

Race, Class and Politics in New York

Hated Koch Ousted, 'Healer' Dinkins Wins

David Dinkins won the New York Democratic primary on September 12, making it highly likely that the largest city in the United States will have a black mayor. An end has finally come to the blatant anti-working class and racist reign of Ed Koch.

Dinkins' triumph prompted a wave of celebrations. Union leaders who should know better have been heard to say that a new day for labor is dawning in New York. The leftist *Guardian* newspaper enthused that "New York City, where daily existence can be so repressive, suddenly *feels* like a better place to live."

"It's hard to remember a more palpable sense that an election will really make a difference. That optimism is not limited to New York's vast African-American communities ... where people were literally dancing in the streets Among New Yorkers of various backgrounds there is widespread hope that if he becomes the first Black mayor of this city where racial tensions have become razor sharp, Dinkins will live up to his campaign image as the 'Great Healer.' "

Rarely have liberal illusions in electoral images been more explicit — or more unwarranted. Given his moderate record and minimal promises, the overwhelming likelihood is that Dinkins will accomplish no more than any other capitalist politician. Indeed, taking office at a time when the capitalist ruling class is demanding intensified austerity for the masses, his role will be to carry out that policy. The people who danced at Koch's defeat will have little to celebrate in Dinkins.

Ironically, it was Koch's racism that enabled a black candidate to win. Early in the primary race, polls showed Koch being trounced by either Dinkins or the Republican Rudolph Giuliani. Koch's unpopularity reflected not only hatred by blacks and Latinos but widespread disgust with corruption by his cronies and political allies.

DINKINS' LOW-KEY STRATEGY

Dinkins strategy was to duck difficult issues in order not to antagonize anyone, hoping that Koch would hang himself; he ran an uninspiring campaign that deliberately downplayed his position as a black candidate. Meanwhile Koch's television commercials filled with black and Latino faces flooded the airwaves, and he began to surge in the polls.

In *These Times* writer Salim Muwakkil captured the growing mood of dissatisfaction in Dinkins' camp:

"Dinkins' quest to become the city's first black mayor has failed to fire up the city's African-American community. Thus, despite a campaign featuring a wide range of interracial support, the Dinkins candidacy is generating scant enthusiasm among the grass roots of his core constituency. Many black analysts blame this on his conciliatory political style. Others claim his team just hasn't done the necessary legwork." (August 30.)

But just when it appeared that Dinkins' strategy would allow Koch to downplay the racist character of

his administration, the calm exploded. On August 23, a gang of white youths in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn attacked four blacks. When it was over, Yusuf Hawkins, 16, was dead from bullet wounds. His "crime" was to walk into a white, Italian neighborhood where blacks were not welcome. Yusuf Hawkins joined a long list of victims of racist murder during the Koch years — Willie Turks, Michael Stewart, Eleanor Bumpers, Michael Griffith, and more.

BENSONHURST AND THE CAMPAIGN

Koch's racism resurfaced when he accused blacks who demonstrated against racist murder in Bensonhurst of inciting whites. Having been lulled by both Koch and Dinkins, suddenly people remembered *why* they hated the mayor's guts. Bensonhurst accomplished what Dinkins had failed to do: arouse the anger of blacks and many whites at the filth emanating from City Hall.

Concern over the latest racial murder was mixed with maneuvers over the primary. Dinkins supporters feared that the protests in Bensonhurst would cause whites to flock to Koch. Similar considerations account for the mayor's accusation against the demonstrators.

Protest hit a high point on August 31, the "day of outrage," when 10,000 people, mostly black, took to the streets and clashed with police on the Brooklyn Bridge. Violence broke out when cops prevented the marchers from crossing the bridge to reach City Hall. Marchers fought back with rocks and bottles; scores of demonstrators and cops were injured. Yet even in the face of this assault, Dinkins stuck to his conciliatory approach and kept his distance from the protesters.

Dinkins' victory has for the moment silenced much of the criticism. Bourgeois commentators praise his clever strategy, while the grumbling from black militants and left supporters have given way to good old-fashioned pragmatism: if it works, why knock it?

WHO BUTTERS DINKINS' BREAD?

Those who believe that by supporting Dinkins they are building a movement against racism and social injustice have little to point to in his campaign. Dinkins doesn't even pretend to be building a movement, as Jesse Jackson did with his rubber-stamp Rainbow Coalition. Dinkins' failure to mobilize the black community was deliberate. He is doing what nearly all Democrats have done in recent years: moving to the "center" in an attempt to appeal to white middle-class voters.

