1984: It's Not Just Another Election

I. What Makes This Election Different?

On the surface, the 1984 presidential election looks like a replay of those others which have preceded it. Once again, two bourgeois politicians, each aspiring to be the representative of the U.S. imperialist system, are appealing to the masses of people for their votes. And once again, ordinary people, in accordance with those rituals of populism and patriotism which are the standard ideological fare of the "democratic" electoral process and through which the U.S. ruling class retrieves its political legitimacy every four years.

And yet there is a widespread sense that something very much out of the ordinary is taking place this year in the electoral contest. The election and the events surrounding it have aroused passions—on all sides—suggesting that, for once, there is more at stake than is usually the case when the imperialist guard is either reaffirmed or changed. Two factors, in particular, stand out.

One is Ronald Reagan. The President's four years in office have been characterized not only by the heavy-handed suppression of dissent and the intensification of the class struggle in the U.S. but also by the capitalist recovery that has occurred in the world. Reagan's policies have pushed the world closer to the nuclear brink, methodically paved the way for another Vietnam in Central America, mercilessly punished minorities while promoting "white rights" (meaning white supremacy) as official government policy, weakened the trade union movement, reversed the momentum of the movement for equal rights for women and undermined the living standards of major sections of the working class. Insult begets Reagan is the bourgeois contemptuous message to the masses that the U.S. ruling class believes it can get away with anything without fear of retaliation.

The second factor is Reagan, on the basis of his first-term record, receiving a popular mandate to exercise the enormous powers of the U.S. presidency in similar fashion for another four years cannot help but be anxiety-provoking—especially since we can rightfully assume that a second term will mean an additional four years of aerial bombardment, massive social disfranchisement, and terrorism. Just the possibility of starting Reagan from office in 1984 would make this year's election unprecedented.

The other factor making this year's electoral contest extraordinary is Jesse Jackson—so much more than a candidate of the working class. As a result, left and progressive forces cannot afford the moralistic indulgence of abstention or the sectarian indulgence of independent "protest" candidacies—no matter how justified and righteous our anger at the craven alternative to Reagan that the Democratic Party has provided in the person of Walter Mondale.

Certainly the political training of the working class requires the most ruthless exposure of the myths associated with the bourgeois electoral process—especially the fantasy that power can be transferred from the bourgeoisie to the working class through such means. At the same time, the working class must be trained to approach each political event in its particularity—figuring out concretely how both its immediate as well as its long term class interests are best served.

In the 1984 election, those interests, we believe, are concentrated in two goals:

One is ousting Ronald Reagan from the White House, a goal which requires of the left that it undertake to explain to the masses why it is in their political interest to vote for the Democratic Party's candidate, Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro.

The other is building the Rainbow Coalition, a goal which requires of the left that it work within and help push forward the Jesse Jackson-led insurgency within the Democratic Party. It is no minor matter for the future of U.S. working class politics for the communists to advocate the election of one bourgeois candidate over another in a presidential election—rather than urging support for candidates of the left, or a "protest" vote or a boycott of the electoral process. It is likewise a major responsibility to advocate building and strengthening a particular political faction within one of the two bourgeois political parties—as opposed to "exposing" such an effort as a negative concession to capitalist rule and pressuring for the immediate development of a mass independent working class political vehicle.

It is important, therefore, that this conclusion not be based on intuition or premonition. We cannot rest our case simply on exposing Reagan's perfidy orouting Jackson's virtues. We must explain, in the case of Reagan, why another bourgeois politician—no less devoted to the interests of U.S. imperialism—is, under present circumstances, a preferable alternative. We must also explain, in the case of Jackson, why an effort nominally aimed at making the Democratic Party "truly" representative of the masses—a goal whose attainment is, to say the least, highly problematic—represents at this stage the most advanced motion toward independent and progressive working class politics in the U.S.

If doing so, we take issue with others on the left who are advocating strategies based on abstaining from this year's election or fielding alternative left presidential candidates. On the contrary, we believe that in order to meet current challenges, in order to move toward the destruction of American capitalism in the U.S. it is necessary to take the offensive in this election to a greater and a degree that few other bourgeois politicians—even incumbent presidents—have ever done.

The decision by the U.S. ruling class to put the reins of its state apparatus in the hands of this particular right-wing demagogue in 1980 was a calculated risk. Their purpose was to see whether a political figure representing the neo-fascist right could forge a popular consensus in support of renewed U.S. military aggression abroad, a massive bid to regain nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union, and a program of racism, repression and social austerity at home—policies deemed essential to the defense and resurrection of the imperial system.

