

Atlanta's black leadership falters

I was not chosen to run by any established or non-established organization. Friends of mine in this district, white and black, individuals—not any organization—came to me and said, "John Lewis, we would like you to be our candidate." No smoke-filled room, no behind the scenes.

—John Lewis

By Jon Jacobs
Atlanta Bureau

Atlanta. The race to fill the congressional seat from the Fifth District of Georgia entered its final stages this week with the outcome surprisingly in doubt. Short weeks ago John Lewis, former head of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Voter Education Project (VEP) had seemed virtually a sure bet to replace UN Ambassador Andrew Young in the Congress. However, with the election only days away, Lewis is given a less than even chance of making the projected runoff in the 12-candidate race. This spectacular political disintegration, although partially attributable to the inept campaign being run by the Lewis forces, is also a sign of a precipitous breakdown in the moral and political authority of Atlanta's traditional black leadership consortium over the city's black population.

The Fifth District of Georgia is unique. When its voters sent former M.L. King Jr. strategist Andy Young to Congress in 1972 it became one of the few majority white districts in the nation to have a black representative in Washington. Conventional wisdom here has had it that Young's election, and that of Mayor Maynard Jackson in 1973 was attributable to the ability of Atlanta's black leadership consortium, which strongly supported both candidates, to turn out massive black support for its choices. Any black candidate who could get just a few white votes, it was thought, could guarantee his election by obtaining the backing of the consortium. Thus it seemed, and some politicians have even publicly stated, that the seat was and would remain a black seat for the foreseeable future.

►A small group of friends.

Therefore, when Young informed Lewis and Georgia State Senator Julian Bond, while on a trip to Africa last year, that he would be resigning from the House, it was only natural that they should discuss who should run for the vacated post.

It must be understood that Young, Lewis and Bond are part of a small but influential group of former civil rights workers who have congregated in Atlanta and gone into politics, government bureaucracy or the foundations. Most of these individuals see electoral politics as a natural continuation of the movement and they have aided one another politically whenever possible. Consequently, according to reliable sources, Young asked Bond if he would be interested in running for the office. Bond is reported to have said that he is too controversial to win the race (probably a correct analysis) and suggested that Lewis run for the post. Assured of the backing of insurance man Jesse Hill, Delta Airlines executive John Cox, construction magnate Herman Russell, and other members of the leadership consortium, Lewis eventually agreed.

Although possessed of some chronic liabilities as a candidate (he, for example, is afflicted with terminal mumbles), Lewis' impeccable civil rights background made him seem almost a natural candidate for this particular seat. Born dirt poor, Lewis wanted to become a Baptist minister. While working his way through divinity school, he took part in the 1960 Nashville student sit-in movement which was the effective first salvo of the civil rights surge of the '60s. Developing a quick reputation as a rock-solid believer in the philosophy and tactics of non-violence, Lewis rapidly assumed a leadership position,



John Lewis discusses voter registration with Louisiana sugar cane workers.

eventually becoming head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Atlanta. SNCC was then at the cutting edge of the movement in the South and Lewis soon became known both to civil rights workers and to community people all over the South as a tireless worker who was as good as his word at all times.

Leaving SNCC as events radicalized that organization (he was replaced by Stokely Carmichael), Lewis did a brief stint as an executive with the Field Foundation before lighting at the Voter Education Project (VEP).

►A natural successor?

At VEP, Lewis led a successful effort to register literally millions of unregistered black voters all over the South. Over the years at VEP he became a most respected member of the unofficial, Atlanta-centered, national civil rights hierarchy. At the same time, his honesty, diligence in his work, and his obvious goodwill even to his avowed enemies earned for him the reputation virtually of a living saint. Additionally, due to his attendance at many national political conventions and his testimony before numerous Congressional committees, Lewis, like Young before him, was a minor national figure. Thus to some, and apparently to Lewis himself, he seemed a natural almost a pre-ordained successor to Young.

The black leadership consortium agreed and supported Lewis from the start. Apparently expecting trouble from young turk black politicians, however, they decided to start low and subtle in their support. Thus, at a December leadership meeting at Paschals, Atlanta's black political hangout, the question of support for a Fifth District candidate was not even raised until it came up from the floor, raised by an individual not involved in the consortium.

