

Whipped into line by Wall Street

Jesse Jackson drops protest against Bush presidency

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After the Supreme Court's unprecedented intervention last month to halt the counting of votes in Florida and hand the presidency to George W. Bush, the Reverend Jesse Jackson denounced the high court's decision as a "coup d'état" and likened it to the infamous pro-slavery ruling in the 1857 Dred Scott case. Citing the disenfranchisement of tens of thousands of minority voters in Florida, Jackson warned of a "civil rights explosion" and called for mass demonstrations in Washington the week of Bush's inauguration.

For his remarks, Jackson was attacked by right-wing publications led by the *Wall Street Journal*, which ran a scathing editorial on December 14 denouncing him as a "race baiter" and demanding that the Democratic Party rein him in. Without expressing any illusion that Jackson would maintain his opposition to Bush, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time that the right-wing assault against him represented an attempt to intimidate all public dissent. (See: *Wall Street Journal targets Jesse Jackson: opening salvo in an attack on public dissent*)

Jackson was already in full retreat. Almost overnight he retracted practically everything he said challenging the legitimacy of the Bush administration. On the very day the *Wall Street Journal* published its editorial attack, Jackson was on the phone to Bush to congratulate him and offer his services to "help heal the nation," an offer he repeated on several news shows over the next few days. Then in a syndicated column on December 17, entitled "Common Ground," Jackson praised Bush for his offer of "bipartisan cooperation to address America's challenges" and unify the country. "After the bruising, partisan disputes of the last months," Jackson wrote, "many will dismiss such language as boilerplate rhetoric that is dished up routinely by politicians of all stripes on all occasions. But I choose to assume that Governor Bush

was sincere, that his desire to reach out is real, and his spirit upon taking office is broad and generous."

Although only a few days before he had accused Bush of stealing the election by suppressing the votes of tens of thousands of minority voters, Jackson now suggested Bush might reverse course and support measures to protect the poor, the elderly and working people. "If he pursues that agenda, reaches out, is prepared to compromise he can fulfill the charge that is his to keep," Jackson wrote. A "good start," he said, was the Republican president's appointment of two blacks to his administration: Colin Powell as secretary of state and Condoleezza Rice as national security advisor.

On National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation* show December 27 Jackson made it clear that he had called off any demonstrations in Washington to oppose Bush's inauguration. Instead, his scheduled "Week of moral outrage and indignation" would consist of a prayer breakfast in Chicago on Martin Luther King's birthday—January 15—and conclude with a rally in Tallahassee, Florida on Inauguration Day. Of the latter event, Jackson said, he planned to join the AFL-CIO and the NAACP at the Florida state capital "not to protest what happened on November 7, but to focus on a voter registration drive and counting the votes in 2002."

A spokesperson for Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH Coalition told the *World Socialist Web Site* the organization had decided not to protest in Washington—where other groups were rallying against Bush's inauguration—because "we want to be in a position where we have a dialog with Bush in order to present our agenda. We have to keep our channels open for discussion and not be without a voice when we need to be heard."

Anyone familiar with Jackson's career would not be surprised by such a cowardly capitulation to the Bush

administration. But the rapidity of Jackson's cave-in indicates that in addition to the campaign in the right-wing press there must have been other forces behind the scenes pressuring Jackson to drop his opposition to the new Republican administration. In this regard a recent article in the *Village Voice* is quite revealing.

In the piece, entitled “Is Jesse for sale?,” author Peter Noel says key business backers of Jackson's Wall Street Project—founded in 1997 to pressure companies to name African Americans to corporate boards and award more business to minority-owned companies—told him to call Bush or face the loss of financial and political support.

“Downcast Wall Street investors whose fears had been focused on a slowing economy demanded that Reverend Jesse Jackson curtail his blistering attacks on George W. Bush,” Noel writes. “These guys on Wall Street aren't Democrats or Republicans,” Noel quotes one investor saying, “They're capitalists. When they saw the tide turning, some of Reverend Jackson's top contributors put a call in to him.”

Noel's sources said Jackson was told to call Bush. One business leader allegedly told Jackson that he would call Bush first “and tell him to take your call.” On December 14, Jackson made the call and Bush took it. Ever since, Jackson has sought to dampen opposition to Bush and stressed the need for “dialog.”

The article continues: “With Wall Street having factored in a Bush victory, sources in the financial community say, it was only a matter of time before major movers and shakers muzzled Jackson and other Gore loyalists crying thievery.” Noel quotes one “financial insider” saying, “These contributors told Reverend Jackson, ‘You better hold this down because we won't back you anymore if you are averse to the new administration in Washington. We certainly can't give you the floor of the New York Stock Exchange and all these other perks if you are out there taking shots at a president we now have to lobby to get what we want.’”

According to the *Village Voice* Jackson did not return calls for comment. It is noteworthy, however, that on January 23 Jackson will host a black tie gala with business leaders on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange during the Fourth Annual Wall Street Project Conference. This year's conference will be entitled “Diversity in Corporate America: The Essential Best Practice” and will include representatives from some of the Wall Street Project's biggest corporate sponsors, including Bell Atlantic, GTE and the New York Stock Exchange.

Such groveling before Wall Street says a great deal about Jackson's personal corruption and that of the whole layer of privileged upper middle class blacks with which he is associated. It is well known that he was on the right wing of the 1960s civil rights movement and his crass opportunism and careerism led to clashes with Martin Luther King Jr. In the decades since, however, his connections to corporate America, and most recently the Clinton administration, have allowed Jackson to channel billions of dollars in contracts to black entrepreneurs, gain influence on corporate boards and accumulate a personal fortune, reportedly worth millions of dollars. As he told *Mother Jones* magazine last year, “I fail to understand why we should have any reluctance to have a resource base as one of the fruits of our freedom struggle.”

The events over the last month should help dispel any illusions among working people that Jackson is a spokesman for minorities, workers and the oppressed. When it came to a choice of defending basic rights—including the right to vote—or losing financial backing from his corporate paymasters, Jackson unceremoniously sacrificed the former.

As he has done in the past, during the post-election crisis Jackson acted as a political lightning rod to attract behind him the widespread anger generated by the power grab by the Bush camp. To organize a powerful movement against the economic and political forces directing this attack would require mobilizing the broad masses of working people in defense of their democratic rights and social interests. Such a campaign is anathema to Jackson who is a willing servant of the economic and political establishment.

There is another significant point to be made about Jackson's actions. If this is the reaction of Jackson—who is a representative of the most left-wing and liberal section of the Democratic Party—one can only imagine how quickly “centrist” Democrats will drop any resistance to the Bush White House and accommodate themselves to its reactionary social agenda.



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