Certainly Reagan has more than lived up to these expectations. Military activity abroad has been the defining characteristic of his administration's foreign policy—in Lebanon, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Grenada, Libya's coastal waters and the Persian Gulf. Deployment of new intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Western Europe represents a major bid to regain first-strike capacity over the Soviet Union. Both ideologically and militarily, the country is inexorably being placed on a war footing. At the same time, Reagan's supply-side economics, cuts in social spending and attacks on unions are, in essence, a program designed to strengthen the hand of capital and weaken the bargaining position of the working class. The goal is to facilitate a renegotiation of all the conditions of labor in the U.S. on terms more favorable to the bourgeoisie suffering a diminution of its profitability.

One of the extraordinary factors in the 1984 elections is the presence of the consistently progressive voice of the Rainbow Coalition.

Not only has the Jackson campaign brought a program of consistently progressive politics into the bourgeois electoral arena, it has activated a mass social base—principally in the Black community—for their support. Under Jackson's leadership, the Rainbow Coalition has challenged both the assumptions and the policies of those twin pillars of bourgeois rule in the U.S.—imperialist policy abroad and racism at home.

These are the factors—the particular nature of the Reagan presidency and the historic emergence of progressive politics supported by a substantial electoral base in the Black community—which have made the 1984 election an event which we believe cannot be approached simply with formulas and slogans of other periods.

WORKING CLASS STAKE

In our view, the working class has a crucial stake not just in using the 1984 election as a vehicle for having its class interests placed before the masses, but in the actual outcome of the ballot. As a result, left and progressive forces cannot afford the moralistic indulgence of abstention or the sectarian indulgence of independent "protest" candidacies—no matter how justified and righteous our anger at the craven alternative to Reagan that the Democratic Party has provided in the person of Walter Mondale.

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In order to win popular support for such a program, Reagan has undertaken to alter drastically the country's ideological climate. The Reagan view is that previous administrations—Republican as well as Democratic—helped undermine the necessity for such a consensus by unduly legitimating an atmosphere of tolerable dissent (as opposed to mindless patriotism), starry-eyed internationalism (as opposed to hard-nosed national chauvinism), liberal materialism (as opposed to rock-bottom orthodoxy), and holding out the possibility of coexistence with the socialist countries (as opposed to unyielding anticommunism and anti-Sovietism).

But there has been more to the Reagan paganism than just ideological and hysterical anti-communist propaganda. A central component of the Reagan program and its attacks on the working class so that Blacks and other minorities would bear the brunt of the assault while the better-off, predominantly white sectors of the working class remained relatively cushioned from its worst aspects. Exploiting the existing racial division in the working class and further exacerbating it was viewed as the key to winning substantial segments of the workers to support of the Reagan program. It is a strategy which, it must be admitted, has enjoyed considerable success.

Now, the 1984 election will register the extent of the President's success; and what degree of a popular mandate he enjoys on behalf of such a program.

THE MONDALE DIFFERENCE

Of course, if Walter Mondale were nothing but a Democrat in name only, the pending November plebiscite would be politically meaningless. But while Mondale is a clear-cut and thoughtful representative of monopoly capital, his differences with Reagan are not without significance. They reflect a perspective and a set of policy preferences within the bourgeoisie which are measurably at odds with the Reagan program. And since, at the present time, the bourgeoisie deems it necessary to rule by way of a "democratically" determined popular mandate, it is politically possible for the President-elect to intervene in this debate and affect its outcome.

By the principal concern of this section of the bourgeoisie at this time is the question of the composition of the government: who will sit where. And, that, by the wholesale nature of his attacks on the working class at home, the President's program can gain support for the social arrangements through which the bourgeoisie's rule has been reconstituted and which protect the ruling class with a popular consensus for its policies and property relations. We have already a good deal to the way in which these differences get expressed politically in the course of Reagan's first term. They will, we believe, be even more graphic in a second.

THE WAR DANGER

To begin with, it is almost certain that a re-elected Reagan administration, its political base reconstituted, will be even more likely to step up its aggression and military buildup. A Reagan victory would make it all the more difficult for a respectable, albeit unstable congressional opposition to continue to refuse funding to the Nicaraguan "contra" forces. Indeed, with Reagan's already campaigning for re-election on the basis of blatant appeals to jingoism and militaristic anti-communism, it seems likely that office would be used not only to reinforce the consensus behind new military actions and wars, but also to pursue an aggressive and insidious attitude toward negotiations with the Soviet Union on nuclear weapons and other arms.