Although no pitch for black support for Lewis was made at that meeting by the consortium, the dishes had hardly been cleared away at Paschals before some of Atlanta's most restive political ambitions, long muted by the influence of the consortium, sensed political weakness and went for the jugular. State Rep. Billy McKinney, a gun-toting self-proclaimed "black redneck," immediately decried alleged attempts on the part of the consortium to "shove [the Lewis candidacy] down our throats" and declared his candidacy. Henrietta Canty, a former government bureaucrat turned private enterprise advocate, did the same.

Although the rebellion among the formerly obedient troops caught some political observers by surprise, it was still not taken seriously as a threat to the consortium's ability to turn out the black vote for Lewis. One long time observer of black politics in Atlanta told this reporter at that time, "With Daddy King (Rev. M. L. King Sr.) and those supporting Lewis, McKinney and those others might as well

campaign into a bucket." As the campaign began in January, Lewis' most dangerous competitor was seen as City Council President Wyche Fowler, a white political opportunist who apparently is breaking the law by running for the Congress without resigning his city council post. Even he was given only a medium chance of beating Lewis.

►Rosey picture fades.

This rosey picture for the Lewis camp did not last long. Blacks running against Lewis have found fertile ground for their attacks on his record. Many black Atlanta voters have apparently responded positively to the charge that Lewis, after spending years at VEP registering voters almost everywhere but Atlanta, has little claim to a Congressional seat from Georgia. Candidate Henrietta Canty explained it to IN THESE TIMES thus: "John Lewis would have done better in Alabama or Mississippi. How can someone who has been insensitive to the needs of this district be expected to know what has to be done about education problems, youth development problems, etc. when he gets to Washington?" The more eager than expected black community response to this line of argument quickly made it obvious that Lewis was not in for an easy campaign.

The Lewis campaign, thus challenged to prove its candidate deserving, has failed miserably. Lewis, as all those who know him well can attest, is a man of considerable depth of ideas. Strong views that confidants know he holds on many political issues have utterly failed to come through the high moral rhetoric with which he is campaigning. Thus shorn of hard content, the moral tone comes across from both candidate and campaign as hackneyed emotional claptrap. This reporter has known Lewis for years and yet, in an interview for this article, I could elicit no specific opinions or commitments from the candidate:

IN THESE TIMES: "Do you think your work around the South qualifies you for the Fifth District post?"

LEWIS: "My whole life has been one of helping people, particularly that segment of society that has been left out and left behind. I think my background and my experience in the South working with all people will make it more helpful and be of great assistance as I play a role in the Congress."

IN THESE TIMES: "Do you think the Fifth District seat is a black seat?"

LEWIS: "I think that this is a seat that belongs to the people of this district. It is a seat that deserves the very best. And it deserves electing a person that can bring people together and not a person who intends to separate and divide people whether that person be black or that person be white. I believe I represent the very best in this district."

►An incompetent campaign.

This has been Lewis' campaign slogan—

"Let's send the best to Congress." But, with Lewis delivering pithy sentiments all over town, even the least sophisticated audiences to whom he has been speaking have sometimes become restive. Many of his most ardent supporters, people who from their personal experience with the candidate and their faith in him as an individual know that he is a political progressive without any trace of cold war mentality, are wondering what his incompetent campaigning says about his ability to represent his politics successfully in Washington. And, more importantly, spot checks confirm the generally held feeling that those black candidates saying Lewis is not the person for the job are getting more numerous and appreciative audiences as the campaign goes down to the wire.

The extent to which the incompetence of the Lewis campaign has startled the Atlanta progressive community cannot be overstated. Although his campaign staff contains many veterans of successful electoral campaigns, including Jimmy Carter's, some of the most basic and mechanical election tasks have not been done, or have not been started until dangerously late. Even a satellite campaign office in lily-white North Atlanta was only recently opened, seemingly as an afterthought. But, perhaps most damaging, it doesn't appear that anyone in the campaign is telling the candidate that his bumbling, mumbling speaking style, combined with his sonorously empty prose, are an embarrassment even to his closest supporters. Certainly, if anyone has told Lewis, no change in his style has resulted.

►Still some hope for Lewis.

