

BLACK POLITICAL CONVENTION

January 1979

by John Malachi and Jim Griffin

In the last week of December a broad range of Black activists came together to develop a common agenda now that the Rizzo era is drawing to a close. The Black Political Convention was sponsored and organized by the Black United Front (BUF), a broad based organization which grew out of the charter change struggle.

The Convention demonstrated conclusively that the political energy unleashed by the fight to deny Rizzo another term has by no means spent itself and that the BUF has staying power. The workshops and plenary sessions spanning the holidays drew upwards toward 1500 people. Delegates encompassed most of the Black organizations in the city. The same elements who constituted the successful coalition against the charter change were on hand.

Progressive elected officials like State Representative Dave Richardson, community activists like Sister Falaka Fattah and revolutionary nationalists like the cadres of the African Peoples Party all played important roles. Marxist-Leninists, while not numerous, were also active participants.

But the Convention was not limited to veterans of the political scene. As one delegate said, "There are a whole lot of ordinary Black working people and people off the street here and they're making their voices heard." The Convention reflected the overall growth of activism and political understanding that has developed in the Black community over the last year.

A PLATFORM FOR STRUGGLE

In calling the Convention the BUF had several related aims. The first was to adopt a platform that would concretize the urgent needs and demands

of the masses of Black and Hispanic people. This was achieved through a series of ten workshops which developed proposals to submit to the plenary sessions. One purpose of adopting the platform was to provide a basis for evaluating the candidates and influencing next year's election. But more importantly the platform raises demands that should become the focal point for struggle over the coming years regardless of who is in office. Finally the Convention was expected to determine the future of the BUF, giving it a more formal structure and clear direction.

The Convention also adopted resolutions condemning U.S. involvement in South Africa, endorsing justice for MOVE, calling for a decent standard of living for welfare recipients and enforcement of affirmative action programs in firms doing business with the city. . . to name just a few.

FOR A BLACK INDEPENDENT PARTY

The Convention also demonstrated an understanding that neither the Republican or Democratic Parties provide a vehicle for winning these demands. A resolution calling for the BUF to work for the formation of an independent Black political party was adopted.

A final session of the Convention will hear the candidates for Mayor and the row offices and decide on endorsements. Charles Bowser would appear to be the only mayoralty candidate who stands a chance of gaining endorsement.

The show of independence on the part of the Convention is an encouraging sign that the Black people's movement is not about to become the appendage of any candidate's political campaign.

The Convention platform was not adopted without struggle. In the

economic development workshop there was an attempt to tie the Convention to a Black capitalist program with an almost exclusive emphasis on building Black owned businesses and financial institutions. This current was soundly defeated. The Convention was deadlocked over the question of desegregation of schools versus an emphasis on community control.

While the Convention succeeded in convening a broadly based conference and adopting a progressive platform, some shortcomings stand out. Black trade unionists as an organized force, both leaders and rank & filers, were woefully under represented at the conference and the platform only partially reflects their concerns.

Secondly, the platform does not speak to the question of funding expanded city services. Without a demand calling for the shifting of the tax burden from the working people to the wealthy and the corporations, the support for the rest of the program is narrowed.

Finally, while the Convention was relatively free of the most simplistic forms of narrow nationalism, there continues to be a failure to grasp that the whole multi-national working class has an objective interest in winning the kind of platform articulated by the Convention. While there was recognition of the need for tactical alliances with whites, the necessity of a strategic alliance between the movements of the oppressed nationalities and the multi-national working class remains a distinctly minority viewpoint within the movement.

These weaknesses should not blind anyone to the fact that the Convention marks a great step forward and that the movement represented by it is the cutting edge for progress in the city of Philadelphia at the present time.

BLACK POLITICAL CONVENTION

Votes Thumbs Down on Mayoralty Candidates

February 1979

by Michael Simmons

In the last week of December the Black Political Convention, brought together a broad spectrum of political forces in the Philadelphia Black community and adopted a platform called the "Human Rights Agenda." The platform reflects the urgent needs of Black people in this city and coincides with the needs

and interests of working people generally. (See January issue of the *Organizer*.)

In early January the delegates reconvened to hear from the candidates seeking nomination and office in this year's election. Recognizing that in the post-Rizzo era, no candidate can boycott the Black community as in the past, both Al Gaudiosi and Bill Green were on hand.

Charles Bowser, the front runner among Black voters, was naturally there. Hardy Williams, the other announced Black candidate for the Democratic Mayoralty slot stayed away, mistakenly denouncing the Convention as a stalking horse for Bowser. The Consumer Party was also represented. In addition, some 20 odd candidates for the row offices presented themselves.

The behavior of the Democratic mayoralty candidates was a sign of the times. They tripped all over themselves in a rush to disassociate themselves from the most blatant symbols of Rizzismo. Gaudiosi and Green, as well as Bowser, said they would sack School Superintendent Michael Marcuse and Police Commissioner

Joseph O'Neil. But when it came to substantive policies this boldness disappeared.

