

Among the delegates to the Democratic National Convention: Complacency, conservatism and a few sparks of discontent

Jerry White, At the DNC in Los Angeles
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“They say it's there, but I'm not aware of it.” That was the response to a question on the growth of social inequality posed by this reporter to a delegate who was wildly applauding after Bill Clinton's speech to the Democratic National Convention. Her remark, though particularly stark in its expression of complacency, was not untypical of the comments this reporter got while interviewing delegates on the floor of the convention.

Nearly 5,000 delegates and alternates attended the national gathering in Los Angeles this week, which brought together many of the most active supporters of the Democratic Party, along with 15,000 elected officials, paid party functionaries and guests.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has pointed out in previous articles, most of the delegates were drawn from more privileged layers of society that have benefited from the stock market boom fueled by the policies of the Clinton-Gore administration. The *WSWS* spoke with union officials, mid-level managers, a construction contractor, a lawyer, a computer programmer, a social services administrator and an elected official. This reporter also spoke with a retired teacher and a retired oil worker.

Rosa Holliday is an education and training coordinator for General Motors and political science professor in Bay City, Michigan. Though the area, which includes nearby Saginaw and Flint, has been devastated by downsizing in the auto industry and the disappearance of steady, better-paying jobs, Ms. Holliday said, “We have never had such a long stretch of prosperity in America.”

She acknowledged that “lower incomes are a problem” but this, she suggested, was because low-paid workers were not sufficiently educated to compete for better-paying hi-tech jobs. “That is why Gore is pushing skills training. That's the key to preparing people for work,” she said.

When it came to the issue of social inequality, Ms. Holliday denied that it had anything to do with the class structure of American society. Inequality, she said, was fundamentally the product of racial discrimination, an obstacle that Clinton had taken great strides to remove. “It has been a problem in American society that not everybody has shared in prosperity.

But Clinton has opened things up and made it inclusive, through affirmative action and other things. No other administration has ever pushed this so hard.”

For the most part, the much touted “inclusiveness” of the Clinton-Gore administration consists in the cultivation of a layer of minority entrepreneurs and officials through government contracts and other benefits, an achievement repeatedly hailed from the convention podium as well as by delegates.

One black delegate from Mississippi, who is also a Teamsters shop steward at United Parcel Service, said, “The civil rights era was able to effectuate some changes. We now have the maturity to have these dialogues for all, and blacks have become part of the process. The political system is a great instrument to bring about social change.”

As for why the masses of working people, black and white, did not share that view, but instead looked at the elections with a combination of disinterest and disdain, he could only speculate that the reason was general contentment. “In the 1960s we had a rough time,” he said. “There were civil rights issues, the Vietnam War and serious social concerns. With the advent of accelerated communications and the availability of learning about political issues, maybe the people have been lulled into a state of apathy. And maybe voter apathy isn't a bad thing. Maybe the people are grateful and appreciative that things are going in a positive direction. The US is well known for responding to the needs of Americans.”

Nearly one in three delegates or alternates at the convention were trade union officials or workers close to the union bureaucracy. Their comments reflected the very conservatism and contentment that were often ascribed to the general public, revealing the chasm that separates these elements from the broad masses of working people.

Garland Rosauero, an official from the Operating Engineers union in Alameda, California, said, “We are the largest construction union local in the world. Our guys build highways and buildings. They are always working and are doing well. There's work out there for everybody who wants it. It might not be at the wages they want, but it's better than it was eight years

ago. Naturally, it might not be what everybody wants, but Clinton and Gore have given us great opportunities.”

Mr. Rosauero acknowledged, “I do very well and know a lot of guys who have done well in the stock market, playing the dot.coms.” He continued: “For those not doing well—like people working at McDonald's or making \$7 an hour—how can they blame the government for that?”

I asked Mr. Rosauero about the Democrats' abandonment of their past liberal policies, particularly the expansion of social spending associated with the Kennedy-Johnson years. What did he think about Gore's insistence on “fiscal responsibility” when the government was running huge surpluses, the economy was supposedly booming, yet tens of millions of working people were facing economic insecurity and lacked basic needs like health care?

“I agree with fiscal responsibility,” Mr. Rosauero said. “We need to fund programs, but not put the government back in debt. Sure, it takes a lot of money, but we can't go back to tax and spend. It used to be that way, but it's a political thing—we have to keep the party in power. The party had to change to survive.”

These views were amplified by Texas delegate Howard Berger, a lawyer for real estate companies and local governments. Mr. Berger became active in Democratic Party politics in the 1970s, supporting Jesse Jackson's People United to Save Humanity and Operation Push. This was the third Democratic National Convention that he had attended.

He acknowledged that social inequality was worse than when Clinton took over the White House in 1993, but said that while it would be beneficial to greatly expand social spending and attack problems like health care and education, it was not politically feasible.

First Berger blamed Republican resistance. But then he suggested more broadly that the American people were at fault because they had shifted to the right over the last 30 years. If the Democrats pushed for significantly more social spending, it could provoke a popular backlash that would prevent the passage of even the most modest reforms.

“The Democrats,” Berger said, “are afraid that America does not have the political will for sweeping change. Johnson's Great Society programs got us Richard Nixon. The war on poverty generated support for Ronald Reagan. That is why we have to slowly expand existing programs like Medicaid and Medicare.

“I support a single payer plan to provide health care insurance to everybody, but America is not ready for that. You have to get there any way you can, by increasing the services to the people and decreasing the profits to the insurance companies.”

Mr. Berger went on to explain that Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson had believed that every twenty years there would be two years in which the possibility existed to enact significant social reforms. “Perhaps,” he said, “Clinton thought that he was doing that with his health care plan. We missed that and now we are going to have to have another twenty years of

incremental changes.”

When I suggested that it was unlikely that working people could bear another two decades of worsening social inequality, particularly under conditions of the economic shocks that were sure to come, Berger acknowledged that this was a serious problem and that social upheavals could result. He added that in the long run, it was Roosevelt's New Deal programs that saved capitalism from revolution.

The Democrats' shift to the right did disturb a number of the delegates I spoke to. Some complained about Gore's selection of Lieberman as his running mate, because of the latter's support for school vouchers and his role during the Clinton impeachment.

I had a conversation with a retired oil worker from Galveston, Texas, a member of the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers (PACE) union, who was attending his first Democratic convention. Allen Alexander had been a shop steward at Amoco for 25 years when he was forced to retire, under the threat of losing his pension, when the oil giant merged with British Petroleum. He denounced the conditions facing the working class and spoke angrily of the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy's collaboration with big business. His support for the Democrats seemed tenuous and reluctant, the product of the AFL-CIO's long efforts to block the building of a political party of the working class.

“For ten years I thought about the building of a labor party,” said Alexander. “But I didn't want a party that would be run by the same bureaucrats as in my union.”

Alexander blamed the AFL-CIO leaders for opening the way to corporate downsizing and union-busting when they refused to defend the PATCO air traffic controllers fired by President Reagan in 1981. “The unions did nothing. That's because the leaders were bought off and working with the corporations and politicians. The union bureaucrats were doing that for their own benefit, not the workers'. Before the 1980s it only took one paycheck to raise a family. It will never go back to that. At the same time, the CEO at BP Amoco got \$12 million dollars when he retired, plus God knows how many more millions in stock options.”

When I suggested that it was high time for the working class to build a political party of its own that would challenge the present political and economic setup, he agreed, saying, “Why can't there be a party for the people, that serves the interests of the people?”



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