Jesse Jackson: From civil rights to black capitalism

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The Reverend Jesse Jackson, civil rights activist, two-time presidential candidate and consummate political opportunist, died on Tuesday. He was 84. More than any other individual, Jackson embodied the transformation of the civil rights movement—its conversion from a mass working class movement against racial oppression into an "interest group" in the Democratic Party and a tool for the social advancement of a narrow stratum of the black upper middle class.

For decades Jackson was one of the most recognizable figures in American politics. He seemed to be everywhere: on picket lines and in presidential campaigns, as well as in corporate boardrooms and cable-news studios—habitually presented, and in effect anointed by the media, as the heir to Martin Luther King Jr.

His death has prompted tributes from different quarters of the ruling class. Former President Biden remembered him as "a man of God and of the people," while Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer called him "one of the most powerful forces for positive change in our country and our world." Republican Nikki Haley commended him as "a principled fighter," and none other than Donald Trump called him "a good man, with lots of personality, grit, and 'street smarts.'"

That such praise comes so readily—from leading Democrats and Republicans, and even from the fascist Trump—reveals something of Jackson's chameleon-like role in American political life. Contrary to the image he cultivated and the fevered imagination of his media and pseudo-left cheerleaders, Jackson was at no point in his career a genuinely "left" or oppositional figure.

He could, to be sure, "talk left" and for a period he commanded significant popular support. As the Workers League wrote at the height of his 1988 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, Jackson was "typical of the populist demagogues produced by American capitalism repeatedly to divert the working class from the road of independent political struggle." His function was "to give workers, the unemployed, and the poor the illusion that the Democratic Party can be transformed into the agency of progressive change."

His 1988 campaign won 13 primaries and caucuses and nearly 7 million votes, drawing on the residual authority of the civil rights struggles among workers battered by deindustrialization and the broader Reagan-era assault on living standards. But for all his rhetoric—he called Carter's deregulation policy a "domestic neutron bomb"—Jackson proved himself again and again to be the party's most reliable campaigner, delivering votes for Democratic presidential nominees, each one farther to the right than the last: Carter, Mondale, Dukakis, Clinton, Gore, Kerry, Obama, Biden and Harris.

If Jackson is mourned in ruling circles, it is for this service: He could speak in the language of protest while channeling support back within the boundaries of the existing order. Jackson's view of Obama is revealing. He quite correctly regarded the younger man as a carpetbagger dropped into Chicago to ride the Democratic Party machine to national office, and in 2008, unaware his microphone was live, was heard saying he wanted to "cut his nuts off," adding that Obama was "talking down to black people." This did not stop him from endorsing Obama and shedding a tear when Obama was elected.

Unlike Obama, Jackson had genuine connections to the black working class and the civil rights movement. Born in segregated Greenville, South Carolina, in 1941, Jackson came of age amid the grinding poverty and daily humiliations of Jim Crow. The "shotgun shack" where he was raised by his grandmother lacked running water or sewerage. As a teenage student activist and then a college SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) organizer, Jackson was drawn into the civil rights movement at a time when activists were murdered and maimed in the South.

Jackson, however, quickly revealed his personal ambitions. He was present at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968. By then their relationship was already strained, in no small part over King's suspicions about Jackson's financial operations in Chicago, where he had been sent in 1966 to head Operation Breadbasket, the movement's arm in the urban North. In the hours after the assassination, Jackson appeared on national television claiming to have cradled the dying King and heard his last words—a claim disputed by others present—deepening the bitterness within King's inner circle and coloring Jackson's subsequent

ascent.

King was in any case a figure of fundamentally different character—a mass leader in the genuine sense, and one whose political evolution brought him into increasingly direct conflict with American capitalism and imperialism. The movement he led was marked by a deep internal contradiction between the conservative aims of its middle class, mainly clerical leadership and the revolutionary strivings of the masses.

