

By David Moberg

THIS MAY NOT BE THE VERY WORST OF TIMES for strikes, but it's hardly the best of times either. Unions can win, contrary to popular impressions, but the costs are great and the deck is stacked against them.

After long, tough walkouts, unions at Boeing and Nynex were able in the week before Thanksgiving to win big victories on principles but relatively modest financial settlements. But at the same time, in the crusade to save Eastern Airlines from Frank Lorenzo, the pilots' and flight attendants' unions decided to throw in the towel after nearly nine months on sympathy strikes, leaving the Machinists union to carry on alone. Yet even there, the strike cost an already weak Eastern so dearly that it may not survive, and the Machinist strikers still retain some leverage and internal solidarity.

The Boeing and Nynex strikes involved clashes over fundamentals, not just division of the pie at these two large, prosperous companies. Machinists at Boeing fought for—and won—restrictions on mandatory overtime that was destroying many workers' personal and family lives. They also regained regular annual wage increases, after having received only lump-sum bonuses for each of the past six years. Boeing has saved immense sums of money by forcing overtime

LABOR

rather than hiring new employees and by avoiding basic hourly wage increases. The union estimated these increases would have cost Boeing 3.5 times the amount of simple bonus payments, because wage increases compound and affect benefits such as pensions and vacations.

Faced with a growing health-care crisis, many employers have sought to shift medical costs to workers. Telephone unions—the Communications Workers (CWA) and Electrical Workers (IBEW)—successfully resisted such efforts in AT&T and regional Bell company contracts this year, but nowhere was the fight as intense as at Nynex in the Northeast. The CWA responded to corporate demands with cost-containment proposals, as do most unions, and called for a national health plan as the only real solution. Although companies' productivity increases often offset rising health costs, higher medical costs ultimately mean lower gains elsewhere for workers. Yet contrary to corporate claims, Nynex workers won wage hikes—about 9.6 percent over three years—comparable to those at other Bell companies. The workers agreed to give up only company-proposed bonuses they didn't want, in order to avoid health-insurance payments of \$1,500 a year that would have surely risen much higher.

The benefits of education: Both strikes proved successful largely because the unions had conducted yearlong person-to-person educational campaigns through a trained network of shop stewards or activists, who at Nynex also built solidarity through symbolic on-the-job protests. "We had never been so ready so early, and people understood what the issue [of health-care costs] was about," said George Kohl, administrative assistant to CWA President Morton Bahr. A yearlong campaign to personally deliver and discuss pamphlets on individual

Strikers' creative tactics overcome anti-union odds

issues convinced young Boeing workers—most of the 41 percent of the 57,000 strikers who had less than two years' seniority—of the older workers' conviction that bonuses were no substitute for higher wages. "The old art of pamphleteering works if you do it right," said Machinist local communications director Jack Daniels. "Tom Paine would have been proud of us."

Boeing was backlogged with orders and very profitable, and its workers were skilled, irreplaceable and solid (only 3 percent crossed the picket line in eight weeks)—making the strike a textbook confrontation. Nynex was highly automated, and could cover basic service by using managers and temporary replacements working long hours. But new installations and repair work suffered, as only one percent of workers crossed picket lines during the 16-week strike. CWA used its activist network creatively, picketing work crews in their manholes and executives at awards dinners—a strategy described as "devastating" in an internal management memo. It reached out for support from other unions, pension funds, international allies and customers (in a modest effort to get them to withhold phone-bill payments). It worked hard to maintain close ties with the IBEW workers, seen as the weak link by management because they had no strike fund. And taking advantage of the public regulation of utilities, the union got 130 New York state legislators to sign an ad opposing a \$360 million rate hike for New York Telephone, a Nynex subsidiary.

The mad capitalist: Nynex and Boeing managers may have taken tough stances, but they weren't out to break the unions and weren't crazy—which was precisely what the unions faced with Lorenzo at Eastern. In a

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December *Vanity Fair* profile, one of his closest longtime friends describes Lorenzo, chairman of Texas Air (which owns Eastern and Continental), as representative of "the capitalist ethic at its far, far extreme, its Ku Klux Klan extreme."

