"The present debate... has placed the question of independent Black politics squarely on the agenda of the Black community."

BY FRANCIS M. BEAL

It has been described as a battle between emotional symbolism and realism, between independence and subordination, between accommodation and resistance. Whatever the characterization, the debate over whether a presidential candidate in next year's Democratic primaries has become the centerpiece of contention within the Black community over the future direction of Black politics. As the forces of decision get closer, the arguments on both sides have heated up. For John Jacob of the Urban League, a Black president will not only be anathema to the counterproductive retreat into emotional symbolism at the expense of realistic coalitions, but it is the only Black mayor of Tuskegee, Ala., "If a Black candidate does not run, then you cannot guarantee that non-parties are going to be more conservative."

Triggering the debate is a controversy surrounding the question of Jesse Jackson, whose Chicago-based organization, People United to Serve Humanity (PUSH), played a key role in the recent Harold Washington campaign. But the significance of this growing controversy for the future of Black politics in the U.S. goes far beyond any particular personality.

As an issue of principle, it is clear that the Black community as a whole, but especially the younger generation, has become more conscious of the racism's imperviousness to change and the aggravated decade-long assault which has reinforced white supremacy. In particular, the momentum toward an independent Black candidacy indicates widespread alienation from the "liberal wing of the Democratic Party.

BLACK CONCENTRATION

What has brought this question to the fore at the present time, ironically, is the new form of Black ghettoization, which, over the past 20 years, has transformed many of the nation's major cities into centers of population concentration. As a result, there has been a surge of Black political activity which has led to the development of Black political machines and the election of a number of Black mayors, city officials and members of Congress.

There has thus come into being relatively new political mechanisms through which the interests of the Black community can be expressed. This is not the same as the traditional Black organizations which represent the interests of specific groups. It is the beginning of an independent party which can speak for the Black community as a whole.

The debate over a Black presidential candidate is an essential debate over the fundamental strategy of Black politics, the central question of which is whether a more independent Black political force can succeed in the Democratic Party or whether the Black community must form its own party. As far as the former possibility is concerned, the debate has settled on the slogan of "Black leadership," which is the slogan of the new Black political force. While Black mayors continue to operate as a relatively passive adjunct to the leadership of the Democratic Party, the new Black political force, which has been given the label of "Black Power," is a more direct challenge to the Democrats in particular—by flexing a concentrated and independent political muscle.

This is not the first time that this debate has surfaced in Black politics. It has been a struggle that has been fought out by the National Black Political Assembly (NBPA), which met in Gary, Ind., in 1972, where the wisdom of continuing to tie Black political efforts to the Democratic Party was seriously aired. The NBPA's 1976 meeting also considered the question and went so far as to sound out Rep. Ron Dellums (D-Calif.) on the possibility of being a presidential standard-bearer.

"BLACK LEADERSHIP FAMILY"

The present proposal to project a Black candidate grew out of a series of meetings launched last year by an informal group of Black elected officials, civil rights, religious and labor leaders self-designated as the "Black Leadership Family." Responding to the explicit and all-sided racist assault launched by the Reagan administration, the goal of the Black Leadership Family was to develop a strategy to oust Reagan and the Republicans in 1984 and to unite on a Black political agenda.

Participants identified affirmative action, employment, education, environmental protection and military spending as the key issues. They also agreed on the need to launch a vigorous voter registration drive among Blacks nationwide.

The idea of a Black presidential candidate, which had been vaguely discussed from the outset of the Black Leadership Family's discussions, came to life in the course of the sharply polarized Chicago mayoral election last spring. The political enthusiasm of the Black community, which registered and voted in record numbers, and its capacity to function as a coherent voting bloc behind a militantly anti-racist candidate offered compelling evidence of the Black electorate's potential political power nationally. At the same time, the endorsement of Washington's white opponents in the Democratic primary by most of the party's national liberal figures—and the desertion of the party by large numbers of normally Democratic whites in the general election—underscored the fact that the Democratic Party's liberals could hardly be considered reliable champions of anti-racist politics.

LOGIC OF CANDIDACY

The essential logic behind running a Black candidate in next year's presidential primaries is to elect a bloc of delegates to the Democratic Party national convention who will have sufficient political leverage to influence both the party's eventual nominee and the party's platform. Or, as Jesse Jackson puts it, Blacks will be "renegotiating our relationship with the Democratic Party.