As bleak as things look, however, Lewis staffers hold out some hope. Many supporters who initially thought Lewis would walk away with the seat have become involved with the campaign as it has become obvious the candidate is in a life-and-death struggle. Wyche Fowler, his chief white opponent, is beset by public doubts about the legality of his candidacy. And, although the late entry of former SCLC head Ralph Abernathy into the race may be splintering Lewis' support even more than previously thought, the recent endorsement of Lewis by Ambassador Young is seen by some campaign workers as the shot in the arm needed to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. As we go to press, polls are showing Lewis, Fowler, and liberal Republican Paul Coverdell in a dead heat. Lewis staffers, although admitting that they have somehow frittered away an almost certain win still believe their election day "Get 'em to the polls" system will get Lewis at least into a runoff. And, as one Lewis staffer told IN THESE TIMES, "[If we get into a runoff] it will be hard to beat Fowler all right, but maybe we can do it. First we've got to get into the runoff—by the skin of our teeth if we do it."

If John Lewis is not elected, the nation will lose the services of a progressive young black man in Congress. Whether he pulls it out or not, however, the rocky start and patchy support for his campaign has shown that the black consortium, which several years ago replaced the white Chamber of Commerce as Atlanta's main political locus, no longer wields the automatic power it once did. And, with mayoral elections in October of this year and the white business community red hot to regain City Hall, re-election for the less than universally popular Mayor Jackson seems less than a sure bet. Unless the old consortium and the up-and-coming young turk blacks can reach an accommodation and present a united candidacy in October, the Atlanta black community faces the possibility of, in the space of nine months, losing both the Fifth District seat and the mayoralty. Few doubt that this double whammy could be a crippling blow to the new and fragile tradition of black political power in the "New South." ■

Photo by Archie Allen/Southern Exposure

Labor's tough line on defense, dissidents and nukes

Cold War ideology and concern for the immediate jobs of union members took precedence over other considerations in the labor leaders' decisions.

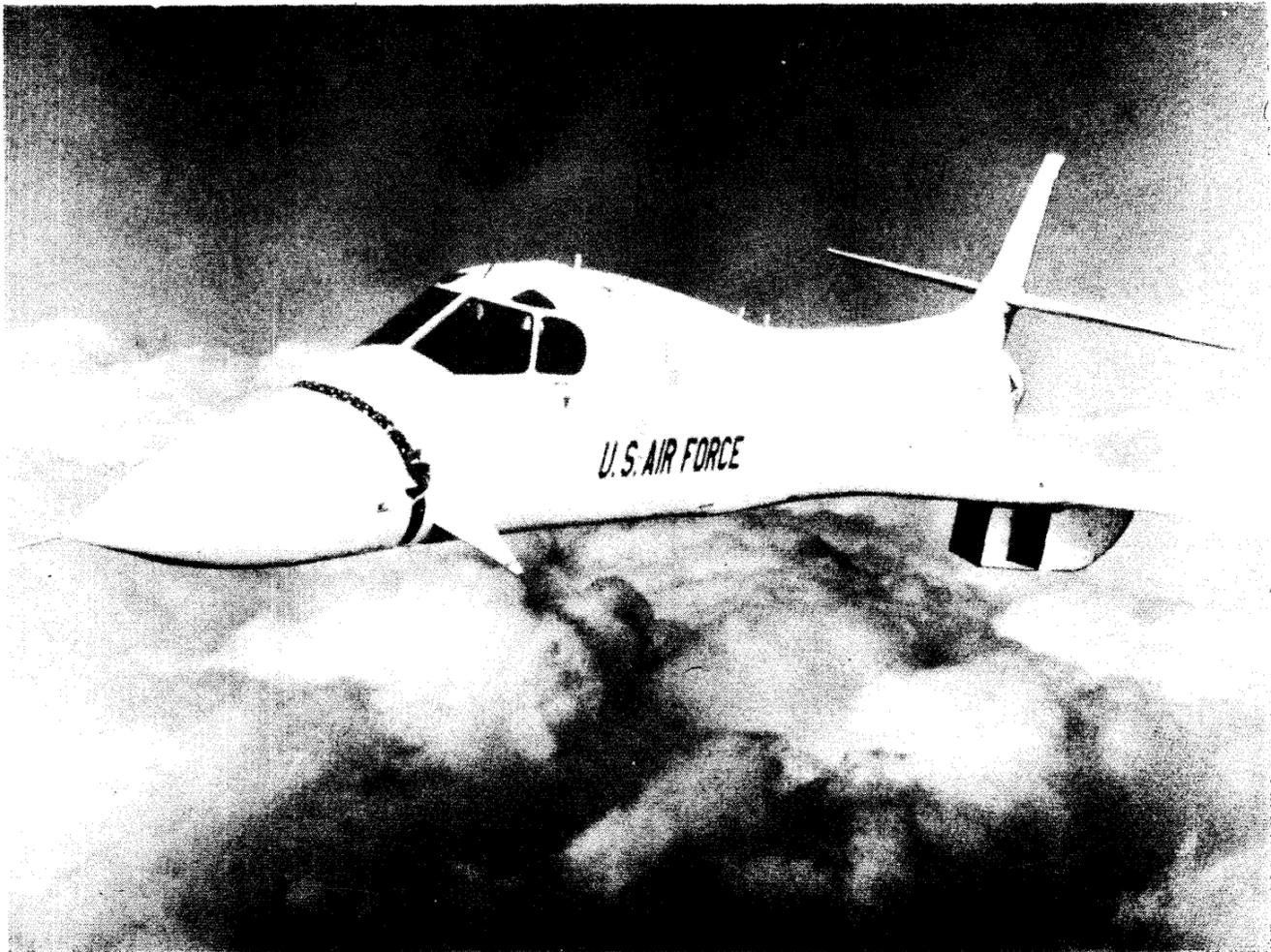
In addition to outlining future legislative goals, the Bal Harbour AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting reaffirmed support for increased defense spending, further development of nuclear power and the rights of dissidents in the Soviet Union. On these issues, Cold War ideology and concern for the immediate jobs of union members took precedence over other considerations.

