

Behind New York's election fracas

by Michele Steinberg

An eleventh-hour court order preventing New York City's primary elections from being held as scheduled Sept. 10 may be used as a precedent for a series of lawsuits and racial confrontations which could paralyze the electoral process and government itself in cities across the United States. In New York, a group of professional race riot agitators has been uncovered working to inflame both black and Hispanic minorities and the white population on the issue which provoked the court order, that of electoral redistricting and its impact on minority representation in city government. Both Mayor Ed Koch and his Socialist International-linked opponent Frank Barbaro, who are currently trading "racism" charges over the reapportionment issue, are heavily implicated.

The last-minute cancellation of the primary occurred Sept. 9, when a three-judge panel ruled that New York had violated provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 by drawing up its new election districts without securing proper approval from the U.S. Justice Department.

The Supreme Court unanimously upheld that ruling. The occasion for the ruling was a lawsuit brought by minority groups that charged that Mayor Koch and the city council had discriminated against minorities in a redistricting plan that decreased the number of largely black and Hispanic districts, despite an overall increase in the city's minority population. On Sept. 16, the New York state legislature passed a series of bills rescheduling the primaries for mayor, borough presidents, and other citywide offices for Sept. 22, but excluding the disputed city council races. Until the Justice Department approves the substance of the present or some other redistricting plan, those votes cannot take place.

Thus it is quite possible that Mayor Koch, should he be re-elected, as is widely expected, will end up ruling without a properly elected city council next year. This sets a dangerous precedent for other austerity-ridden municipal governments, many of which are already sliding into the "financial dictatorship" mode pioneered by New York's Big MAC and Financial Control Board.

Mayor Koch, who apparently invited the original court ruling postponing the election by his failure to secure Justice Department approval for the redistricting plan, and Barbaro, who has sought to capitalize on the mayor's provocative "tough on minorities" stance, have used the primary postponement to bring the "race ques-

tion" front and center in the campaign, to divert attention from their Democratic opponent Mel Klenetsky's insistence on the fundamental issue of the planned economic collapse from which every constituency group in the city is suffering.

Meanwhile, a long-embedded race riot organizing apparatus has mobilized, and further legal actions are afoot to block

A bill including at-large seats in the general election passed by the state legislature has drawn fire from Albert Vann, head of the Black and Puerto Rican Caucus in the statehouse. Vann, one of the original plaintiffs in the suit against the city, warned the State Assembly, "It's either the ballot or the bullet."

Sources report that Vann's home district, the Oceanhill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn, where he helped foment racial tensions during the teachers' strike of 1968, is already rife with rumors of race riots.

A suit brought in federal court on Sept. 17 by incumbent City Councilwoman Mary Pickett of Brooklyn again seeks to enjoin the entire election on the basis that running split elections for the city council violates existing election statutes, and discriminates against minorities by encouraging second-round low voter turnout.

At the same time Pickett was filing her suit, representatives of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Educational Fund (PRLDEF), the Black and Puerto Rican Legislative Caucus, and the firm of Lebeof and Lamb, all involved in the original suit, were meeting with officials from the Voting Rights section of the federal Justice Department to demand exclusion of the councilman-at-large seats from the Sept. 22 election. On Sept. 18, they won.

In New York, the National Black United Front, headed by Rev. Herbert Daughtry, an extremist considered to be anti-Semitic and in favor of violence, was holding meetings with black and Hispanic groups in New York to map out actions against the election.

NBUF is closely allied with the Black Economic Survival group, which led armed attacks on construction sites in the name of minority hiring; the Communist Workers Party, and the EAST, a black separatist group in Brooklyn which has been behind numerous riots and is believed to be linked to the Black Liberation Army.

The New York model is being planned in other cities. According to the Department of Justice, there are private suits in Detroit, in two counties in New Mexico, and in Atlanta which challenge the U.S. Census conducted in 1980. These suits claim that the census significantly underreported the minority population, and any reapportionment decisions resulting from the census will be inherently discriminatory.

With congressional elections coming in 1982, groups like the American Civil Liberties Union and the PRLDEF, both nationally based, will use the New York precedent.