

Dinkins Fronts for Wall Street


Black candidates won important elections in Virginia and New York City in 1989. But even though the Democrats won, party politicians are rancorously debating the meaning of the victories. For the working class, their significance is deeper than what appears on the surface.

The debate indicates that the ruling class is upping the ante. Its attack on working-class living standards will intensify. For workers in general and blacks in particular, the threat of slashed wages and unemployment is severe.

At first it would seem that the success of Douglas

ance is significant since Robb is attempting to assume political leadership of the national party by attacking Jackson and claiming the political "center." In Wilder, Robb now has a successful black politician who can serve as a point man and cover for racist appeals to white voters. "Center" and "mainstream" are code words for keeping down blacks and other outsiders and "fringe elements" in society.

Further, Robb's program, like that of the party apparatus itself, aims at beating the Republicans by vying with them for the banner of "fiscal conservatism" — meaning



Democratic Party is cemetery for workers' hopes and black movement. Jesse Jackson and David Dinkins are gravediggers who dig their roles.

Wilder and David Dinkins, the new governor of Virginia and mayor of New York City, would mean a boost to the prestige of the nation's leading black politician, Jesse Jackson. However, their campaigns had veered to the right, away from Jackson's populist approach. Their victories are being used as evidence that the Democrats must move away from Jackson and toward the political center.

Pointing out that Wilder kept Jackson away from Virginia while Dinkins downplayed Jackson's support, some bourgeois spokesmen have even claimed that the votes were a blow against Jackson. Clearly upset, Jackson was put in the embarrassing position of having to claim credit for the Wilder and Dinkins victories.

But more than Jackson's ego is at issue. A concerted effort is being made by party regulars to undermine his role in the party. Those favoring the shift to the right hope to use gains made by black politicians, gains which he helped make possible, to cover for racist attacks on Jackson.

Wilder went along, criticizing Jackson for claiming any share of credit for his victory. Jackson had given his campaign no help "directly — or indirectly — that I know of." The point was not personal: Wilder called on the party to "take a plunge into the waters of America's new mainstream." Democrats, he said, should "focus on the values of the overwhelming majority of the people in this country."

These words could have been spoken by any number of white officials urging the party to the right. Indeed, Wilder's close ally and patron is Senator Charles S. Robb. This alli-

unraveling of government welfare programs ("entitlements" that benefit all layers, not just the poor) won by past labor action and black struggles. As well, it signifies a new step in government support for business attacks on workers.

DINKINS DUNKS JACKSON

Whereas Wilder has openly distanced himself from Jackson, Dinkins had to fudge. It is worth putting the Dinkins campaign under a microscope because the extreme nature of this fudge helps clarify what is happening. We can begin with Jackson's victory in New York City during the 1988 Democratic presidential primary, which paved the way for Dinkins to run for mayor. Jackson dealt a blow to racist Mayor Ed Koch who sought to mobilize Jewish voters against the black candidate.

Dinkins was Jackson's New York campaign manager and in effect took over the local coalition behind Jackson. This included not only broad-based black support but also activist-oriented unions like Local 1199, the hospital workers' union headed by Dennis Rivera and the local unions of the Communication Workers led by Jan Pierce. Stanley Hill, chief honcho of DC 37 (AFSCME), which represents most city workers, also fervently enlisted in Dinkins' cause. They all played major roles in the campaign.

Dinkins' problem was to capitalize on Jackson's popularity so as to mobilize activists to defeat Koch — while at the same time maintaining enough distance so as not to antagonize Jewish voters hostile to Jackson. In this bal-

ancing act, as the campaign progressed Jackson was kept at arm's length. This became even more true after Dinkins won the Democratic primary.

In his race against Republican Rudolph Giuliani, Dinkins focused on Jewish voters, most of whom had voted for Koch in the primary. Dinkins' major campaign ads attacked Louis Farrakhan, the Black Muslim leader. When Giuliani ran ads addressed to Jewish audiences linking Dinkins to Jackson, Dinkins' staff went to great lengths to reassure voters that the two were quite different. While Giuliani was clearly appealing to racism, Dinkins' aides made a point of not defending Jackson but instead arguing against "guilt by association."



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Although some black and left supporters of Dinkins voiced occasional complaints, their criticism was muted by the opportunist desire to win at all costs. Pragmatists accepted that Dinkins had to forego Jackson-style rhetoric to win white, particularly Jewish, votes.

Now supporters of Jackson and Dinkins see "experts" suggesting that Jackson has become a stumbling block for black politicians. Efforts to discard him as a sort of worn-out shoe have a certain poetic justice. After all, Jackson himself has been a champion of the same pragmatic approach now being turned against him. It was he who showed how to play the political game and cut deals in 1984 and 1988. If the fruit he now harvests tastes like sour grapes, he cannot object on principle.

