Despite dissent at the top, the NAACP is pushing its Fair Share program for black economic development

"I'm just a country preacher," Benjamin L. Hooks, an ordained minister, told reporters when he was named executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1977. Although the statement was made in all modesty, it's an image the 58-year-old former judge and FCC Commissioner has had to contend with since he took over the reins of the organization to succeed the late Roy Wilkins.

Faced with a lull in the movement for full civil and economic rights compounded with a declining membership and a less than adequate budget, Hooks was charged with rebuilding the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization. Although the group reports a membership of 500,000 with 2100 local branches, several internal sources question whether the real figure is not much lower. And despite membership fees rising from $5 to $10, the total 1983 operating budget for the National Office of $7,355,000 does not even cover their expenses. High rents forced the National Office to relocate from Manhattan to Brooklyn and there has been some discussion of moving the headquarters to Chicago or Washington, D.C.

Soon after his appointment, Hooks became locked in a power struggle with Margaret Bush-Wilson, chairperson of the NAACP board of directors. In May the conflict came to a head when Wilson suspended Hooks on charges of mismanagement. Less than two weeks later, the NAACP board by a 49 to 2 vote reinstated Hooks as chief executive officer and stripped Wilson of her administrative powers.

Although he is reluctant to discuss the issue, it is obvious that this was an overwhelming victory for Hooks. When asked about the conflict, he said, "I think the fact that the board reinstated me speaks for itself. Now it's time to pull together and work even harder to ensure the civil rights of black people.

However, the ensuing publicity has raised new questions concerning the organization's viability. Despite its internal problems and these consistent attacks on civil rights made by the Reagan Administration, the NAACP has had several major victories in the past few years. As a prime force behind the extension of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, NAACP celebrated the passing of the extension last June in the midst of its 73rd annual convention in Boston. Shortly before, the Supreme Court had overturned a Mississippi lower court decision awarding $1.25 million in damages to local merchants affected by the NAACP's 1966 Port Gibson, Miss., boycott. With this decision, the Supreme Court affirmed the Constitution's First Amendment protection of political boycotts. And earlier this year, the association won exclusive right to the NAACP initials, thus signaling the final separa-

By S. Lee Hilliard

NAACP administrators meet at national office (from left to right): Howard Henderson, director of administration, Benjamin L. Hooks, executive director, Jerry M. Guess, executive assistant to the executive director, Thomas Atkins, general counsel

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tion from the Legal Defense and Education Fund.
Although it has been accused of basking in past glories, all is not quiet along the NAACP battlefront. The NAACP is slightly shifting from it’s traditional legislative struggle for equal rights to working more in the political and economic arenas.

The NAACP hopes to register at least 1.5 million new black voters by the time of the 1984 elections while encouraging more blacks to seek local, state and federal elective offices.

The NAACP has established Operation Fair Share directed by Fred Rasheed, an economic development program demanding that the private sector make a commitment to hire and promote blacks at all levels of management, appoint blacks to corporate boards, set up minority procurement programs and make greater use of black financial institutions.

On other issues, the NAACP has assailed Reagan’s soft policy on South Africa, denounced the current attacks on school busing and affirmative action. The group also has issued policy statements on diverse issues ranging from nuclear warfare to cutbacks in social services.

Still, critics of the grass-roots based organization question whether it has enough qualified personnel and volunteers to effectively carry out the Fair Share and other programs. Also there are grave doubts about the effect the economic development programs will have on the majority of black workers at a time when unemployment in the black community is over 20 percent.

Sitting in his sixth-floor office at the Brooklyn national headquarters, where his wife, Frances volunteers as his aid, Hooks discusses the image and future of the NAACP. His words and rolling phrases sound very much like the preacher, and his awards and memorabilia on the walls and scattered around him highlight his impressive secular accomplishments.

BLACK ENTERPRISE: What is the present mission of the NAACP?
Hooks: Progress is our mission. My job is to knock down every barrier that prevents blacks and other minorities and women from enjoying the fullness of American freedom. Our fight is to make this system work for black people as well as it’s worked for anybody else.

BE: Now that the ties between the NAACP and the Legal Defense Fund (LDF) are severed, what cases are the NAACP national office working on?
Hooks: We have our own staff of seven lawyers and I think we have a case docket of well over 200 cases. We still get involved in certain criminal cases when it appears that blacks are being railroaded into prison. We take a lot of job discrimination cases. We have a settlement with Eglin Air Force Base for millions of dollars. And we still do school desegregation cases.