Dinkins' "conciliatory nature" is a code word for subordinating necessary social struggles in order to gain votes, particularly among liberal Jewish voters who were a solid basis for Koch in previous elections. Thus he boasts of supporting Israel "100 percent" — despite its gross anti-Arab racism and support for every reactionary regime on the globe, including South Africa. He also makes a point of having denounced the anti-Semitism of Nation of Islam Minister Louis Farrakhan, a demagogue who articulates black outrage. This "Jewish campaign" was a source of much discontent by militant blacks. Muwakkil quotes an anonymous "publisher of a

militant African-American-owned weekly”:

“Dinkins is so concerned about showing how reasonable he is and how anti-Semitic he’s not, the man has almost completely forgotten where his bread is buttered. Why is he bragging about denouncing Farrakhan, when his core constituency looks to Farrakhan as a hero? Who is he trying to please?”

Good questions, since Dinkins (like liberals generally) finds it easier to come down on the anti-Semitism of Farrakhan than on the more potent racism of white politicians. But most of the left only obscures the answer, since they criticize Dinkins from the popular frontist position of trying to work in the Democratic Party and move it to the left. From this standpoint, Dinkins’ liberalism (he is even a member of the Democratic Socialists of America) is a plus, but his conciliationism and unwillingness to mobilize black militancy are the other side of the same coin. They are exactly the attributes that make him acceptable to the white-dominated ruling class.

A “LAW AND ORDER” CAMPAIGN

Who indeed “butters Dinkins’ bread?” Just look at his background. Dinkins has long been part of a black political elite tied hand and foot to the Democrats and capitalism. His claims to champion the interests of the working class and minority poor are belied by his past support for Koch. Dinkins’ break with Koch reflects the need to contain the anger of workers and blacks and prevent them from turning away from the Democrats. But it equally reflects the dissatisfaction of black politicians with the mayor’s failure to respect their patronage “rights” and other privileges.

Dinkins has no intention of rocking the boat. At every opportunity he reassures the bourgeoisie that he will keep things from getting out of hand. His conciliatory approach embodies the lie that the interests of the ruling class and the oppressed masses can be reconciled.

Dinkins’ main slogan, “vote your hopes and not your fears,” was aimed at reaching white voters by reassuring them he was not a black militant. As the *New York Times* pointed out after the primary, Dinkins was seen by white voters (and by the ruling class, we might add) as “unthreatening” — one pundit styled him a political Bill Cosby. As a result he won over 30% of white votes, far more than expected.

Dinkins apparently succeeded in convincing many whites that he was the best candidate for preventing racial conflict from breaking out. It is typical of this racist society that when a black youth is brutally murdered for being black in the wrong place, the main concern of the political establishment — white and black — is to reassure whites that *blacks* are not about to commit violence.

PANDERING TO WHITE FEARS

Reality is thus stood on its head. A race war is a greater threat to blacks, as Howard Beach and Bensonhurst show. Yet political hacks and the media are preoccupied with *whites’* fears that blacks might retaliate. As well, the avalanche of political rhetoric demanding “peace between the races” and an “end to polarization” equates racists with their victims. A war, not peace, is

necessary — not between races but against racists.

Dinkins, like the other candidates, pandered to the distorted picture. His most significant proposal was an “anti-wilding law” which, in Koch-like fashion, lumped the attack on the white Central Park jogger with the murder of Yusuf Hawkins by a racist gang. This fits in perfectly with his efforts to join the other candidates in showing he is tough on crime. He ran ads calling for more cops — forgetting that his victory was in large part due to an angry reaction against the mounting violence against minorities by cops and others.

Dinkins’ victory will be a test of bourgeois liberalism. Two other well-known liberals won primary races for top City Hall positions: Elizabeth Holtzman for city comptroller and Ruth Messinger for Manhattan borough president; another, Charles Hynes, won the nomination for Brooklyn district attorney.

Holtzman, the current Brooklyn D.A., showed how liberals compromise with racism in her handling of the Bensonhurst murder defendants. Four ringleaders were charged at first only with assault. Even when second-degree murder indictments came down, they remained free on low bail, with little protest from white liberals. (Dinkins, of course, has not criticized his running-mate Holtzman.) The contrast with the treatment of the eight black defendants in the Central Park case is stark: initially denied any bail at all, they were pilloried in the press from the start.

BLACK MILITANTS FALL INTO LINE

Even though after the Hawkins murder Dinkins kept his distance from any expression of black militancy, he benefited from the reactions of both blacks and whites. By focusing attention on the racial polarization of the Koch years, Bensonhurst won Dinkins the support of white voters, even prejudiced ones, who fear an explosion of racial violence. At the same time, it forced blacks, including militants and nationalists, to fall into line. Racial solidarity and anti-Koch sentiment was so high that most of Dinkins’ black critics caved in and endorsed him, objections and all.