THE REAL ISSUE: AUSTERITY

The discussion over who gets credit for the Wilder and Dinkins victories points to the real significance of what is taking place. Both Wilder and Dinkins are well suited to lead austerity attacks on minorities and the whole working class — especially Dinkins, who has ties to left-talking labor bureaucrats like Rivera and Pierce. The bourgeoisie expects Dinkins to use this good will to push through cutbacks and taxes that would have led to an uproar under Koch.

Indeed, the media have suddenly noticed that Dinkins' program is very similar to Koch's. He appointed Norman Steisel, an investment banker colleague of Felix Rohatyn, the bourgeois theorist of austerity, to be his first deputy mayor. Other Koch holdovers and Rohatyn fans are in charge of city finances.

In his first major post-election address, Dinkins promised city business leaders not to alter the pro-business policies of the Koch administration. Declaring that "government simply cannot afford to do all that needs to be done," he called on the City Council to push through \$200 million in service cuts proposed by Koch.

Letting slip the real policy of his incoming administration, Dinkins harkened back to the city crisis in the mid-1970s. Recalling this model of public and private sector cooperation, Dinkins stated that "we must come together as we did 15 years ago with the same spirit of urgency and resolve." What he fails to mention is that this "unity" came at the expense of the working class, which suffered tens of thousands of layoffs and massive cuts in wages and services.

Dinkins' speech got rave reviews from the bourgeoisie. *Newsday* found it "reassuring" and congratulated Dinkins on "his transition from candidate to leader by talking about his approach to maintaining fiscal stability." A major New York real estate developer approvingly commented that "when the candidate becomes the mayor, reality sets in." Even Koch was elated by Dinkins' performance. "Doesn't it sound like me?" asked the mayor. "I think so. I wonder if the same people will attack him that attacked me?"

Good question. In his first days in office he has followed through on his threatened cutbacks. Dinkins is counting on labor leaders and other supporters not to attack his program. But the union bureaucrats are under pressure from workers whose conditions are worsening and who are under the illusion that Dinkins owes them something in return for their backing.

Already one union leader and a major Dinkins supporter, Barry Feinstein of Teamsters Local 237, has been forced to distance himself from the new mayor. After Dinkins' gloom-and-doom austerity speech, Feinstein suddenly discovered that Dinkins represents management. Calling Dinkins "my boss" and "the enemy," Feinstein challenged the new mayor by announcing he was going to seek wage increases equal to those won by the hospital workers.

Reality has also hit some leftists in the face. The leftist *Guardian* newspaper, which after the primary had rhapsodized that "New York City suddenly feels like a better place to live," now fears that Dinkins has been pressured to "buy into the language of domination" and imagines there was a "coup" against the "people's candidate" between election and inauguration. This is pathetic. Dinkins' friends and program were the same in the fall as in the winter — for those not blinded by opportunist electoralism. Anyone who believes Dinkins' current line was unforeseeable should check out our previous issue.

A writer in the *Village Voice* urged the new mayor to

“keep himself available to his real friends and to those thousands of New Yorkers who believe in him as a force for revolutionary change.” This slop comes after complaining, accurately, that Dinkins’ campaign was run by “Manhattan elitists” beholden to Rohatyn, “whose only role in life is to make sure Wall Street welfare checks – interest on city bonds – get mailed every week.” People who talk of revolution owe a little something to their readers: stop slobbering over politicians whose role in life is to kick the working class in the face.

MODERATION: STRENGTH OR WEAKNESS?

While Feinstein’s remarks do not reflect a real break with Dinkins, they do point to a dilemma facing the administration. While Dinkins ran a moderate campaign which hardly addressed the needs of the masses, the campaign nevertheless aroused expectations by its very nature. Not only is Dinkins New York’s first black mayor, but he defeated a mayor despised by many workers for his racist and anti-worker policies.

Thus, while Dinkins’ role is to dampen the class struggle, the bourgeoisie is concerned that the masses may act on their illusions in him. This explains why an astute labor leader like Feinstein must distinguish himself from the mayor in order not to get caught in the middle of a working-class explosion against austerity.

In a workers’ upsurge, Dinkins’ “strength” – the moderate, middle-of-the-road pragmatic politics that helped him get elected – will suddenly become a weakness. Unlike Jackson, Dinkins is not attuned to the sentiments and rumblings of the masses. Jackson has demonstrated an ability to tap into explosive sentiments building within the working class as few bourgeois politicians can. This allows him to place himself at the head of emerging struggles, such as the hospital and telephone workers’ strikes in New York, in order to derail them into safe channels. Dinkins, like Wilder, has never been a leader or a major activist in mass struggles. He has instead worked his way up through the party establishment (albeit one which placed huge obstacles in the path of black leaders).