Prominent union leaders have been actively involved in the Committee on the Present Danger, a 141-member organization that views the Soviet Union as "the principal threat to our nation, to world peace, and to the cause of human freedom..." The committee proposes higher levels of defense spending so that the U.S. will regain a "stable balance of forces" with the Soviets, the only "strong foundation" for American diplomacy. Committee members sitting on the AFL-CIO Executive Council include Lane Kirkland, AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer, Albert Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and Sol Chaikin of the International Ladies Garment Workers (ILGWU).

►The B-1 essential.

In accord with this Cold War outlook, the Executive Council backed full funding for the B-1 bomber program, widely criticized as expensive, unnecessary and of marginal security value. "We believe the B-1 program is essential if the United States is to have the best possible bargaining position" in arms limitation talks, the AFL-CIO said. They stressed that their support was not based on job creation, since "similar expenditures in other areas could provide as many and perhaps even more jobs."

Within the Executive Council, however, the vote did not go as smoothly as Meany had expected. One member tried to table the resolution and six others voted against it. This is quite unusual because Meany seldom makes proposals unless he is certain they will pass unanimously. Observers speculate that the no votes included A.F. Groszpiorn of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW),



The Executive Council backed full funding for the B-1 bomber program, stressing that it was not because of the jobs involved but because of the national security question.

Jerry Wurf of Municipal Workers (AFSCME), and Glenn Watts of the Communications Workers (CWA).

"The vote on the Executive Council about the B-1 may be the beginning of something significant. The turnover in the leadership of some unions may turn things around," comments one former union staff member. He believes—despite statements to the contrary—that labor's defense policy flows from the union leaders' concern for jobs and that those who differ with Meany's anti-communist politics would still approve more defense spending.

►Support for Soviet dissidents and nuclear power.

The Executive Council also denounced human rights violations in the Soviet Union and welcomed Vladimir Bukovsky, a recently-exiled Soviet dissident, to the Bal Harbour meeting. Bukovsky applauded U.S. labor unions for defending human rights as far back as 1947, when they "collected the testimonies of a great many

former Soviet political prisoners and published the first map of Gulag Archipelago." Meany hopes to sponsor visits by Bukovsky to other trade union centers.