The Reverend Al Sharpton, who led the Bensonhurst marches, is a favorite target of the bourgeois media. Sharpton had refused to support Jesse Jackson in 1988 because of his compromises with the Democrats. His forceful expression of justified black anger is undermined by the fact that he is an admitted FBI stool pigeon and a charlatan who offers blacks no solution. Sharpton has influence over many blacks largely because the rest of the black leadership is so vacillating. But lacking any strategy for a serious mass-struggle alternative, he ended up endorsing Dinkins — certainly no less compromising a politician than Jackson.

The *City Sun*, which also stood aloof from Jackson last year because of his softness over the Howard Beach murder and his failure to vigorously champion the black interests, made similar criticisms of the more conservative Dinkins campaign yet nevertheless endorsed him:

“We have had vigorous disagreements with David N. Dinkins and have criticized his shortcomings on many issues that affect this city’s Black community, but we are clear about one thing: If there ever was a time to put aside these differences and deal with the larger issue of what is confronting us,

both as a people and as a city, this is it. We believe strongly that no candidate in the current crop vying for the city's highest offices is as capable of resurrecting its spirit as Dinkins is."

This is hardly a resounding endorsement from a black paper. The editorial gropes for reasons to support Dinkins. Unable to point to any militant program or struggle he has championed, the editors resort to commonplaces: the candidate is "compassionate and sensitive." They are reduced to the only real argument for blacks to vote for Dinkins: "he's one of us." Nevertheless, given the absence of any powerful white-led or interracial institution that is willing to give more than lip-service to black pride, black anger or especially black fears in the present dangerous climate, that argument is a weighty one.

CAPITALISM AND RACISM

The primary campaign showed that the capitalists are anxious to avoid racial conflict and explosions by blacks. Yet the very conditions created by bourgeois rule insure that racial polarization will grow. Ronald Reagan and Ed Koch are just two examples of the more open racism that has become acceptable again. That whites have voted in greater numbers for Jesse Jackson and now Dinkins should not obscure this reality.

By helping to defuse black anger, Dinkins helps insure that no real solution to racism develops. Racist violence is not simply the result of bad ideas in the abstract; it grows because capitalism has no solution to its crisis other than to squeeze the masses. The more the capitalists attack workers' living standards, the more the system attempts to pit group against group, to divide the working class along racial, ethnic and gender lines in a fierce struggle for survival.

Just as police racism against blacks worsened under Benjamin Ward, Koch's black police commissioner, so will it continue under a Dinkins administration. The understandable desire of the black community to have one of its own in office is precisely what capitalism will use as a club against it.

LABOR BUREAUCRATS' SUPPORT

In addition to his base among blacks, Dinkins got substantial support from the labor bureaucracy. Except for a few, mostly in construction, Dinkins had nearly every major New York trade union in his corner — the hospital workers' Local 1199, the United Federation of Teachers, various Communication Workers locals, and the largest public employee union, District Council 37. Many have largely black memberships.

After Jesse Jackson's success in New York City in the 1988 presidential primary, the bureaucrats saw an opportunity to regain credibility among black workers by backing Dinkins against the vulnerable Koch. Koch had stuck his foot in his mouth by viciously attacking Jackson during the campaign, an act that paved the way for the Dinkins candidacy. Jackson's success showed that Koch could be beaten, and the bureaucrats saw a chance

to regain influence in City Hall. Support for Dinkins was also a way of placating workers disgusted with the bureaucrats' capitulations to Koch's attacks on public employees throughout his tenure.

Dinkins got labor's support cheaply. He made no real commitments and has done nothing for workers. Early in the campaign he made noises about opposing the state Taylor Law, which prevents public employees from striking. But ruling-class criticism of this position made him drop it like a lead balloon. (The bourgeoisie's concern over Dinkins' labor relations was shown by the *New York Times*' last-minute decision to endorse Koch.) A similar situation developed over Local 1199's contract struggle: first expressing sympathy for the workers, Dinkins toned it down after criticism in the press.

Dinkins' conciliationism fits in nicely with the outlook of the labor bureaucrats who don't want confrontations with the bosses. Koch has taken union support and money in the past while spitting at the workers and making it clear he doesn't depend on them. In Dinkins the union leaders found someone who needed them and who therefore they hoped would be more open to negotiation and compromise.

FOR THE WHOLE CITY?

But now that Koch has been slain, Dinkins is the clear front runner. He should win easily against Giuliani and is therefore less in need of labor's backing. While he still wants union help, Dinkins is reassuring the bosses that he owes the unions nothing. A campaign spokesman hastened to say that Dinkins is "proud of the support he's had from labor [but] all his labor supporters understand that he will do as mayor what's in the interest of the city, on the whole." (*New York Daily News*, October 4.) Translation: he'll be hard on the workers in the interest of *capitalism* on the whole. Koch had lost too much credibility to feed garbage about "equality of sacrifice" to working people and the poor. Because he is black and a proclaimed "healer," Dinkins is suited for the job.