Lorenzo, who used the bankruptcy laws in 1983 to break the unions at Continental, has effectively used bankruptcy court during the strike as a shield to block union-backed buyouts, interfere with labor rights and hold off creditors while he cannibalized Eastern—selling planes, gates and the profitable shuttle—and poured hundreds of millions of dollars into a money-losing effort to keep planes in the air.

He has had a strategic ally in the White House. Lorenzo gave George Bush and the

Republicans more than \$100,000 last year, and Bush's chief legislative aide is a former Texas Air vice president. Bush early on rejected presidential fact-finding, then just before Thanksgiving vetoed a blue-ribbon com-

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mission to investigate the strike, a commission that had been overwhelmingly approved by Congress.

The veto triggered the pilots' abandonment of the strike, which led the flight attendants to follow suit. After the veto, pilots began to believe, as Capt. John Knudson said, that "we're going to have to stand down and wait for the system to fix itself. We've done everything we can at this point." Leaders in both unions feared that even more of their members would cross the picket line. By early November about one-fourth of pilots and flight attendants—but only 300 of 8,500 Machinist mechanics and ramp workers—had returned to work. Both sympathy strikes had been amazingly strong at the beginning, but after top pilots' union leaders tried to end the strike in August, a significant minority of pilots, later followed by attendants, crossed the picket line despite an overwhelming vote to continue the strike. The leaders' misguided action "did destabilize the unity of the pilots," Knudson said. "It's unfortunate that happened."

Pilots' union leaders and non-Eastern pilots, restive over big strike-benefit costs, pressured Eastern pilots to return if Bush vetoed the commission. This was the culmination of a strategy that had all along relied far too heavily on political lobbying, courtroom maneuvers and financial strategies and had not simultaneously carried on enough grass-roots, disruptive action.

Machinists and flight attendants had been a bit more aggressive with demonstrations, boycott appeals and lobbying of travel agents not to book Eastern or Continental. There was unprecedented cooperation among the often-combative unions during the strike, and most pilots, flight attendants and mechanics still express strong mutual support despite their divergent decisions. But as Machinist Local 796 President-elect Paul Bacich said, "The whole strike could have been, and still can be, better coordinated."

Many Machinists and flight attendants wanted more militant action and aggressive public outreach: non-violent civil disobedience, "stall-ins" at airports, secondary boy-

cotts on railroads, militant picketing, refusal by other Machinists to handle Eastern planes or baggage. But there were many constraints. International union leaders feared injunctions and fines. Also, since they were seeking a buyer while striking, union leaders feared an Eastern lawsuit, under federal racketeering statutes, that would accuse them of conspiring to damage Eastern in order to buy it more cheaply.

Strikers started with a vast reservoir of public support and antipathy towards Lorenzo. Union leaders cautioned against alienating that support—but it could also have been argued, Bacich said, that "if you have that popular support, you can risk civil disobedience." Although the Machinists initiated the strike, they did not have a developed strategy, and the pilots' critical support gave them heavy strategic influence. Many cautious pilots saw militant actions as not befitting their professional self-image. Finally, the AFL-CIO's ultimately disappointing "Fairness at Eastern" campaign, which raised money, held press conferences, mobilized pickets and lobbied Congress for the commission, opposed militant actions.

Eastern's wasteland: Despite the pilots' and flight attendants' return, the strike isn't over. Lorenzo still lacks experienced mechanics and is desperately attempting to delay or avoid comprehensive airplane examinations and major structural modifications ordered by the Federal Aviation Administration. Eastern is also short of planes and leases many at great cost from Continental. And although it flies 75 percent of its pre-strike flights, Eastern's passenger loads are well below average despite money-losing fares, and the company is losing \$2 million to \$3 million a day. Even Continental has been barely profitable, and it appears the industry may be entering an economically tough period. Lorenzo has been unable to deliver \$200 million promised to Eastern creditors and is finding it harder to raise capital on Wall Street.

