

Democrats demand new party leadership

by Kathleen Murphy

The battle over who will lead the Democratic Party heated up last week as prominent conservative Democrats demanded a new party leadership.

Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia, whose tenure as Senate Majority Leader has been interrupted by the Party's electoral disaster, surprised reporters at his weekly Saturday press briefing by roundly criticizing the current leadership of the Democratic National Committee and its chairman, John White of Texas. Senator Byrd, who will now become Minority Leader when Congress reconvenes in January, identified the DNC leadership as being in large part responsible for the defeat of many Democratic congressional candidates. "I am convinced that too little help was given to Democrats up for House and Senate seats," Byrd stated. "The DNC has created a good deal of discontent and disappointment among those seeking re-election who didn't get any help" against better financed and better organized Republicans.

Byrd said that the DNC focused too much of its attention on Jimmy Carter's ill-fated re-election bid, at the expense of other Democratic candidates. In September, Byrd had expressed similar misgivings about the activities of White and DNC Executive Director Les Francis, a Carter-appointed honcho, in September, but his pre-election warnings were ignored. Carter people had privately termed Byrd's statements "spiteful," and expressed bitterness over Byrd's refusal to come out strongly and early for the ticket.

While Byrd refused to specify his choice for a successor to White, he made it clear that the party would not tolerate his continued stay in office. "I don't know how much support the current chairman has or whether he can be re-elected," the senator commented. The Senate Majority Leader demanded more input into party decision making for the Democratic leadership on Capitol Hill if future party disasters are to be avoided.

Later in the week, former Democratic presidential

candidate Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. declared that "it is urgent that the DNC select a new chairman immediately."

"This should be a distinguished Democrat with no special commitments either to 1980 candidates for the presidential nomination, or to personalities identified currently as prominent candidates for the 1984 nomination. . . ."

"Even if we assume that John White were capable of performing that new kind of role within the DNC," LaRouche continued, "his vigorous partisanship for Mr. Jimmy Carter's candidacy and specific positions, together with the DNC's subordination of the interests of the party's candidates as a whole to Mr. Carter's perceived special interests, has made Mr. White and (former Carter campaign chairman) Mr. Robert Strauss the foci of most of the bitterness existing throughout the party and most of its traditional constituencies at this time."

LaRouche declined to nominate a successor to White, but specified the qualifications for a new party leader. "We require a leading figure who will be viewed as equally sensitive to all state party organizations and principal constituencies. . . ." said LaRouche, who currently is chairman of the advisory committee of the National Democratic Policy Committee, a policy-planning group and rallying center in the party.

LaRouche proposed that all former candidates agree to support "a short list of between four and six distinguished Democrats who might be willing to be drafted for election as DNC chairman." LaRouche indicated his preference that prospective candidates date from the "first half of the 1960s" and be capable of achieving the stature of a "Mr. Democrat," the term normally associated with traditional party leaders such as the late Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn of Texas.

Sensing the depth of the revolt against him among party conservatives as well as the followers of Sen. Edward Kennedy, White announced Nov. 18 that he has no intention of remaining on as party head unless "we can't decide on a new chairman."

Two weeks ago, White had boasted that he had the votes to remain as chairman and gave every indication that he intended to fight for his post. But that was before Bob Strauss, who was touting his fellow Texan as a "compromise candidate," did an about-face. Strauss declared firmly last week that "John White has no intention of remaining as Democratic chairman."

All this maneuvering promises to get more defined as the party heads for the first post-election meeting of its executive committee in Washington, D.C. Dec. 9. Rumors are circulating within party circles that White will be pressured to resign as quickly as possible, so the real brawl—over what party policy will be—can be gotten underway.