King's own answer to that contradiction had grown increasingly radical. He acknowledged that the movement's gains had been "limited mainly to the Negro middle class" and argued that addressing the degradation of the majority required a multiracial movement of the poor. "We are saying that something is wrong … with capitalism," he told his staff. "There must be a better distribution of wealth, and maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism."

His denunciation of US imperialism—branding Washington as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today"—made him an enemy of the American state, as FBI files have made abundantly clear. This likely contributed to his assassination in 1968, a crime never adequately explained.

After King's death, his successors—with Jackson prominent among them—moved further to the right, abandoning talk of systemic change and aligning with the affirmative action framework advanced under Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon to cultivate a privileged black professional layer by giving them a "piece of the action," as Nixon put it.

As King feared, Jackson had already learned to convert the movement's moral capital into personal and financial advancement. In Chicago, at the helm of Operation Breadbasket, he refined the blend of pulpit rhetoric, media fluency and backroom negotiation that defined his public life: translating protest into deals.

After he broke with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1971, Jackson's PUSH organization (People United to Save Humanity) extracted concessions from big business. Corporations hired black executives and set aside contracts for black-owned firms. "By 1974, Jesse Jackson had created his own economic patronage machine," writes his biographer, Barbara Reynolds. The *New York Times* wrote in 1972 that Jackson was "good copy but safe copy; radical in style, not in action. The Jesse Jackson of today is not a threat to established institutions."

When his 1988 tax returns were made public, they revealed that Jackson had been "parlaying his services in defense of the capitalist system and the Democratic Party into a personal fortune," as *The Bulletin*, newspaper of the Workers League, reported at the time. His combined household income grew from $59,000 in 1984 to over $200,000 by 1987, while he donated less than 1 percent of it to charity. Jackson died with a net worth estimated at $4 million—tiny compared to the oligarchs who control American politics today, to be sure.

Jackson's main activity was always to promote the black elite, as the conditions of the vast majority of black workers steadily declined along with those of the working class as a whole. "To black entrepreneurs, especially the big ones, Jesse Jackson is a benevolent godfather," as his biographer put it. In 2001 he published a self-help book co-authored with his son Jesse Jackson Jr.: *It's About the Money!: The Fourth Movement of the Freedom Symphony: How to Build Wealth, Get Access to Capital, and Achieve Your Financial Dreams.*

Jackson's prominence as a political figure faded after the 1980s. In that decade, from the steel and auto shutdowns to the Hormel and Phelps Dodge strikes, Jackson was dispatched again and again by the trade union bureaucracy to walk picket lines, to lead prayers and to urge "responsible" settlements. Veterans of those struggles recall that when Jackson arrived, it usually meant the vultures were circling and a dirty betrayal was being prepared to send workers back without their basic demands, or worse.

From the Pittston Coal strike in 1989 to the Detroit newspaper strike of 1995 to the Flint water crisis of 2016, he continued to appear as a fixer and a conciliator rather than the advocate he claimed to be. But his sway over working people had sharply diminished. When he visited Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 after the police murder of Michael Brown, the crowd greeted him with taunts: "When you gonna stop selling us out, Jesse?" and "We don't want you here in St. Louis."

In subordinating opposition to the Democratic Party, Jackson facilitated and was part of the decades-long lurch of American politics to the right, which has now entered a new stage as Trump erects a presidential dictatorship. As he wages a war on the Constitution, acting on behalf of the oligarchy, Trump is reviving and bringing forward all the reactionary filth of the past, including the most backward forms of racism and chauvinism.

The ruling class, however, is confronting a massive social force that is entering into struggle: the working class. Jackson invoked the memory of the civil rights movement in order to funnel social anger back under the sway of institutions that oversaw the plundering of workers in the interests of an ever more insatiable capitalism. The ruling class nostalgia now on display for Jackson is, at bottom, nostalgia for a type of social demagogy whose credibility is rapidly disappearing.