After the Convention Storms...
The Rainbow Comes Out Fighting

By Frances M. Beal

With the experience of the Democratic National Convention behind it, the Rainbow Coalition is coalescing policies and plans to maintain itself as an independent political force through the November election and beyond. The dual tasks of defeating Reagan and consolidating the Rainbow will now shape the efforts of the movement led by Jesse Jackson for the duration of the campaign.

With this sharply critical of the shabby and racist treatment afforded the Rainbow in San Francisco, as well as Mondale’s obvious repudiation of the coalition following the post-convention demands, the national and local leadership of the Rainbow Coalition reiterated that task of defeating Reagan must remain on the top of the agenda of the dispossessed and that the temptation to quickly unite either with the Democratic Party or abstain from the electoral contest this year must be resisted.

This perspective was highlighted in a recent communication from Jackson to state and national campaign officials: “Although we did not receive all we expected during the primary elections, we now move to support the Democratic Party’s mission—the defeat of Reagan in 1984, as we continue to move on our own behalf to construct the forces of a Rainbow political organization.”

This theme was echoed by Mary Kenyatta, who worked in the Rainbow in western Massachusetts. "Reagan represents a reactionary trend with a consolidated hold on the government," she told FRONTLINE. "His track record has been so racist and so aggressive internationally that we have to defeat Reagan and then fight the Democrats."

Jimi West of the National Black United Front agreed that the defeat of Reagan is a crucial task for all progressives in this country. "Reagan has been depicted as invincible, representing the majority of the American people," he stated. "But if Reagan is not defeated, the America we know will be a stagnant and frozen force of the people, including the Democrats, to take notice that there are millions of people who are opposed to his policies.

CRITICAL SUPPORT

What has emerged as a major theme throughout the Rainbow Coalition is the concept of "critical support" for the Mondale-Ferraro ticket. Jesse Camacho, co-chair of the Jackson campaign in California’s Eighth Congressional District, noted that "the Rainbow Coalition is not the same thing as the Mondale campaign. In the course of organizing to cast a vote for the Democratic ticket, we will not just emphasize what we’re against in terms of Reagan, but we will be talking about what we’re for and that is peace and justice.”

Kenyatta was even more specific. She noted that "People will be asked to pull that lever for Mondale because it is the only way to vote against Reagan in the general election, but we are not encouraging people to go into the Democratic Party with their eyes blindfolded; we want people to go in to change it.”

The criticism in this "critical support" of Mondale is sharp; as of this writing, he has failed to make a single concession to the demand that were established at the end of the Democratic Convention: a leading role for Jackson forces in every aspect of the election campaign; inclusion of Jackson forces in the leadership of the Democratic Party’s state organizations, especially in the South; a mass campaign to register Blacks, again especially in the South, and a pledge that Mondale will set as a goal the election of at least one Black congressman from each southern state.

Instead, the Mondale campaign has been giving Jackson the brush-off, continuing its effort to undermine Jackson’s leadership by promoting accommodationist Black figures who backed Mondale during the primary season.

Mondale’s press secretary Maxine Isasus tried to obscure the politics behind these demands by posing the issue in terms of traditional Democratic Party power-brokering: "Mondale does not need a broker between himself and Black America," she said. "Jesse Jackson does not need to perform that role or broker for us.”

Once again, the Democrats are out to obscure the point. Jackson’s wasn’t a traditional campaign, and he is not looking for the traditional "spoils" of Democratic Party maneuvering. The Rainbow’s demands are part of a program to consolidate an ongoing progressive wing within the Democratic Party based in the nation’s Black communities, and in fact this is the real reason they are stonewalled by the Mondale camp.

Knowing they will face such stern intransigence, Jackson and his campaign advisers are hardly banking their future on getting concessions from Mondale. "In the spirit of independence and self-respect," Jackson stated emphatically, "we in the Rainbow Coalition must not measure our identity by our proximity to the Mondale-Ferraro campaign. Rather, we must measure our performance as a campaign by its proximity to our ideals.

In a major policy statement presented on the steps of the Capitol during an Alpha Kappa Alpha Alpha voter registration rally on July 26, Jackson underscored the importance of his backers maintaining a "spirit of independence...as we prepare for the battles ahead.

In his speech, Jackson announced that the "Rainbow Coalition is being institutionalized as a political organization—a policy of arm for progressive politics in 1984 and beyond." He warned, however, that the Rainbow must be "economically independent" since its "competitors can’t finance our army.

In concrete terms, this means that plans are afoot to conven a national Rainbow convention to constitute the founding of the Rainbow Coalition," he added.

Some organizational mechanisms have, nevertheless been agreed upon. It has been reported that a formation entitled Rainbow Coalition, Inc. (RCl) has been established as well as a Rainbow Political Action Committee, which is "going to be a local and national progressive candidates."

Local bodies meanwhile have been summarizing the lessons of the spring campaign and the Democratic Convention and cracking up their machinery for the current task. "Part of this process has been to analyze what was won and what was not in the course of the primary season," Camacho stated. "Without this type of assessment, we could lose our bearings in the coming months.”

In some local areas, groupings of activists, particularly in several southern states, have been campaigning on a series of issues and electoral campaigns to the point where the Rainbow Coalition is now being seen as a viable alternative to the Democratic Party. "We have been working with groups that are not affiliated with the Democratic Party in order to develop a Rainbow coalition," Kenya said. "We are going to remain independent, but we are going to work towards building the Rainbow Coalition.”

Most of the local Jackson committees have, minimally, laid plans to launch aggressive voter registration campaigns. "We are going to take this campaign as a matter of survival," Kenya said. "We are not going to sit idly by and allow the Democratic Party to win this election.”

As local committees forge ahead and the national forces struggle to develop the Rainbow Coalition, some members argue that the mission is not a competition, but a more inclusive approach to political organizing. "We are not going to be a Rainbow Coalition, we are going to be a Rainbow Coalition, but we are going to work with other organizations," Kenya said. "We are going to work with other organizations to build a Rainbow Coalition.”

In his July 26 address Jackson noted, "The Democratic Party’s mission is not to defeat President Reagan in November—and we agree. We share that mission. But many of the lessons of that campaign are not good, and we must learn from them."

While this general orientation for the future work of the Rainbow Coalition has been established, the nuts and bolts of how to accomplish the new mission have still not been agreed upon. Weiss attributes this partly to the fact that the Rainbow Coalition has not yet established its priorities, and that it must be prepared to deal with a range of issues.

"There are some people who want to call a meeting of national leadership to constitute the Rainbow," he stated. "An opposing proposal is to hold city and state meetings, and from there, call a national Rainbow Coalition meeting in the very near future," he continued. "A national meeting must be the foundation for our political machinery to promote our mission of a new coalition, a new leadership and a new direction.

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