

## What Kind of Demonstrations This Election Summer?

By Melinda Paras

One way or another, there will be mass demonstrations at the Democratic and Republican parties' national nominating conventions this summer.

But what will be the political substance of these actions, how will they be organized and which gathering will be the target of the protesters' main focus? These questions have moved to the center of recent discussion and struggle on the left, and the degree to which the summer protests will contribute to the political maturation of the working class depends on how they are resolved.

This debate has assumed a singular importance this year because of the Jesse Jackson candidacy which, on the strength of a political base in the Black community, has brought a broad left perspective into the electoral arena. And Jackson's candidacy is not just a challenge to the Reagan administration. It is equally a challenge to the Democratic Party—in particular, its frontrunner, Walter Mondale—and the tendency to reduce the struggle against Reaganism to a lowest-common-denominator "dump Reagan" effort devoid of substantive political content.

The alternative offered by Jackson is a campaign which targets the central features of Reaganism—the drive toward war and the racialized character of the administration's broader assault on the working class.

With such a perspective expressed right in the thick of one major convention's debate, a unified, politically focused mass action outside the Democratic Party convention can have an especially significant impact on the national political climate and, in particular, on the balance of forces in the San Francisco convention hall. One clear implication of this fact—and this is a key factor making plans for mass actions different from other years—is that synchronization of left efforts with the strategy of the Jackson forces is essential from the outset.

Ironically—but predictably—the chief obstacle to an effective, unified effort is the left itself; or, to be more precise, the political immaturity of the left which keeps it hostage to amateurishness, organizational sectarianism and an inability to grasp the pivotal character of the struggle against racism to the broad sweep of a progressive agenda.

### FOCUS ON THE DEMOCRATS

One example of this immaturity is the inability of many forces central to the national antiwar and anti-intervention movements to grasp the special significance of mass actions at the Democratic convention in San Francisco July 16-19. Here a view has developed which tends to equate protests outside the Republican national convention in Dallas with actions in San Francisco.

Justified by the argument that the movement must indicate its opposition to both parties (and after all it is the Republicans who are in power), this view misses the whole point: The Republican platform is already set in stone, while a bitter struggle is underway among the Democrats.

To be sure, progressive forces—especially those in Dallas—have the responsibility to register some visible protest to the Reagan pep rally. And given the near-fascist conditions which Texas "law enforcement" officials will impose on the city, they should be offered assistance by the progressive community nationally, especially in defense of their civil liberties. But such a purely symbolic action cannot be equated with what will take place at the Democratic Convention where an opportunity to actually impact

Melinda Paras is a member of the Line of March Editorial Board.

the motion of politics and shape the character of the mass anti-Reagan movement has emerged on the strength of the Jackson candidacy.

To equate these two actions is to surrender any sense of political focus or priority; and for a movement with limited resources and a less than reassuring history of being able to sort through the innumerable questions of tactics, speakers, slogans and the like, such a course cannot help but weaken the attempt to link up with the Jackson campaign in order to have an impact on the national political climate as a whole.

It is also worth noting that there is an even more shortsighted perspective with a voice at the center of the peace movement. That is the view—and it speaks volumes to both the complacency and limited vision which hang heavy over much of this sector of the movement—that since the peace and anti-intervention movements are based in New York and Washington, "nothing can be done" about all this stuff in San Francisco. How fortunate that this was not the conclusion of national antiwar forces about the Democratic Convention in Chicago in 1968!

### RACIAL BLIND SPOT

But even if it is agreed that the Democratic Party convention should be the focus of high-priority mass actions this year, there still remain serious obstacles to an effective protest.

The most serious of these is the racial blind spot which has historically pervaded much of the organized peace and anti-intervention movements. The traditional pattern is all too familiar: predominantly white organizations set the agenda and plans for a "broad coalition" and then "invite" their chosen contacts (if they have any) in the minority communities to lend support for the action. Such an approach, always disastrous, would be particularly destructive this year, when the Jackson campaign, rooted in the Black community, has played a pivotal role in bringing antiwar politics to the center of national debate. Most obviously, it ignores the fact that the Jackson forces, to maximize leverage inside the convention, will quite likely take initiatives themselves to organize mass actions outside.

The broader point, however, is that Black and other minority communities are central not only to anti-racist politics in this country, but to *all* progressive politics. Any remnant notions of a narrow, single-issue, permanently white peace movement simply must give way to this fact. The peace movement must grasp the link between the war drive and the intensifica-

tion of racism, as well as the link with other social issues.

In this sense, there can be no politically grounded or tactically significant actions at the Democratic Party convention unless Black community forces—and the Jackson campaign in particular—are in on the ground floor. They must be central to the process of setting the orientation for the demonstrations, grouping the forces, establishing the politics, determining the speakers and establishing the tactical leadership.