Elections reflect deeper processes, as the bourgeoisie decides how to move and with what class alliances. Given the enormous weight of blacks in heavy industry and the cities, it is natural for the capitalists to use black politicians as pointmen in their attacks on the workers. Not only do they serve as Judas goats leading black workers to the economic chopping block; they also make perfect scapegoats. When the inevitable angry reaction comes in response to the austerity drive, white workers can then be demagogically told that blacks are to blame.

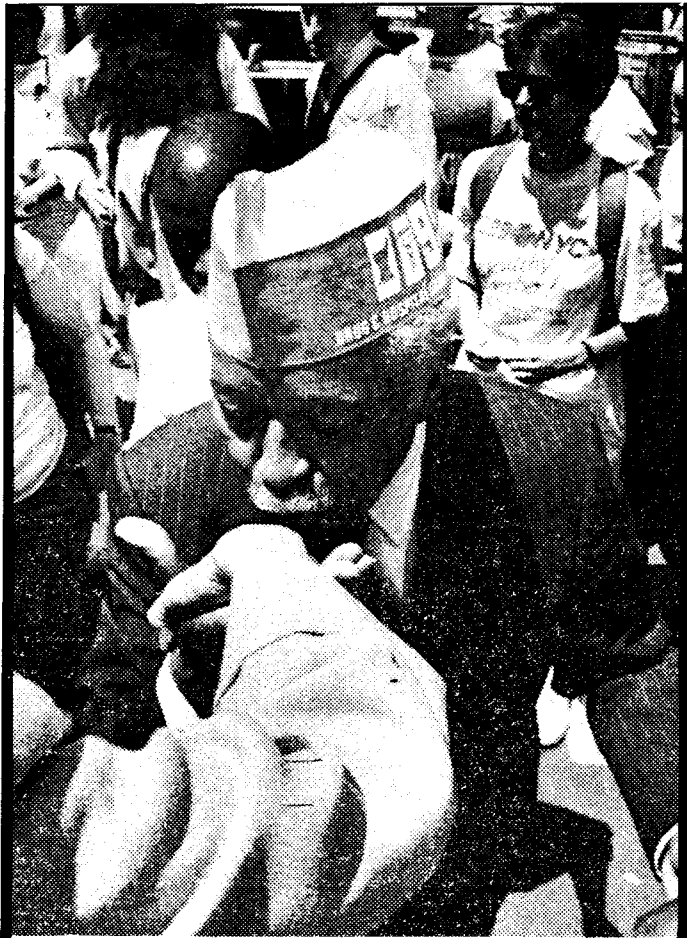
The ruling class far prefers social order to social upheaval; it is a frightened class which normally moves with great caution. While workers believe themselves to be weak, the capitalists well know what power labor could unleash if it had different union and political leaderships.

Jesse Jackson is absolutely loyal to capitalism, but the promises he makes to incorporate the masses seem to Wall Street to be part of the problem, not the solution. The Wilders and Dinkinses seem like a much safer bet. Their whole careers testify to their willingness to use their color to do capitalism’s bidding, whereas a Jackson might have to deliver on some of his “wild” promises to hold his base.

Attempts to write Jackson’s political obituary are premature. The capitalist crisis is deepening. While the bourgeoisie on the surface is elated by the events in East Europe, underneath they are frightened by the rise of

revolutionary movements anywhere, even in the Stalinist states. Slowly, the U.S. working class is beginning to shake off the effects of defeat and demoralization. A major class confrontation is unavoidable. In such a situation, the Wilders and Dinkinses and the bosses they work for will once again need the help of the Jacksons to contain the masses.

The working class cannot stop the coming accelerated wage cuts and unemployment by electoral means. It cannot stop crippling racist attacks through passivity. Only a year ago in New York, working-class students at the city col-



David Dinkins at hospital workers’ rally. As mayoral candidate, he exploited labor support. As mayor he’ll help bosses exploit labor.

leges, mostly minority, gave the politicians just an inkling of what could be done to hurl back their attacks by mass action. United action – a general strike against the capitalist assault – is the operative necessity. Given their history and position, there is no doubt that black workers will play an enormous role within the leadership of such a strike.

The coming period is filled with opportunities and dangers for the working class. In the absence of a revolutionary party, the future workers’ explosion is ripe for derailment by political opportunists like Jackson. It is the task of revolutionaries to expose the class nature of Jackson and his allies in order to prevent them from misleading the working class into a class collaborationist course. The more successful they are in preventing the development of a revolutionary alternative, genuinely independent of the capitalists and their parties, the more they open the way for a solution from the right.■