Fielding such a candidate would, in addition, encourage Black voter registration, give prominence to Black issues and enhance the prospects for Black candidates in both the primaries and the general election.

The success of such a plan is well within the realm of possibility. According to a study issued by the Joint Center for Political Studies, "A Democratic presidential victory in 1984 is inconceivable without a strong Black showing in northern cities and the South." Blacks produced 20% of the Democratic vote in the last three Democratic elections and constitute a swing vote than can tilt the election one way or the other according to the degree of their turnout.

Proponents of the Black bid argue that if most of the Black electorate were mobilized behind a Black candidate, this could translate into a powerful bargaining weapon to wrench a convincing commitment from the party for policies that Blacks want and need.
Recovery Still Leaves Most Unemployed in the Dust

BY RANDALL SEWELL

Despite the headline-grabbing 5.4% drop in the official jobless rate in July, the depth of the U.S. economy's unemployment problem has hardly been touched. Growing structural unemployment along with more supply chain disruptions could be the underlying trend in the U.S. employment picture. In addition, nine months of "recovery," while producing more jobs, has simultaneously provided the political excuse to scuttle even the most meager federal stimulus efforts to ease the emergency relief to the millions who are still without work.

RECOVERY'S LIMITED IMPACT

Officially, the U.S. economic recovery is tight and corporate America is registering a return to high profitability. The economy grew at an annual rate of 8.6% in the second quarter of 1983, average personal income is up 5% over a year ago and inflation has been held to its lowest level since 1973. As usual, improvement in the jobs picture lagged behind strengthened corporate profitability, and job creation was still out of reach of its recession. It has taken a full nine months of officially declared recovery to make any significant dent into the recessionary 10.8% unemployment rate reached last December. But finally some noticeable gain in employment is emerging. That was the largest monthly fall in joblessness in 23 years, and overall the official unemployment rate has dropped from 9.6% to 9.5% of the "active" work force. The 1.7 million jobs added since last December (the majority of which showed up only in the last 3 months) is the largest comparable gain in a recovery period since World War II.

This is good news for those going back to work. However, for the 10.6 million who still officially listed as without jobs the forecast remains bleak. For despite the overall job gains, all they really show is that the business cycle still exists and the strength of the preceding recession was a result of the depth of the recent recession.

A closer look at the unemployment figures highlights the overall improvement in terms of revealing an unabated advance in structural unemployment. The number of discouraged workers (those who have given up looking for a job and who are not counted in the official unemployment figures) continues a pattern which dated at the 1.7 million, down only .1 million from the height of the recession. There has been virtually no change in the number of people working part time due to a lack of full time employment. The average length of joblessness is now 32 weeks, with a week's job is still at a record 21.7 weeks, down only .3 weeks from the peak last month. Of course, those looking for work, only 38.6% received any unemployment benefits in July, compared to 53% in the third of the jobless who received benefits at a similar point in the last recession.

The idea that the recession is just a recessionary edge to the whole unemployment picture is widely recognized. However, not so often mentioned is the idea that the recession has aggravated the gap between white and Black unemployment rates. The Black jobless rate in July was 9.5% as compared to 2.9% for whites. But the ratio of 3.5 times that of whites, in now 2.4 times greater.

STUCTURAL CHANGES

The minimal impact of the present recovery on the long term employment picture pictures a pattern which dated the U.S. economy's recession/recovery cycle has followed for decades. Since World War II, the lowest unemployment rate achieved after each recovery has been higher than the one after the previous recovery. The exception to this trend was the recovery following the 1964-66 recession in the midst of the Vietnam war buildup. The recession that followed the 1974-75 recession only brought unemployment down to 5.9%, and this recovery will be lucky if it falls below the post-World War II 5% minority unemployment level below 18%.

All of this is really no surprise given the structural changes taking place in the U.S. economy and capital's drive for increased productivity based on cost cutting, automobile and speed up. The era of unchallenged U.S. dominance over its capitalist rivals is over, and U.S. corporations now face higher competition even to keep, much less expand, their previous shares of both the international and domestic market. Under these circumstances, the drive for profitability is to slash the costs of production in order to make higher profits on a reduced volume of business. Necessarily, this implies an all-out employer attack on workers' wages and benefits, as well as a large scale infusion of funds to install the newest and most efficient production technology.