### LEFT SECTARIANISM

One of the other major obstacles to building a unified mass demonstration at the Democratic Party convention is the powerful sectarian impulse that continues to grip a number of groups on the left. This sectarianism is one of the unfortunate but probably inevitable by-products of the fact that the U.S. progressive movement is still at the stage where it has neither ideological cohesion nor political unity. And the check on sectarianism that would come from the advanced forces, the communists, being themselves united in a single organization is, unfortunately, not yet a reality.

As a result, every major national undertaking requires building a new coalition, hammering out new points of unity, and allocating authority based on the real political strength and reliability of the groups attempting to work together.

In such a vacuum, particular left groups with infantile and simplistic notions of what it takes to build a durable people's front can occasionally latch on to the objective need for a mass action. The pattern is to hastily put together a small coalition, gather endorsements from a few prominent figures who are not really central to the organizing work and then begin promoting its inherently narrow effort as *the action* around which the left must unite. The effort to portray this undertaking as something it is not inevitably leads to misrepresentation and the tactics of petty organizational maneuver.

This tired tactic makes it that much more difficult for serious forces on the left to build the kind of more stable coalition capable of undertaking actions of any real political significance. Generally too polite to say in public that such-and-such a group is really conducting a farce, the more responsible groups on the left have the added burden of explaining to the movement as a whole why there are two "official" calls, two sets of posters, two sets of slogans, etc., for an apparently unified demonstration.

All of this will ring a bell with those on the left who have had an opportunity to

observe at close quarters the Workers World Party (WWP), which continues to promote the fiction that its "All People's Congress" is *the* anti-Reagan front. But as the WWP has become increasingly discredited, the Communist Workers Party (CWP), sensing the attractiveness of a mass demonstration outside the Democratic convention, has nimbly stepped into the breach.

And so—presto! We now have the CWP saving the movement with its pre-packaged call for a "People's Convention and Protest" in San Francisco in July. Needless to say, this "People's Convention" has neither the Jesse Jackson campaign nor the main peace and anti-intervention forces in on the ground floor.

Of course, these "minor details" haven't stopped the CWP from promoting its effort (especially on the East coast, as far away from San Francisco as one can get) as *the* July protest. And in a telling comment on how hungry some activists are for a quick-fix solution to the long term problem of building a viable national coalition, this narrow effort has achieved more than one endorsement from forces who could have done more careful investigation and/or should have known better. (See "Conference Debates Independent Political Action," page 4.)

Petty organizational maneuvering aside, there is also something highly dubious about the focus on a "People's Convention" as an alternative to the Democratic gathering this year. For such a gathering presupposes unity not only in protest but in support of an alternative "people's program" and a strategy for achieving it. And since the kind of groundwork to give such an effort real significance has not yet been laid, the result can only be more organizational manipulation or an eclectic grab bag of mutually exclusive ideas—and probably both. Anyone who thinks that a serious new independent political force can emerge out of such blatant gimmickry is not in touch with reality.

### PROSPECTS

Unfortunately, it remains possible that these various obstacles may seriously inhibit the organization of a broad and effective protest in San Francisco next July. On the other hand, there are factors that provide grounds for more optimism. On the most general level, there is a compelling logic to a mass and unified protest built around the Jackson campaign and the organized peace forces; this logic is not based on abstract principle, but on concrete historical necessity.

More concretely, there is mounting evidence that specific and tangible steps are already being taken in that direction. Just in the last few days, a call was issued by the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), the Coalition Against Cruise and Pershing II Missiles, Congressman Ron Dellums and several key peace activists in the San Francisco Bay Area for a major rally at the Democratic convention in July. Under the title "Vote Peace in '84," this call emphasized not only demands to reverse the military buildup and halt U.S. intervention abroad, but to resolve the problems of poverty, unemployment and inequality at home. If this effort can link itself more strongly with forces in the Black community, particularly the Jackson campaign, it is possible the real potential of this summer's protests can be realized.

The general lesson here is that even a protest that flows directly from the compulsions of the class struggle will not occur automatically; it requires careful political planning and painstaking work on the part of the conscious forces. In particular, it requires an outlook that rejects vague and shifting unities (lowest-common-denominator anti-Reaganism being the prime example) but also respects the difficulties of cohering broad and diverse forces into a durable movement. No short cuts or sectarian schemes will suffice; nothing with a lasting impact on the class struggle comes that easily. □

# FRONTLINE

*Frontline is a newspaper for the many thousands on the frontlines of the class struggle. It provides a penetrating, consistent analysis of domestic and international events for those committed to the fight against the imperialist war drive, the rising tide of racism and the whole range of assaults on the working class at home and abroad.*

*We think you'll agree that Frontline is informative, lively, and provocative. **Subscribe now—don't miss a single issue!***

FRONTLINE, P.O. Box 2729, Oakland, CA 94602

name \_\_\_\_\_

address \_\_\_\_\_

city \_\_\_\_\_

state \_\_\_\_\_

zip \_\_\_\_\_

One Year (23 issues)/\$15

Canada/\$20

Special first class rate/\$20

Int'l except Canada/\$25

Make checks payable to Frontline. Write for details on wrapped copies and bundle rates. Six weeks required for address change.