Does this mean that a Mondale administration would be a beacon of peace and justice on a world scale? Hardly. But a Mondale president is likely to "stop the illegal war in Nicaragua" in his first 100 days in office is not as likely to invade that country in the first flush of enthusiasm after the election to as be as precocious as the Reagan administration in sending U.S. troops into El Salvador. Certainly a president dubious at the prospect of nuclear edge over the Soviet Union is more likely to make the attempt promised by Mondale to negotiate a verifiable nuclear freeze. Like other candidates before him, Mondale in office may quickly reverse course in these and other campaign promises. Nor would we have any illusions that Mondale would hesitate to take any military actions required to defend the imperialist system. Nevertheless, the ouster of Reagan and Mondale's election would signify the fact that the bourgeoisie has not forged a stable, reliable popular consensus for a military aggression and nuclear-rattle-and that above will be something of a bitter disillusionment open to the next administration.

PREPARATIONS FOR FASCISM

On the domestic side of this political equation, it is time to take a step back from the phenomenon of slashes in social welfare, attacks on equal rights, assaults on women's, forays against the trade unions, threats to social security and the like and attempt to identify the more far-reaching political trajectory of the Reagan administration.

In our view, the first Reagan administration set into motion both an ideological climate and a series of political measures which represent a qualitative escalation in the preparations for fascism. Emboldened by its re-election, a second Reagan administration would attempt to carry this process ahead even further—and would be in an excellent position to do so.

This motion toward fascism is an inevitable counterpart of the Reagan administration's preparations for war. For thestanding summation of the leading political and military representatives of the ruling class in the wake of the Vietnam War is that the U.S. cannot fight another war on a similar (or larger) scale without demanding extensive economic sacrifices from the workers and without extensive curtailments on political liberties.

Many of the characteristic features of fascism have already become part of the country's present political and ideological landscape. Not nearly as crude as Hitler's proclamation of Aryan ethnic "purity," the Reagan administration's carefully coded racism has nonetheless legitimized and reinforced existing white supremacy in practice and simultaneously given it a more moral justification in the name of "white rights" and "traditional values." The attempts to weaken the trade unions, while not nearly as blatant as the assault on minorities—is nevertheless a significant reversal of prevailing bourgeois policy for more than 35 years and is likewise typical of fascist's need to undermine every form of organization developed by the working class for its own protection.

The Reagan administration has also created an ideological climate that literally reeks of a fascist mentality. The

We Are Emerging as the Progressive Force in the Depression

The station to build and grow in strength. We can expect Reagan to continue to undermine the Reagan administration's "democratic" action to the point that, by the wholesale nature of his attacks on the working class at home, the President's program can gain support for the social arrangements through which the bourgeoisie's rule has been reconstituted and which protect the ruling class with a popular consensus for its policies and property relations. We have already a good deal of the way in which these differences get expressed politically in the course of Reagan's first term. They will, we believe, be even more graphic in a second.

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CRIMING WOLF?

The left has been criticized—and often rightly so—for too quickly rushing to condemn the police every time a bourgeois policeman titils to the right. But in the wake of Reagan’s first term, it is all too appropriate to give voice to the danger of bourgeois fascism. In this light, the decision to reject the alternative offered by the Democratic Party in this election as qualitatively different from what Reagan and Mondale would be a misunderstanding of the political realities and an irresponsible complacency.

The fact that in the context of the 1984 election, the objective defense of bourgeois democracy against the invades of fascist power, needed more than the liberal wing of the bourgeoisie is quite sobering. All of history demonstrates that the struggle against fascism will be, in the final analysis, a class struggle, which will be judged by any assessment of Walter Mondale and the leadership of the Democratic Party would have to affirm.

In the long run, the struggle against fascism will only be as stable and as consistent as the constitutional strength of the working class can make it. For as the imperialist crisis deepens, the liberal wing of the bourgeoisie will become ever more pro-fascist. The struggle against the fascist alternative. One can already see the harbingers of such future developments in the controversies surrounding Jesse Jackson—for who can doubt that a substantial portion of the Democratic Party would bolt for (and (fascism) if the political alternative was Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow Coalition? It is particularly, in the present set of circumstances, the need of the working class to defend bourgeois democracy against the stepped-up preparations for fascist reaction by Reagan is bound up with electoral support for Walter Mondale and the Democratic Party.

