The Jesse Jackson Candidacy: A New Political Force In the Electoral Arena

By Frances M. Beal

When Jesse Jackson announced his candidacy for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination last November, even his strongest supporters were in no position to say whether the effort would be a measurable impact on election year politics.

The most that could be expected from it, in the view of some optimistic Democratic Party strategists, was large numbers of previously unregistered Blacks coming to the polls for the first time in an election next November. Meanwhile, a number of Black leaders and other Black political figures, playing out their roles as minority promoters of bourgeois political solutions, have already refused to back Jackson by claiming that his candidacy would benefit the most committed of his political superiors, the Reverend John Glenn, at the expense of the more liberal Walter Mondale.

SECOND PLACE

Four months later, as the 1984 election campaign is under way, the poodles are shaking their heads in disbelief. The last of the eight Democratic contenders to announce his bid for the nomination—according to the latest Gallup Poll (Feb. 16)—has moved from a distant also-ran into second place as the choice of Democratic voters.

According to Gallup, Jackson is now the preferred candidate of 34% of registered Democrats. This is a long way from the 49% who back Mondale, but is actually an all-time high percentage point since the first time anyone who prefer Glenn. The other five candidates each garner two to three percent of the vote.

No one is more embarrassed by all this than those Black politicians who claimed that Jackson's campaign would undermine the Black community's leverage on the Democratic Party. Not only has Jackson moved into second place in the polls, he has breathed a vigor and political content into the Democratic Party's attempt to win the presidential election that clearly would have otherwise been absent.

From his spectacular trip to Damascus which foreshadowed the Reagan's policy in Lebanon to the manner in which he has propelled the concerns of minorities, women and the poor to the electoral agenda, Jackson has already transformed a new dynamic into the 1984 election.

That dynamic rests on the two aspects of Jackson's candidacy which set him apart from all the other hopefuls in the Democratic presidential nomination. First, his candidacy is based on activating the mass political mobilization of the Black community, broadening out into a "rainbow coalition" of those who have borne the brunt of the Reagan administration's assault on the working class: "the rejected, spanning lines of color, sex, age, religion, race, region and national origin."

The other dimension is the candidacy's forthright challenge to the principal policies on which the Reagan administration has been reasserting its hegemony in the world—imperialism, militarism and the expansion of wealth for the rich and the poor.

The bourgeois politicians have pretty much steered clear of a frontal assault on Jackson, even though they know that they want to attack him would be to acknowledge that there exists a substantial social base for the mobilization of the Black community in the imperialist consensus. But its safe to say that the major publication of the New Right, The American Spectator, was speaking for far more than the fascist fringe when it declared that "Jackson is interested in polarizing American politics. He is determined to pit class against class, race against race, even though he pretends otherwise. He is not a candidate for the middle class, but a candidate of the Third World."

Perhaps the most significant impact of the last four months of the campaign is that Black community itself. The campaign has not only tapped the political potential of the Black masses; it has posed a direct challenge to the longstanding assumption that Black community politics must operate as a relatively passive adjunct to the leadership of the Democratic Party, capitalizing favors from it in return for virtually automatic support.

Jackson poses a different strategy: asserting leverage over the political process—and the Democrats in particular—by flexing a concentrated independent electoral muscle.

Jesse Jackson is not the first political figure to realize that the 1965 Voting Rights Act and the concentrations of Blacks in major urban areas have given Blacks the potential to influence the outcome of elections. Efforts at independent Black political activity, both within the electoral arena and outside it, have been now be seen again in the Jackson campaign, typified by a campaign rally in Mississippi last month: after taking Mondale to task for his weak anti-racist stand, Jackson led a march of some of 2,000 students, tenants farmers, unemployed workers and church members to the county courthouse to register to vote. Such actions—and Jackson is reproducing them in various forms wherever he goes—are much more than exercises in applied civics. They are actually galvanizing the Black populace into the electoral arena as a critical front in the struggle against white supremacy in the present period. Thousands of Blacks who had formerly shied away from the voting booth as an exercise in futility have been drawn into organizing activity around the country. Along with the efforts of other civil rights groups, it has been estimated that close to one million new Black voters have been added to the polls nationwide.

