

NATIONAL COMMITTEE

State chairmen expand voice

by Laura Chasen

For the first time since the trouncing of the Democratic Party in the November elections, members of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) executive and Democratic state chairmen met to discuss how to avoid another electoral disaster. The state chairmen conferred in Washington, D.C. on the morning of Dec. 9, while the DNC executive gathered that afternoon in the same hotel.

Most striking was the overwhelming sentiment in both meetings that elected officials be made ex officio members of the DNC, in order to rebuild the party around constituency groups. Democratic leaders made clear their blatant rejection of the "McGovern" reforms beginning in the late 1960s, which had opened up the party to numerous affirmative action rules, breaking the strength of political networks. The McGovern reforms were attacked as a critical reason for the party's huge electoral defeat. "We have invited any special interest group to come in and sandbag a meeting or organization," declared one state chairman. "We must get elected officials back into the party. Legislators must respond to the grass roots, so we should let them back in."

For the first time in many years the direction and leadership of the party is up for grabs.

"Why did we lose? and what should be do about it?" asked Morley Winograd, head of the state chairmen's group, in opening the meeting. Winograd's question unleashed the pent-up rage of the state chairmen against the Carter administration and the national party leadership for ignoring the local party structure throughout the election period. "In our state the national party has been the enemy," declared William Farris, state chairman of Tennessee. "I had to fight with them much more than I fought the Republicans. We never get visits, consultation, never has an individual from the Tennessee party been put on national commissions. . . . The national party now comes in before elections and tells people not to give to the local party but just to the national. . . . So let's make sure the new direction of national chair is in league with the people."

Chairman after chairman stood up to emphasize that

the next head of the Democratic Party must be concerned about rebuilding the base of the party and electing local officials. "We all know what John White was hired for" declared one chairman, referring to the current party leader, whose only concern was the re-election of Jimmy Carter. "As for the party chairman, he must be committed to electing Democrats at all levels" commented one Eastern party leader bluntly. "The new party chairman must not be a candidate himself or be committed to any candidate for President." Rosalie Abrams of Maryland proposed that the state chairmen's group arrange to have all the candidates for party chairman address the state chairmen's group before the DNC actually chooses a party chairman, a proposal unanimously approved.

Western state chairmen spoke out against the neglect they have felt from the national party leaders and the administration, the Democratic administration had at times outraged many Western party officials by opposing such programs as water development which are critical to the West. Declared Wanda Hitchcock of Wyoming: "I would propose that there be regional coordinators to coordinate national with regional policy and also let the state parties understand some problems of the national."

Although no specific proposals were offered, the chairmen recognized that unless Democrats can come up with solutions for the economic crisis, the party will lose more elections. "We lost this election because people were voting pocketbook issues," declared one leader. "We must talk about lowering interest rates, about more jobs," declared another.

DNC executive session

At the Democratic National Committee executive meeting, Winograd, who is a member of the executive, and Michigan DNC executive member Sam Fishman, a UAW official, strongly backed a resolution establishing a commission to review making party officials "accountable" to the party policy. The resolution had been mandated by the 1980 convention. In support of the commission, Fishman, who like Winograd favors "social-democratizing" the party, stated: "In regard to the resolution on accountability, it is a major thrust that the national Democratic Party program and platform ought to be the party's contract with the people, and people can expect that it will guide candidates."

Eventually, a fight broke out about whether party finances were misspent during the election. Finance chairmen Charles Manatt and Peter Kelly reported on the state of the party's finances, claiming that the Democrats had spent a higher percentage of their national finances for local elections than the Republicans had. Outraged at this assertion, when they knew the national party had given little help to local candidates, the DNC officials voted for a resolution requiring a full accounting.