Lorenzo now faces fights from flight attendants and pilots over who can be recalled. All the unions will fight for an override of Bush's veto of the blue-ribbon commission. Machinists are now evading legal constraints on picketing by having groups with anti-Lorenzo T-shirts roam airport concourses. Belatedly, the unions have also contacted Scandinavian and other European unions, who could pressure the Scandinavian Airlines System, which owns 10 percent of Texas Air. If the Machinists can keep their ranks solid, the strike can still wound a weakened Eastern, bloodied as much by its owner as its workers. Some creditors are already pushing for sale of Eastern's lucrative Latin American routes, a move that could be the line's death knell.

Against a crazed anti-union zealot, the unions mounted an impressive strike, unique in its fight against the employer's plan to defeat its unions by dismantling the company. Although the unions might have accomplished more with greater creative militancy—which the Machinists could still use—the strike sent a message of something more than labor's difficulties. "Lorenzo paid an incredible price and lost over a billion dollars," said Nancy Tauss, vice president of the flight attendants' union. "Although we certainly wish there'd been a different outcome, we do think other employers won't be willing to follow in Lorenzo's footsteps." □

By Salim Muwakkil

THE TRIUMPHS OF MODERATE AFRICAN-AMERICAN candidates in the recent off-year elections have triggered an avalanche of predictions about Jesse Jackson's political demise. Mainstream pundits are virtually falling over themselves delivering obituaries of his National Rainbow Coalition (NRC) and the political style it embodies. Indeed, an alien observer could easily conclude that the election results were notable less as unprecedented victories for

POLITICS

a host of black candidates than as one grand defeat for Jackson.

What accounts for this blatant Jackson-bashing? It certainly isn't backed up by evidence. To the contrary, the results of these historic elections can easily be traced to Jackson's groundbreaking efforts. In 1988, for instance, Jackson became the first black presidential candidate to win Virginia's Democratic primary. One year later Douglas Wilder is the state's first black governor. That's no coincidence.