SACRIFICIAL FAIRNESS

After his primary victory, Dinkins picked up substantial support from businessmen. What the bourgeoisie wants was explained by Felix Rohatyn, the financier who designed the "rescue" of New York City in the 1970s that slashed public services and stole workers' pension funds to back the city's debt. This leading thinker and spokesman for the corporate establishment put it precisely:

"On balance, people in the business community think that reduced tension has to be the highest priority, that it's impossible to govern with any requirement for sacrifice unless the people who are going to be asked to sacrifice feel they are being treated fairly. Dave has a lot of personal qualities that lend themselves to that kind of approach." (*New York Times*, September 26.)

"Suffice it to say that I would be extremely comfortable with David Dinkins as mayor of the city," Rohatyn added. If he's comfortable, working people had better be warned. Leftists like the *Guardian* who celebrate Dinkins' election will have a lot to answer for.

As the bosses understand, Dinkins in office will make it easier for the labor bureaucrats to sell austerity to the ranks. The bureaucrats will argue against militancy that might hurt him. Rather than boosting mass action, the short-term effect of a Dinkins victory may be to dampen struggles.

In backing Dinkins, the labor bureaucrats show their readiness to substitute support to Democratic politicians for necessary mass actions to defend the real needs of the workers and oppressed. A worthy response to Bensonhurst, for example, would have been to shut the city down in a one-day general strike, serving notice on the ruling class and their racist thugs (cops and others) that we will not put up with any more. A real "day of outrage" to shut down New York is the way to forge working-class unity and mobilize the force that can stop race murder.

The crucial importance of mass action in fighting the capitalist assault was demonstrated by the victory won by City University of New York students last spring. It also illustrates the dismal role played by Democratic politicians, David Dinkins in particular. The rescinding of tuition increases and budget cuts, won through sit-ins, strikes and militant demonstrations is now being undercut by Governor Cuomo and his allies.

DINKINS AND THE CITY UNIVERSITY STRUGGLE

Tragically, some of the student leaders who justly condemned Dinkins for refusing to support the mass struggle waged by working-class students, largely black and Latino, have now been enticed into supporting him. A letter by four LRP supporters published (in a shortened version) by *The Campus*, a City College student newspaper, quoted the Students for Educational Rights group summing up the lessons it had learned:

"To David Dinkins, we send this message: you have shown your true colors by refusing to support a cause that should have required no second thought. ... Your intransigence, Mr. Dinkins, will be remembered. Do not expect wide support from the CUNY colleges. ... It is an abandonment that was acridly endured, as a merciless stab in the heart."

The letter responded to the decision of some SER leaders to form a student committee for Dinkins:

"What has changed your attitude towards Dinkins' since last May? One thing ... you got a promise

from him that says: 'As Mayor I will speak out on your needs in areas where I do not have direct authority ... I will also oppose further cuts in the CUNY budget.'

"Is that any firmer or less vague than what he said in May? ... He opposes 'further cuts' — but what about the slashes already made? He will speak out for us where he has no authority — thanks, but what will he do where he has power as Mayor? Even if he makes specific promises to 'advocate' this or that, can you believe him? Is he now any less tied to Cuomo, who is set on cutting back CUNY? Didn't Cuomo promise much the same thing when he ran for office? Dinkins' record of non-support shows that his word is no better than Cuomo's."

These students, like the labor bureaucrats and the black and Latino establishment, are sowing illusions in "healing" the race and class divisions of capitalist society. They have become part of the problem, not the solution. As the letter concluded, "In trying to cover up [Dinkins'] record of betrayal of our struggles, you are doing a great disservice to the students and workers of CUNY."

Interracial working-class struggle is vital. At the same time, black self-organization for self-defense against the brewing storm cannot wait. Racism cannot be successfully fought without a struggle to end the capitalist system that nurtures it. The working class desperately needs to reject the bourgeois political parties and organize one that defends *its* interests: a proletarian revolutionary party dedicated to socialism. In this, black working-class leadership is central.

DINKINS IS NO ALTERNATIVE

We join other workers and oppressed people in applauding Koch's defeat. By rejecting Koch, the voters rejected the rampant racism of the past decade. We opposed, however, voting for Dinkins in the primary — and we are against voting for him or any bourgeois candidate in the general election. Dinkins the Democrat represents the reverse of anti-racist consciousness; revolutionaries will have to fight to prevent his inevitable betrayal from sowing demoralization among the masses. The currently misdirected feelings of solidarity must be turned into a powerful revolutionary force that will carry out the transformation of society.■