The immediate political impetus for this political upsurge rests in the all-sided assault on the rights and standards of living of Blacks, particularly working class Blacks, which has been a cornerstone of the Reagan presidency. But it wasn't only Reagan. The growing impatience among Blacks with the racist system's imperviousness to change and the reinforce- ment of white supremacy at a local and national level was earlier heightened by what was widely viewed as the betrayal of Black voters by Jimmy Carter and the Democrats. Rep. Louis Stokes (D-Ohio), a veteran of the Congressional Black Caucus, recently stated that "Despite Black gains in elective politics at all levels of the Democratic Party structure, Black issues have been virtually diluted beyond recognition by old line but more powerful party interest groups."

IMPACT ON BLACK COMMUNITY

The heart of this strategy, the mass political mobilization of the Black community, is sometimes narrowly conceived of simply as a voter registration drive. This has led a number of sanguine Democratic politicians to smile benevolently on the effort under the assumption that the eventual Democratic nominee will be the real beneficiary of it all.

Given the depth of anti-Reagan sentiment in the Black community, that may be true this year.

But in the long run, the political franchising and reinvigorating of the Black masses will come back to haunt the ruling class politicians of both parties.

More than anything else, this was the crucial lesson of the Harold Washington campaign in Chicago last year. And it can especially, who have betrothed themselves to electoral politics, this is a significant departure from past practice. Jackson's religious roots probably play some role in his winning these endorsements, but the more fundamental point is that the class base of the Black church is primarily composed of lower strata Blacks who identify with Jackson's political program and ideology. No visible opposition to the Jackson campaign has emerged from this sector.

Among civil rights organizations, the political momentum of the campaign has tended to mute the voices of those who initially opposed it. Thus Benjamin Hooks of the NAACP, who previously had dismissed a presidential bid as "symbolic" and of little political value, now states that the NAACP won't "stand in the way" of the Jackson candidacy.

Jackson has had the least support from Black trade union leaders. With few exceptions, Black labor officials have fallen in line behind the AFL-CIO endorsement of Mondale. Under the leadership of William Lucy, president of the Coalition of Black Trade Unions (CBTU), in fact, the AFL-CIO has organized "AFL-CIO United Black Labor for '84". A vehicle designed to halt any defections of Black labor forces to the Jackson campaign.

This polarization of Blacks around the Jackson candidacy is, however, somewhat deceptive. With most sentiment in the Black community overwhelming for Jackson, the polarization actually highlights the extent to which those leaders who oppose Jackson's candidacy are isolated from their own social base. The political consequences of that develop...
Jackson in Mississippi: the heart of his strategy rests with the political mobilization of the Black masses.

opment may not be registered immediate-
ly. But in the long run, it can mean a qualitative rupture with the accommoda-
tionist politics which have tended to hold sway among Blacks in the electoral arena. Beyond the impact of his campaign on the Black community, Jackson's effect on na-
tional politics has also been significant. The political thrust of his campaign has been to inject into the national debate a broad progressive program that upholds democra-
 tic demands for all. Thus, Jackson not only supports the Equal Rights Amendment and a woman's right to federally funded abor-
tion, he also calls for protection of gay and lesbian rights. On the economic front, the Jackson program includes employment and training programs, tax reform that no longer favors the rich and increases in social welfare spending. What gives Jackson's platform special significance in the 1984 elections, however, is the concentration on "peace abroad and justice at home."

INTERNATIONAL OUTLOOK

The perspective Jackson brings to inter-
national questions stems in great measure from his own summation of the Black experience in the U.S. which he character-
izes as similar to "negotiating with a coloni-
al power."

"We had to negotiate to end apartheid in this country," he says, "to end denial of public accommodations, denial of the right to vote, the right to housing, education and jobs." On the basis of this view of history, Jackson approaches U.S. foreign policy

with a built-in identification with Africans, Asians and Latin Americans.

Critiquing his Democratic opponents for "Eurocentric" habits, Jackson charges the U.S. books "upon the Third World with an arrogance and contempt, some of it because they are poor, some of it because of their color, and some of it because of our re-
lationships with their oppressors or our cor-
porations' relations with their oppressors." Zionism, Jackson has upheld the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and a national homeland and called on the U.S. to open discussions with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Jackson's demand to decrease the mili-
tary budget and to stop support for a dictator is also an important challenge to the bour-
ggeois program of war. Indicative of his constant peace policy is his recent call to

remove the cruise and Pershing missiles deployed in Europe last fall.

ANTI-RACIST PROGRAM

Not surprisingly, the centerpiece of the Jackson candidacy has been an assault on the institutions and practices of white supre-

macy. His principal emphasis has been on the implementation of the Voting Rights Act, which he charges Democrats with "violating" and Republicans with "refusing to enforce.