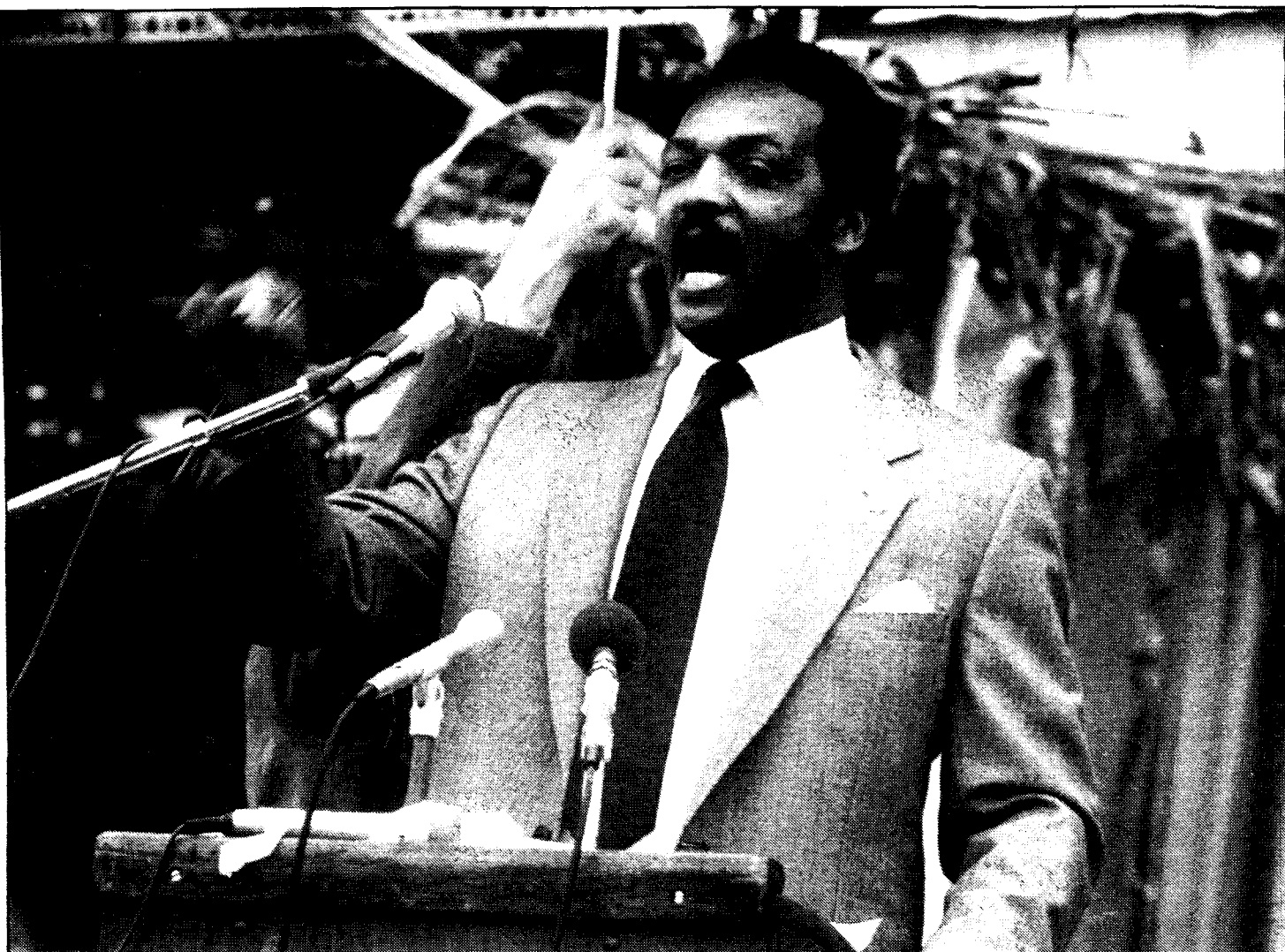
Candidate Jackson also carried New York City in the 1988 Democratic primary. And in a public feud with Edward Koch—who said Jews would be “crazy” to vote for him in the primary—Jackson took the moral high ground and helped accelerate the feisty mayor's decline. This allowed Jackson-supporter David Dinkins to defeat Koch in the primary and squeak by Rudolph Giuliani to become the city's first African-American mayor.

Ubiquitous footprints: John Daniels and Norman Rice, the first black mayors of New Haven, Conn., and Seattle, respectively, both strongly supported Jackson's 1988 campaign, as did the new mayors of Atlanta and Cleveland. In fact, very few spots on the modern political landscape are untouched by Jackson's footprints; his influence is ubiquitous. Yet mainstream pundits gleefully dismiss him as yesterday's news.

“The media reaction is simply a case of wish fulfillment,” says William Strickland, associate professor of politics at the University of Massachusetts and New England coordinator of Jackson's 1988 campaign. “Press pundits want to emphasize the so-called crossover aspect of the race to push the notion that the politics of conciliation are the politics of the future,” Strickland added. “But the most significant aspect of both the Virginia and New York City races was that the undistinguished white candidate still pulled most of the white votes. Wilder was head-and-shoulders above [Marshall] Coleman in qualifications, and in New York, Giuliani's only asset was his whiteness.”

Strickland did not deny, however, that the current crop of moderates are of a different political breed from Jackson. One reason the mainstream so enthusiastically celebrates their victories, he says, is that they present a less-demanding alternative to Jackson's call for a structural overhaul of the system. Although careful to distinguish Dinkins' more progressive policies from those of Wilder, Strickland devalues both their victories as desperate attempts to put “a black face on flawed institutions. They're playing out an old tune,” he said, “while the world needs new music.”