AFL-CIO leaders also discussed environmental issues in Bal Harbour and backed the construction of more nuclear power plants. They expect the future construction of these plants to generate 700,000 jobs by the year 2000. Assailing the safe nuclear power movement for its "no-growth" philosophy, union leaders worked against nuclear safe-guard initiatives across the country last November.

Ironically, critics of nuclear power have pointed out that it is a relatively capital-intensive industry that employs mostly skilled technicians. One study found that 40 percent more jobs would be created in the construction of coal-fired plants.

Ignoring economic difficulties facing nuclear power, (like the spiraling cost of uranium) and widespread revelations about the dangers of nuclear waste, the Executive Council called for speedy de-

velopment of nuclear power to meet future energy needs and lesson U.S. dependence on oil from the Middle East.

Ralph Helstein, President Emeritus of the Packinghouse Workers, also believes that labor policies on defense and energy flow from leaders' concern for their members' jobs. "There are no simplistic answers on why these people do it," he says.

"Part of the difficulty with these kinds of questions is that people who object to the enlargement of armaments or certain attitudes on ecology, have little regard for where the jobs that are presently provided are going to come from.

"There's no question that Meany's orientation has generally been that of a cold warrior on most questions, and continues to be. A few negative votes on the B-1 is not proof that the Executive Council is beginning to open up on foreign policy. There has to be the support in the country for the kinds of programs that make sure people have jobs."

—Dan Marshall

Labor sets its agenda at Bal Harbour meeting

For Northern Republicans, support for right-to-work laws means support for runaway shops.

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of New Jersey, this year's bill deletes the wage stabilization part.

But construction union leaders like Robert Georgine, head of the AFL-CIO Building and Construction Trades Dept., reportedly support the stabilization provision although they cannot publicly back such restrictions on the power of feisty, independent-minded locals. *Business Week* speculates that union leaders are depending on Ray Marshall, the new Secretary of Labor, to propose the stabilization provision as the price of administration sup-

port. In any event, the bill is expected to emerge from congressional committee in exactly the same form as last year.

Other parts of this "unfinished business" include removal of Hatch Act restrictions on the political activity of public employees, a requirement that 30 percent of all imported oil be carried on U.S. ships and federal regulation of strip mining.

►Repeal of 14(b).

The AFL-CIO will also push for reform of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). At the Bal Harbour meeting, they decided to support an "omnibus bill" that combines changes in Board procedures with repeal of section 14(b) of the Taft-Hartley Act. This bill will supersede Frank Thompson's Labor Reform Act of 1977 (ITT, Feb. 9).

Section 14(b) allows states to pass right-to-work laws and undercuts union security. Its repeal has not been strongly pushed by the AFL-CIO since the mid-1960s, when their effort was filibustered to death in the Senate. Organizations like the Na-

tional Right to Work Committee are gearing up to defeat repeal and some observers say that the demand may be dropped in exchange for passage of the rest of the omnibus bill.

There are some indications, however, that prospects for repeal of 14(b) are better than ever and that there may actually be a sharp fight over it. Ray Marshall supported such a change in Senate confirmation hearings and Carter has promised to sign it into law if it passes the Congress. Within the labor movement, pressure for repeal is especially strong from service employee unions that represent workers in many small workplaces. Right-to-work laws make it difficult for them to hold on to new members, since the ban on the union shop allows workers to refuse to pay union dues. If the AFL-CIO dumps the demand, they could catch a lot of flack from these influential quickly-growing unions.

►Republicans reassessing right-to-work.

In addition, some Republican politicians

are beginning to reassess their past anti-labor records. Rep. Robert Michel of Illinois recently told his GOP colleagues that they ought to take a "fresh look" at voting against repeal of 14(b) this time around. Conservative columnists Evans and Novak point out that northern Republicans who support the right-to-work just encourage business to move from their home states to the overwhelmingly Democratic South. With organized labor "splitting into clear right and left factions," they argue that "Republicans must take some pro-union positions, even at the cost of a scruple or two."

These are some of the highlights of the AFL-CIO legislative program as it emerged from Bal Harbour. The union leaders will also demand reforms in the Fair Labor Standards Act, including a 35-hour week and a higher minimum wage indexed to the cost of living. Other demands include expanding federal aid to mass transit, prohibiting discrimination against pregnant women and removing the barriers to voter participation. ■