Al Gaudiosi, as Rizzo's long time henchman at City Hall, naturally had the biggest credibility gap. Gaudiosi tried to close it by pointing to his break with Rizzo over the charter change issue and with bland reassurance that he would be a Mayor of "all the people." He also hoped his endorsement by long time activists Walt Palmer and Mohammad Kenyatta would boost his stock, but instead it only discredited Palmer and Kenyatta. Gaudiosi's public relations effort collapsed when he tried to argue that Frank Rizzo had had the potential to be "the city's greatest Mayor ever." While disassociating himself from Rizzo's most recent excesses, Gaudiosi naturally had to defend Rizzo's earlier policies and actions, since he, himself, was in on them. While Gaudiosi's decision to come before the Convention shows that he is more astute politically than his former boss, he did nothing to convince the delegates that he

should be taken seriously as a "born again" friend of Black people.

Bill Green also failed to win friends and influence people. He trotted out his rather vague pledges, apparently failing to realize that something more is needed in 1979. Green was raked over the coals by the delegates for his wishy-washy, Johnny Come Lately, stand on the charter change. He was also hit for failing to back welfare rights demands while a Congressman.

Charles Bowser, as might be expected, was most in tune with the Convention, but he too fell way short of meeting the expectations the delegates have for a Mayoral candidate. While Bowser did endorse some of the specific items in the Human Rights Platform, like the demand for an elected school board, he too specialized in vague phrases. To the extent he outlined a program, it was well within the bounds of corporate liberalism. Bowser's supporters also alienated many delegates by attempting to stampe the Convention into endorsing their man.

NO CLIMBING ON ANYBODY'S BANDWAGON

None of the candidates gave what could be considered an endorsement of the Human Rights Platform. All of them

pleaded that they had not had time to seriously study and evaluate it. At the same time they had "studied" it sufficiently to conclude that they agreed with "most of it." Since it is possible to agree with "most of it" and still not agree with

the most far-reaching demands, this general "agreement" did little to reassure the delegates.

In the end the Convention affirmed the kind of independence it had demonstrated earlier in framing its platform. While some delegates, notably Bowser supporters, urged that an endorsement be made now, warning that by delay the Convention would forfeit its influence, the majority was not willing to extend support to any candidate at this time. By a 3 to 1 margin the delegates voted to withhold endorsement, focus instead on popularizing the Human Rights Agenda in the community, and reconvene in March to reconsider the question.

By this decision the Convention showed that it is not willing to be the appendage of any candidate, and that it takes its program seriously. The candidates had better begin to take that same program seriously between now and March if they expect to line up any support among the thousands of independent voters who buried Frank Rizzo last November.

BLACK POLITICAL CONVENTION BACKS BOWSER

April 1979

by Jim Griffin

On the weekend of March 9th the Black Political Convention, representing a broad spectrum of organizations, met to consider endorsing candidates for the mayoralty race and the city's row offices. At the first convention, held in late December and early January, the delegates drafted the "Human Rights Agenda", a platform of demands based on the needs of the community, but held off on candidate endorsements. The most recent convention was primarily to take up this unfinished business.

The major struggle at the convention centered on the mayoral candidacy of Charles Bowser. Bowser, as the only major Black candidate with substantial organized backing, figured to have an easy time of it. He expected to walk away with the endorsement and had planned his schedule accordingly, allowing only a few hours for politicking at the convention. Instead Bowser faced a serious challenge and had to fight for his political life on the convention floor.

BOWSER TRIES END RUN

Bowser miscalculated in thinking he would get the nod without having to

commit himself on the Human Rights Agenda. The Convention's candidate evaluation committee had prepared a detailed questionnaire, based on the Human Rights Agenda, to determine where each candidate stood on the issues. Every candidate seeking endorsement was expected to fill out the questionnaire and on the basis of their response would be given a rating. Bowser failed to fill out the questionnaire.

When told that he would not be allowed to address the convention or be considered for endorsement, Bowser reluctantly agreed to fill out the questionnaire. The reason for his reluctance soon became clear. When the candidate evaluation committee reported on the ratings of the candidates, Bowser brought up the rear with a 557 out of a possible 861 rating.

Bowser's supporters defended his poor showing by attacking the rating system. They argued that any candidate could say they supported the Human Rights Agenda but this was no proof that they would actually fight for it. This line of attack neatly skirted the question of why Bowser would refuse to endorse a platform democratically adopted by the broad forces in the Black community.

Bowser himself answered this question in a roundabout fashion. He said he couldn't support the Human Rights Agenda because parts of it were "against the law." He also said it was based only on the needs of the Black community and he sought to be mayor "of all the people."

In fact there is nothing in the Human Rights Agenda that is "against the law." Rather there are demands which are not presently part of the law or that would require that the law be changed. This is quite a different thing. Bowser implied that the Human Rights Agenda stands for anarchy to cover his own devotion to the present law which serves the city's financial, business, and political elite.

Bowser is on record as opposing any change in the City Charter. The charter in its present form minimizes popular control over local government in the interests of rule by Big Business. The charter would have to be changed, for example, to allow direct election of the school board, a popular democratic demand incorporated in the Human Rights Agenda. Bowser opposed this demand in the name of protecting the city charter. His lack of faith in the people and his trust in the ruling class is