The most exact example of this strategy is in the auto industry. Chrysler has made a spectacular comeback, and its ability to do so was based on eliminating half of its workforce and shutting down a third of its plant operations while simultaneously maximizing the plant operations open. In the proposed joint General Motors-Toyota rebonding of GM's recently closed Fremont, California plant, half of the previously existing assembly line jobs will be wiped out. In Nissan's new plant at Smyrna, Tennessee, welding and painting operations will be almost completely automated. These efforts will soon render the norm in U.S. plant technology—not only in the auto industry, but throughout the manufacturing sector.

As a result of such technological improvements, labor productivity in the U.S. is increasing at an extremely rapid rate. According to the latest BLS figures, workers' output per hour increased by 4.3% in 1982, and in the first three months of 1983, it leaped a full 8.3% over the previous quarter. These productivity gains translate directly into increased unemployment.

While increased automation is a key cause of the continuing high level of unemployment, there are others. Over the last 10 years, for example, rising energy costs have led to the displacement of many jobs in the basic industries. In the production of fast-efficient automobiles, for example, Ford Motor Company reduced the weight of its vehicles by over a thousand pounds between 1977 and 1982. This included a 60% reduction in cast iron and a 30% reduction in steel and rubber. These changes alone accounted for the permanent loss of thousands of jobs in the feeder industries that depend on auto companies as a major market for their production.

Speedup, which eliminates the need to hire back laid-off workers as production increases, is another factor contributing to unemployment. At the start of any temporary recovery, employers use the leverage of high unemployment to intensify and increase the working day. According to the BLS, the average manufacturing worker works 40.3 hours in July after having fallen to 38.8 last October. In addition, average working time, when overtime is included, is rising from 40.3 hours per week, a jump of more than 20% over the last year's average. And, with workers clearly worked to the limit, productivity gains averaged only 2.1% of scheduled work time in the first quarter of this year, the lowest figure (2.9%) of the National Affairs began keeping track a decade ago.

As a result of all these factors, there is unlikely to be any significant job expansion in U.S. manufacturing in the coming year. Recovery will be a simulation of high unemployment rate in the 8-10% range has become a permanent feature of the U.S. economy.

OUTLINING RELIEF PROGRAMS

Since the recovery has had minimal effect on the unemployment rate, it has provided the excuse for Congress and the President to avoid enactment of any legislation which would alleviate the hardships facing the jobless.

A further, outcome has been that health insurance for unemployed workers, introduced during the height of the recession, have been cut down with the new economic report. The $4 billion plan recently approved by the House was not only reduced from an original price tag of $6 billion (a general "reserve fund" which may ultimately be used for any purpose). On top of this, the one piece of jobs and relief legislation that did make it through (with the least opposition) the Senate has yet to be signed into law. In the budget talks, the language has been simply left in the dust.

Black Presidential Candidate?

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No Black presidential candidate this year is likely to come close to the one developed capitalize on the particular identity of the candidate. On the other hand, Jackson is such a maverick that the ability to make him accountable to a set of progressive politics is quite problematic. At the least, he has the opportunity to downplay his earlier focus on anti-racist issues in the interests of trying to "broaden" his constituencies. Meanwhile, Jackson's pandering to national chauvinism by attacking Japan for "unfair" trade practices and his promotion of "buy American" schemes do not bode well for his ability to field the kind of all-sided progressive politics advanced by figures like Washington and Della. Despite the weaknesses of a Jackson candidacy, however, a useful political objective has been served simply by floating the idea of a Black candidate. The ensuing debate has thrown a spotlight on the role of the Democratic Party as a prop of the racist system; and it has placed the question of independent Black politics—irrespective of form—squarely on the agenda of the Black community.

INDEPENDENT POLITICS

Implicit in all this is the question of how independent working class politics may finally come to the one developed capita list country which has never produced a working class president. The essential condition for such a development will come about when a significant section of the working class begins to realize that its interests can no longer be served within the bourgeois-led, cross-class coalition which makes up the Democratic Party. The section of the working class most likely to confront that reality is the inner ring of industrial and oppression—most particularly, the overwhelmingly proletarian Black community. Therefore, the idea of a Black presidential candidate represents a significant step toward the political polarization of the working class. The need for a working class which rests at the very heart of any serious advance for working class politics is the essential condition for truly advancing the party and enabling the most advanced section of the working class to move the class as a whole in the direction of independent politics.

In this sense, the present debate over a Black presidential candidate bears within it the seeds for a strategic rupture of the Democratic Party that could destroy the capitalist monopoly on U.S. politics.