

When Jesse Jackson announced his candidacy for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination last November, conventional wisdom held that the effort was largely a quixotic gesture unlikely to have any 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 and voting Democratic next November. Meanwhile, a number of Black elected officials and other Black political figures, playing out their roles as minority promoters of bourgeois politicians, rationalized their refusal to back Jackson by claiming that his candidacy would benefit the most conservative of the candidates, Ohio Senator John Glenn, at the expense of the more liberal Walter Mondale.

SECOND PLACE

Four months later, as the 1984 election campaign is heating up, the pundits are shaking their heads in disbelief. The last of the eight Democratic contenders to announce his bid for office, Jackson—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 some 14% of registered Democrats. This is a long way from the 49% who back Mondale, but is actually a percentage point ahead of those who prefer Glenn. The other five candidates each garner two to three percent of the preferences.

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 unseat Ronald Reagan that clearly would have otherwise been absent.

From his spectacular trip to Damascus which underscored the hypocrisy of Reagan's policy in Lebanon to the manner in which he has propelled the concerns of minorities, women and the poor on to the electoral agenda, Jackson has already brought 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 contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination. First, his candidacy is based on activating the latent political muscle 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 U.S. capital is counting to reassert its hegemony in the world—militarism, racism and the expansion of wealth at the expense of the working class.

The bourgeois politicians have pretty much steered clear of a frontal assault on Jackson's politics—principally because to attack them would be to acknowledge that there exists a substantial social base for a political perspective not founded in the imperialist consensus. But it is safe to say that the major publication of the New Right, *Human Events*, was speaking for far more than the fascist fringe when it declared that "Jackson is interested in polarizing this nation, not healing it . . . He is determined to pit class against class, race against race, even though he pretends otherwise. He is not an American candidate, but a candidate of the Third World."

Perhaps the most significant impact of the Jackson candidacy has been on the 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 oper-

ate as a relatively passive adjunct to the leadership of the Democratic Party, cajoling 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 2,000 students, tenant 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

Calif.) and Mickey Leland (D-Tex.) have come out for Mondale.

The same polarization has taken place at local and state levels. Mayors like Richard Hatcher of Gary and Mario Barry of D.C. have lent their support to Jackson, while Coleman Young of Detroit and Tom Bradley of Los Angeles have jumped on the Mondale bandwagon.

The Black church network has been the most solid bloc of support for Jackson. It has provided a key organizational and financial base for the campaign, especially in the South. Endorsements have come from such groups as the National Baptist Convention, USA (7 million members) and the Nation of Islam. For the Muslim

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



The Jesse Jackson campaign has already expanded the agenda of the 1984 presidential race. But its long term impact on the Democratic Party, Black community politics, and the working class movement may be even more important.

launched before. And on a local level, in areas of heavy Black concentration, Blacks have indeed begun to make their demographic weight felt.

There are three things, however, that distinguish the Jesse Jackson candidacy from these other efforts. First, Jackson is attempting to extend this strategy to the arena of national electoral politics. Second, he is conducting this struggle directly on the terrain of the Democratic Party, in order, as he puts it, to achieve a "renegotiation of our covenant" with that party. And third, he has projected an all-sided political program addressing every significant political question of the day from the vantage point not just of the Black community, but on behalf of a broader grouping of "have-nots" whose interests can best be served by a close alliance with this new motion in Black politics.

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 enfranchisement and activation 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

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 standard 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 reinforcement 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, expressed this sentiment when he said, "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."

BLACK COMMUNITY POLITICS

Despite this dismal history, not all political forces in the Black community have looked at Jackson's candidacy favorably. The main polarization has taken place among Black elected officials. The more progressive and left forces in the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), like Ron Dellums (D-Calif.) and John Conyers (D-Mich.), have endorsed the Jackson candidacy. Other CBC members with stronger ties to the Democratic Party establishment, such as Julian Dixon (D-

especially, who have heretofore eschewed electoral politics, this is a significant departure from past practice. Jackson's religious roots probably play some role in his winning of 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 Unionists (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 camp.