Tuneless campaigns: But advocates of this new strategy would argue that their tunes are not old—they're just not playing music. The Baptist preacher-based use of rhetorical eloquence to evoke an epic vision—the



Public clashes with the newly ascended black moderates may help Jesse Jackson show that his message is ideological, not racial.

Black moderates' wins inspire Jesse-bashers

“music” of traditional black politics—has no place in their nuts-and-bolts political repertoire. Nor do they “run against the establishment, or pose issues as ‘us vs. them,’” said William Schneider, a senior analyst with the American Enterprise Institute.

“They have a different style, and it works,” he added. “It means that blacks can work inside the system and outside the system. It's the march of progress that every ethnic group has discovered.”

Jackson disagrees with parts of that analysis, arguing that African-Americans have long sought to appeal to white voters but seldom received white votes. Black candidates' success in these recent elections is less a function of their altered tactics, Jackson insists, than it is of “the maturing of the mind of white America.” In the '60s, “we integrated the lunch counters and the libraries, and now we are integrating the psyche and the mind of white America, replacing insecurity and unfounded fears with maturity,” he said.

But Jackson acknowledges the differences between himself and politicians like Wilder or Chester Jenkins, the new black mayor of Durham, N.C. Jackson conceded that Wilder did not invite him in to campaign in Virginia, but said that “it is also true that he didn't invite [AFL-CIO President] Lane Kirkland or [Massachusetts Sen. Edward] Kennedy or [New York Gov. Mario] Cuomo.”

Dueling blacks: Speaking before members of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) a few days after his election, Wilder made his political inclinations clear. In essence, he told the mostly white group of mod-

erate Democrats that he was their man. Echoing much of the DLC line on issues like “mainstream values,” free enterprise, holding the line on taxes and a bipartisan foreign policy, Wilder clearly endorsed the group's notion that the Democratic Party must focus on mainstream America to regain its lost eminence. He was applauded lustily.

This, of course, is in direct opposition to the Jackson thesis that argues the Democrats can best expand their support by going after the unregistered poor and “locked out” members of society. It seems clear that Wilder will not shrink from the role that national Democrats have hoped—even prayed—he would play as a black counterbalance to Jack-

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son's progressivism.

But it's possible that the victories of Wilder and the others will do for the Jackson effort what eight years of campaigning has not: lighten the Rainbow. Through public clashes with the newly ascended black moderates, Jackson will be better able to demonstrate that his political message is ideological rather than racial. This hard-won distinction may attract many more white votes should he decide to run for something.

“Even with his supposed liabilities Jackson pulled 17 percent of the white vote in the 1988 primaries,” noted Cheryl Miller, a senior research associate and visiting scholar at the Joint Center for Political Studies, a Washington-based think tank that focuses on black concerns. One thing often lost in discussions of Jackson's political appeal is his campaigns' transracial focus.

Diversity on display: Jackson couched his political message in the civil-rights vernacular, and although that language was linked to blacks in the public mind, it was never intrinsically race-specific. “Jesse was threatening to whites because they chose to see him as threatening,” Miller added. “He never said anything threatening to white people. In fact, much of what he said should have been reassuring to them.”

According to Miller, the black moderates' emergence is another indication of African-Americans' growing diversity. But the national media is so accustomed to portraying African-Americans in stereotypic monotonies, it has a problem depicting that diversity. “In some ways it's kind of insulting for the mainstream media to tell us that Jesse Jackson is not the right kind of leader for us and Doug Wilder is,” she said. “We are a various and multifaceted people, and we have no need for one spokesman.”

The conciliators' narrow victories have inspired some black activists to denounce the process as demeaning. “It was sickening to me how Dinkins and Wilder had to bend so far over backward not to say anything that could, that just might, upset white folks,” said one caller on a black-oriented radio talk show in Chicago. “And then they both just barely got elected. I just can't stand to see my people become so nondescript, so corny, just to win.... I tell you, if I lived in Virginia I would have boycotted the election to protest Wilder's emasculation as a black man. We need Jesse Jackson to run for something again to put black men on the map.”

The radio show's host said most of his callers echoed that view.