions his underlying hostility to the progressive program of the Rainbow Coalition, despite his much flaunted "liberal" credentials. In this sense there is no essential difference between Mondale and Reagan.

On the other hand, Ronald Reagan represents a force for fascism—the most reactionary, racist, warlike sections of the U.S. capitalist class. In this sense, Mondale cannot be equated with Reagan—and this difference is of utmost importance politically. Differences of opinion among ruling class figures on what tactics are utilized for the preservation of the empire can, at times, become an important reserve for the mass, people's movement. If the 1984 elections are not politically framed in this manner, the stakes involved and the urgency of the current juncture will be lost.

NO TIME FOR WISHFUL THINKING

We grant, for the sake of argument, that it would be *preferable* to dump Reagan behind the banner of a truly progressive program such as the one put forward by the Rainbow Coalition. And it would be *ideal* to embody that movement in an independent political party in which bourgeois forces (the like of Mondale, Kennedy and Company) did not exercise the ultimate control over policy and purse strings.

However, we presently face a moment of truth and there is no time for wishful thinking. The objective conditions are not yet ripe and the Black liberation and working class movements are not yet sufficiently mature even to forge an independent political party of any significance, much less contend seriously for national office.

At the risk of sounding pragmatic, the most politically effective approach to be taken at this juncture is the only historically significant one available to us—we must consolidate our positioning on the left wing of the Democratic Party, support the Mondale candidacy and dump Reagan. An abstentionist line, whatever its rhetorical flourish or rationale, constitutes a political retreat of major proportions. For the first time in over 20 years the Black liberation movement is discussing matters of real political significance and is in a position to affect the outcome. All moralistic and subjective considerations must be set aside. On the agenda is participation, not abstention; and participation within the Democratic Party, in

support of the Mondale candidacy, no matter how bitter the pill might be.

Of course, to slavishly fall in behind Mondale is also a form of political surrender. The challenge before us is precisely how to consolidate the Rainbow Coalition and expand its influence as an independent political force while contributing to the Dump Reagan movement from now to November.

Easier said than done. Mondale and a number of Black accommodationist political figures are in no mood to make any room for the independent participation of the Rainbow Coalition forces in the fall campaign. As Jesse said, the "old guard" of the Democratic Party is busy trying to keep the cotton and the boll weevil too! They have made their top priority the attempt to keep the loyalty of the "white South" and the white "ethnic" Northeast and Midwest, knowing that these are the part of the Democratic Party's electoral base most sympathetic to the jingoist and racist lure of Ronald Reagan.

However, despite the likelihood of some of the most low down maneuvers yet to keep Jesse Jackson in a political straitjacket—Mondale and his accommodationist allies cannot simply turn back the clock. When all is said and done, it was Jesse Jackson and his Rainbow Coalition message (not the Andrew Youngs and Tom Bradleys) who won the Black vote in the spring. The Democratic Party needs that vote in November and cannot risk alienating it altogether. This is the basis for the very real leverage the Rainbow still enjoys—and must use to the fullest extent possible.

The other side of the current problem is the internal consolidation of the Rainbow Coalition itself—without which there is no concrete way to contribute to the Dump Reagan drive without merging and subordinating ourselves completely to the Mondale machine.

Yet these difficulties must and can be overcome. Consolidating the Rainbow Coalition, maintaining its *independent initiative* within the Democratic Party, and scoring a major contribution to the Dump Reagan effort is the best way at the present time to sustain the momentum and build on the gains achieved thus far for both the Black liberation struggle and the broader progressive movement. An abstentionist position can only foster cynicism and confusion and a retreat from the hard-won positions recently gained.

Concretely this translates into another period of intense political activity from now until November—without much of the excitement and certainly without the same degree of initiative as the previous period. Yet much can be done to bring the Rainbow Coalition's critique of Reaganism to the same people (and more) who were reached during the Jesse Jackson nomination drive. To carry the urgent message to oust Reagan means more voter registration in the urban ghettos of the North and the cities and the rural areas of the South; firming up the local alliances started in the course of the primaries period; more rallies, more literature—and getting out the vote on election day.

If we don't falter now, the foundations of the Rainbow Coalition—and the political hope and promise it holds out for the Black liberation movement and all progressives—will be strong enough after November to begin to sustain something more: a political formation that could once again shape national politics in 1986, 1988 and beyond. □

Linda Burnham and Phil Gardiner are members of the Line of March Black Liberation Commission. This Viewpoint is an edited version of a longer article available in pamphlet form. To order, send 50¢ per copy (includes postage) to Black Liberation Commission, Line of March, P.O. Box 2729, Oakland, CA 94602.

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