III. The Rainbow Coalition

If working to defeat Ronald Reagan in November 1984 can be considered as the legal defense of the working class, doing so from the vantage point of the Rainbow Coalition and making the Rainbow Coalition a stable and ongoing political force—constitutes a crucial step in the emergence of independent working class politics.

Clearly Jesse Jackson’s campaign for the Democratic nomination was fueled by the blatantly racist contempt demonstrated by the Reagan administration for the well-being and dignity of the black community. But to see the Jackson candidacy as merely a response to Reaganism—and nothing more—is to miss the real significance of that campaign and the Rainbow Coalition it produced.

After all, when Jackson traveled the country seeking votes in the Democratic primaries, he was not running directly against Reagan. He was running against Walter Mondale, the first choice of the Democratic Party leadership—and against others in the party who had their own reasons for opposing Mondale. He was running against the leadership of the AFL-CIO, challenging its right to speak for the working class on the central political question of 1984. And he was running against the traditional Black political establishment which, with its eye on Jackson’s candidacy a challenge to the bowing and scraping approach to the Democratic Party they had imposed on the Black electorate.

In short, Jesse Jackson’s candidacy was simply an act of rebellion by the most reactionary administration founded on the masses by the bourgeoisie in half a century. It was—and remains—a selling critique of opportunism in the labor movement and in the Black community.

The Rainbow Coalition is verifying in practical political life one of the most fundamental truths about the process by which the working class becomes conscious of itself as a class with its own class interests—and begins to organize itself accordingly: namely, that such a process inevitably originates as a challenge to the prevailing political leadership of the working class and ultimately results in the result of the struggle with opportunism.

LEFT BLIND-SPOTS

Most forces on the left—even those who responded positively to Jackson’s candidacy—have not yet grasped the significance of this development. Those who are made uncomfortable by any suggestion that opportunist politics maintain mechanical, color-coded formulas, they think that working with the unions can emerge out of the economic struggles of the organized sector of the industrial working class and other economic interests of the trade union movement. But while they wait in vain for such a development—or, what is worse, while they inveigle their own, reified a political activity of the opportunist trade union movement as an excuse for their own political inaction in working class politics—an actual movement based in the most oppressed sectors of the working class has emerged before their very eyes.

Some on the left are unable to see the the political independence of the Rainbow Coalition because it emerged as a force within the Democratic Party and because its perspective is to continue advancing its politics on that terrain. Such a view is a classical expression of that left infantilism which Lenin criticized in terms that apply equally well to our present situation.

Yes, the Democratic Party is a bourgeois party, a valued institution of capitalist rule—and it will never be anything else! The vanguard elements of the working class know that. But until the mass of workers learn that truth out of their own experience, they will struggle and then again to make the Democratic Party into a political vehicle suitable for their class interests. The vanguard cannot stand aloof from that struggle—let alone castigate the political representatives of the progressive movement as “ideological” for organizing that effort.

It is an implacable law of politics that the only way to deal with the forms of bourgeois democracy nominally available to them in order to improve and change their condition. This is the first step toward political maturation—a signal advance over the lethargic abstention from the vote. The new political generation, however bitterly, resign themselves to their condition.

There are some on the left who are unable to see the progressive character of the Rainbow Coalition because its political independence is a challenge to them. This is not a complete break with the underlying assumptions of the imperialist system. (Why does Jackson call the independent Democratic sector the “military budget,” they want to know?)

This, too, is extremely short-sighted and betrays a totally schematic and ahistorical sense of politics. The real point politically continued on next page

American politics. The old minorities—Black, Hispanic, Asian, Arab and Native Americans, women, Jews, gays, lesbia
American politics. The old minorities—Black, Hispanic, Asian, Arab and Native Americans, women, Jews, gays, lesbian—will be in new cities we have won such as Philadelphia, Newark, Atlanta, Little Rock, Norfolk, Houston, St. Louis, Charlotte, New Orleans, Chicago, New York and others. We represent nearly four million popular votes which reflected the results of 10-12 million votes in the general election. We were the majority Jackson vote in Washington, D.C. and states such as Louisiana, Virginia and South Carolina.

With this power, we are becoming conscious of our ability to affect local government at a number of levels. But, we are also aware of our ability to elect congresspersons, senators and President and their decisions on not only our fate, but the fate of the community. If it is given away now or will it be compromised or traded away. Our support cannot be taken for granted. We are not so desperate to defeat Ronald Reagan that we will compromise our dignity and self-respect.