Focusing on gerrymandering, double pri-

maries, inaccessible registration and voting procedures and the use of racist terror, Jackson has called "compliance or enforce-

ment" of the Voting Rights Act "the pri-

mary issue of the 1984 campaign because enforcement is the key to empowerment. And without power, the most moral, ra-
tional and humane programs cannot be passed."

Jackson has also not hesitated to expose the racist practices and orientation of much of the trade union movement. This is a direct challenge to the Mondale candidacy which is heavily backed by a trade union leadership firmly committed to the defense of white privilege in the working class. Given the effort by Mondale's backers to portray him as a staunch civil rights sup-
porter, the contrast between the two can-
didates is striking. Jackson is a strong advocate of affirmative action, including the use of quotas and timetables to actively promote racial equality. Mondale, on the other hand, argues for a policy in

which such reforms are nowhere to be found.

LEVEL OF THE MOVEMENT

While Jackson's strategy and program remain in some respects specific within the bourgeois electoral arena, they are far from being a revolutionary political program that would support a

colonial reform, opposition to military inter-

vention and defense of the interests of the lower strata of the working class is based on

a belief in the virtues of capitalism and

adherence to the ideological representa-

tions of the bourgeois state. The real issue is to

radicalize the working class and the Black community.

In this sense, his program is an accurate reflection of the level of political maturity of the very movement which has given rise to the Jackson candidacy. Absent a conscious socialist perspective which would have to bring it to from outside its internal logic and dynamic, anyone expecting more at this historic juncture would be placing demands on the spontaneous movement that it is incapable of fulfilling. Despite the fact that Jackson is not

presenting a socialist alternative, his candi-
dacy has already made the 1984 election unique. Other candidates, McGovern in particular, have positions on some issues that are equally progressive. What makes the Jackson candidacy special, however, is the fact that he has been able to identify and advance these insights into the dynamics of a newly aroused political force—centered in the Black community but extending beyond it—and provide these insights within a politi-
cal expression on the national electoral landscape.

It is hard to say what effect the Jackson candidacy has on the election. No one is under the illusion that either the presidency or the Democratic Party's pres-
idents will gain popularity as a result of this campaign. The political force Jackson represents is, at this point, only knocking on the door of electoral politics and attempting to demonstrate its strength and influence. Any concessions it may be able to wrest from the Democratic Party—and those in the next government—will depend to a great extent on its demonstra-
tive strength, the barrier for which will be the entrenched privileges and the dynamics surrounding the Demo-

cratic National convention.

HARBINGER OF FUTURE

In many ways, therefore, the significance of the Jackson campaign is as a harbinger of things to come. For whatever happens to Jackson's candidacy, it will set in motion a series of contradictions which have given rise to his candidacy will not disappear. And the politi-
cal forces brought into motion by the campaign will gain experience from it.

For this long term perspective, Jackson's "rainbow coalition" conceives of the form of a far more historically significant concept—a political movement that can spring from the experience of the mass movements which have heretofore been virtually unrepresented in U.S. politics.

The political organization of this class force in defense of its own interests—in particular, the forging of unity between the Black and Latino laboring masses as the reliable core of a working class united front—would be a political development of major significance. It would establish the basis for a challenge to the hegemony currently exercised by the political repre-
sentatives of the traditional interests of the working class, especially the labor aris-
ocracies, over working class politics.

Such a challenge to the continuous domi-
nination of working class politics by the defenders of imperialism and the supporters of racism within the working class move-
ment sets the condition for a mass break-
avay from the present leadership of the labor movement and its product, the mixture of physical, the Democratic Party. And while no one can predict with absolute certainty the forms of this development, the forma-
tion of a mass independent working class party—a key step in the maturation of the U.S. working class toward self-conscious revolutionary politics—seems most likely to come about through such a process; that is, through the Democratic Party.

At this stage, Jesse Jackson is only talking about the Democratic Party having "liberal" or "progressive" wing that would help the poor and help but pit these "new Democrats" against the political power and entrenched privilege of the corporatist, class collaborationist, racist sector of the working class.

Jackson himself offers a glimpse into the scenario. "It is true that the Democratic Party struggles at this point," he said in one of the New Hampshire debates, "wherein the integrity or the leadership. The party must make room for the new; that is, the new majority of this party... If room is made, the party will expand and be strong. If the leadership, in fact, tightens up, it will split the party."

To the extent that Jesse Jackson's run at the Democratic presidential nomination in 1984 represents a mass movement politi-
cally unavoidable confrontation, it will have a significance that goes far beyond the outcomes of this year's presidential cos-

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