This polarization of Black politics around the Jackson candidacy is, however, somewhat deceptive. With mass sentiment in the Black community overwhelmingly sympathetic and responsive to Jackson's effort, 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 devel-



Jackson in Mississippi: the heart of his strategy rests with the political mobilization of the Black masses.

opment may not be registered immediately. But in the long run, it can mean a qualitative rupture with the accommodationist 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 national politics has also been significant. The political thrust of his campaign has been to inject into the national debate a broad

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

Criticizing his Democratic opponents for "Eurocentric" habits, Jackson charges the U.S. looks "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 relationships with their oppressors or our corporations' 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 military budget and to support a nuclear freeze is also an important challenge to the bourgeois program of war. Indicative of his consistent 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 supremacy. 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 primaries, inaccessible registration and voting procedures and the use of racist terror, Jackson has called "compliance or enforcement" of the Voting Rights Act "the primary issue of the 1984 campaign because enforcement is the key to empowerment. And without power, the most moral, rational 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 supporter, the contrast between the two candidates on this question 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



Jackson marching with civil rights leaders at the August 27, 1983 march for Jobs, Peace and Freedom in Washington, D.C. Later he spoke to the gathering of 300,000, who responded with the cry "Run, Jesse, Run."

progressive program that upholds democratic demands for all. Thus, Jackson not only supports the Equal Rights Amendment and a woman's right to federally funded abortion, 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 international questions stems in great measure from his own summation of the Black experience in the U.S. which he characterizes as similar to "negotiating with a colonial power."

"We had to negotiate to end apartheid in this country," he says, "to end denials of public accommodations, denials 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

Jackson's identification with the aspirations of the historically oppressed peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America for self-determination sets a stable foundation for consistent anti-interventionist politics.

This perspective has come out most pointedly in relation to the Caribbean and Central America. In the wake of the Grenada invasion, Jackson was the only Democratic aspirant to condemn the action while most others were quick to justify Reagan's aggression. He has likewise set an important ideological pole against national chauvinism by reminding the electorate that Central Americans are our "next door neighbors, not our back door." In this light, he has called for removing troops from Honduras, stopping aid to the "contras" in Nicaragua and withdrawing aid to the fascist regime in El Salvador. More recently, Jackson has called for U.S. recognition of Cuba.

From the same perspective, Jackson has also broken with the bourgeois consensus on the Middle East. Flying in the face of the Democratic Party's knee-jerk allegiance to

which such reforms are nowhere to be found.

LEVEL OF THE MOVEMENT

While Jackson's strategy and program represent the most advanced political perspective within the bourgeois electoral arena, they are far from being a revolutionary alternative. His program of anti-racist democratic reform, opposition to military intervention 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 representations bourgeois democracy makes on its own behalf.

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 be brought to it 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 candidacy 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 address the racial and class interests of a newly aroused political force—centered in the Black community but extending beyond it—and provide these interests with a political expression on the national electoral landscape.

It is hard to say what effect the Jackson candidacy will have on the 1984 election. No one is under the illusion that either the presidency or the Democratic Party's presidential nomination is within reach. 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 from the next government—will depend to a great extent on its demonstrable strength, the barometer for which will be the presidential primaries and the dynamics surrounding the Democratic 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 personally, the class and political contradictions which have given rise to his candidacy will not disappear. And the political forces brought into motion by the campaign will gain invaluable experience from it.

From this longer term perspective, Jackson's "rainbow coalition" contains the germ of a far more historically significant concept—a political movement that can speak on behalf of the most oppressed, least privileged and disproportionately minority sector of the working class which has 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 representatives of the more privileged sectors of the working class, especially the labor aristocracy, over working class politics.

Such a challenge to the continued domination of working class politics by the defenders of imperialism and the supporters of racism within the working class movement sets the condition for a mass break-away from the present leadership of the labor movement and its preferred political vehicle, the Democratic Party. And while no one can predict with absolute certainty the forms of this development, the formation of a mass independent working class party—a key step in the maturation of the U.S. working class toward self-consciously revolutionary politics—seems most likely to come about through such a process; that is, by splitting the Democratic Party.

At this stage, Jesse Jackson is only talking about the Democratic Party having "litmus tests it must pass. . . . It must make room for Blacks, Hispanics, women and those who have been rejected historically." But ultimately the litmus test cannot help but pit these "new Democrats" against the political power and entrenched privilege of the pro-imperialist, class collaborationist, racist sector of the working class.

Jackson himself offers a glimpse into the scenario. "There are some Democratic Party struggles at this point," he said in one of the New Hampshire debates, "wherein the aristocracy or the old wineskins must make room for the new wine; 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 clarifies and accelerates that historically unavoidable confrontation, it will have a significance that goes far beyond the outcome of this year's presidential contest. □