OPENLY CHAUVINIST attacks on the United Nations and Third World countries go far beyond the protection of the imperialist system and are a step towards the destruction of the people. The hostility stands against women’s rights has given the administration the dubious distinction of being the most backward of any developed capitalist country on this question, since Hitler proceeded that women’s rightful place in the social order was, "Kuche, Kirke und Kinder" (kitchen, church and children).
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is that the program of the Rainbow Coalition
directly challenges the practical policies
which the Rainbow candidates deputize
crucial to the defense of its strategic
interests; and through the Jackson candi-
dates' call for "No vote, No political force
among a section of the masses"


And if this were not reason enough
to assure the Rainbow candidates of
their working class character of the Rainbow
Coalition, the deep hostility and anxiety
which the Jackson candidacy has pro-
duced in all sections of the ruling class and
uniformly among its opportunist sup-
porters indicates that the most class-con-
scious agents of the bourgeoisie have cer-
tainly figured out the strategic potential of
the Rainbow—eventually some on the left
have not!

BUILDING THE RAINBOW

But that potential will not be realized
automatically. The gain registered by the
Jackson candidates has long been de-
dated and refocused into political forms
more flexible than those produced by a
nominal Negro program. The Rainbow
perspective must be synthesized into a
clear statement of political program. Most
important of all, a strategic conception of
where the Rainbow Coalition is going and on
what battlefronts it will struggle must be
created.

The direction already charted by Jesse
Jackson to guide the Rainbow through
November has opened starkly the problem
and indicates the same keen sense of princi-
ple which characterized the Jackson candi-
dates. But the basic directions of that
essential are:

• To maintain and consolidate the
Rainbow Coalition as an independent
political force in the struggle to oust
Reagan from office.
• To keep the Rainbow Coalition
from being driven out of the Democratic
Party to constitute itself as a permanent progressive faction within it—
in the process, for all intents and purposes, itself as a "New Democratic Party's" left wing


• To continue the political mobiliza-
tion of the Black masses in our own
registration drives and through building
an institution that will function both
inside and outside the electoral arena;

• To strengthen the breadth of the
Rainbow, especially its determined effort to build unity with the Lats and Latinos as
well as other minorities;

• To refuse to turn back to the tradi-
tional pattern of the establishment
mandate given Jackson by the Black
electorate in the primary.

Not everyone on the left will view the
Rainbow Coalition on the basis of such a
perspective would do no more than institutionalize the coalition, but it
is an essential for the Rainbow candidacy.
It would, for the first time, bring into U.S. political terms what, standing at the critical intersection of the class and racial contradictions in U.S. society, would provide a political voice capable of forcing its
demands onto the country's political agenda.

IV. The Independent
Role of the Left

Needless to say, no one on the left
supports the Rainbow Coalition indeed, most (if not all) left forces acknowledge that the President's defeat will not
be a sufficient thing. But much of the
left has been able to recognize the
progressive thrust of the Jesse Jackson
candidacy and the Rainbow Coalition.
But such views, by themselves, have
only a planing relation to politics, a
point of which is not the struggle against
or with the working class.

But the perspective we have advanced will

While Mondale has become the anti-Republican candidate, the independent activity of the Rainbow Coalition brings the most advanced critique of Reaganism in the 1984 elections.

The objectives of the left in the 1984
election campaigns have been different.
The Rainbow Coalition—clearly not
advanced—existing Reagan and building the
Rainbow Coalition are clearly not
inclusively at all.

But no matter what happens in the
November election, the struggle against
fascism—the cutting edge of which is the
struggle against war and racism—will go
on. Even if Reagan is re-elected, the
movement to oust him which is now being
built—especially the Rainbow Coalition—
represents the most advanced component of the anti-Reagan front—can
cannot materially affect the degree to which the President is able to implement his program and the pace at which he tries to implement it. That movement will also act as a powerful check on the Mondale
presidency which, inevitably, would be pulled toward policies of war and repres-

For the forces of peace, national libera-

But beyond such practical urgencies
rests an even more fundamental question.
Problems of the left, of the Rainbow Coalition—of class politics—the bourgeoisie's
toward war and fascism, the spontaneous
emergence of the working class for its own
voice and political expression—have
been brought to the fore this year, the
1984 elections, the potential to become
one of those historic turning points which
mark the transition of the class struggle.

With the left responding to this possibility—
both analytically and practically—we likely
be a turning point in the develop-
movement and the question of a proletarian

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