BE: Why did you choose to go after the utility companies as the first targets of Operation Fair Share?
Hooks: Many of these companies did not have blacks on the board of directors or in senior management; they didn’t have good affirmative action programs, and didn’t advertise but no question about it, that is the ultimate weapon. When we went to the Bi-Lo grocery chain, this was understood.

BE: Can you walk me through a Fair Share negotiation?
Hooks: We met with Jack Valenti of the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences which represents seven major studios. We had 27 meetings over a one-year period and discovered the paucity of blacks in the various trades. We picked a studio to deal with—Disney—and got them to agree to employ what amounts to 10 percent blacks, to hire a [black] vice president, appoint a black to the board of directors and deal with black banks, and so on. Then we went to MGM.

We are also going after the financial institutions. If they don’t respond, we will take direct action through withdrawal of our patronage or informational picketing.

BE: Why is it so important for blacks to get on corporate boards? Many people consider these token appointments.
Hooks: One man does make a difference. But that person must be concerned and committed. He could ask the board about the company’s minority procurement program, for example, or suggest improving the EEO program. So far we’ve suc-

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sense into black people.

I believe that the black middle class and the black professional class have more to lose than anybody else if the objectives for which we’re fighting at the NAACP collapse. And they have more to keep and more to gain if we succeed.

BE: Does accepting contributions from corporations make you beholden to them?

Hooks: I resent any black telling me I ought not get money from the white community, when he doesn’t give a dime. The answer is no. But we will fight to maintain at least 60 percent of our income from the black community. And anyway, the white companies don’t give expecting you not to fight them.

BE: How would you rate President Reagan’s administration?

Hooks: Based on what I see now, Reagan’s policies are a disaster for black people in the areas of civil rights and economics and for the nation economically. We’re going to have to redo his policies.

But black and poor communities might as well face the fact that there will never be the kind of federal aid in the foreseeable future as there has been.

That leads into why the NAACP is doing the Fair Share Program, because we recognized years ago that at some point the will and the purpose for spending the federal money to do worthwhile things in our community would wane. That’s inevitable. And we prepared to go into the private sector. That does not mean philosophically that we don’t think the government ought to do what they’ve been doing. But practically we don’t think they will.

BE: Would you support a black presidential candidacy?

Hooks: Here’s our statement. (Reading from prepared text)

Black Americans must sharply focus on the number-one priority—the defeat of the Ronald Reagan system of government by casting every possible vote for the candidate who is most likely to achieve that goal. If the black candidate is the one who can defeat Ronald Reagan, then that’s the one we would be asking you to support.

BE: Do you feel it is wise for black groups to take sides now?

Hooks: Well, there are many black politicians who feel that they’re almost bankrupt. They’re concerned about trying to get a candidate early on so they can get some goods and services for their city.

Thank God that most black people are not as dumb as black leaders. They know what to do [when voting] and how to do it.

BE: Do you think black leaders will support a particular candidate? Or will the black community rally around several candidates?

Hooks: I don’t think the black community ought to get behind one person for the primary. I think if Mondale and Glenn and others have a chance to win, there ought to be some black folk with all of them.

BE: Do you think the community will agree on a candidate?

Hooks: I think they’re going to support whoever is opposed to Reagan. Johnson and Goldwater is the classic example. Black folks voted in unprecedented numbers [in 1964] because they perceived Goldwater as their enemy.

We probably could have defeated Nixon in 1968 if we hadn’t jumped on all this symbolism, being proud and black.

BE: Are coalition efforts between other civil rights groups, feminist groups, and labor groups possible?

Hooks: I think we can join forces on certain issues. It’s rather obvious we can’t join on all issues. I chair the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), which is an umbrella group of 155 civil rights organizations. If it relates to labor—we don’t quite agree on the question of seniority being the only factor for layoffs. When it comes to the Jewish community, we have some problems on affirmative action.

BE: Where are the real power bases in this country?

Hooks: Power is the ability to effect change. In a sense the news media is one of the most powerful instruments in the country. It has the power to make politicians back up.

And power is in government, corporate boards, labor unions. Power in the black community, for the most part, is in organizations—either political, social or civic organizations.

BE: Where should black folks concentrate their efforts to obtain power?

Hooks: On every level they can. For example, being on the local zoning board is very important. You decide how the city is going to grow. The adjustment board, tax abatement board and library board are all important. We have missed being on those appointed commissions that make important changes.

BE: The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, presented President Reagan with a 500-page agenda reflecting their concerns.

Hooks: We developed the NAACP’s Alternative Budget.

Every bit of testimony I have given is based on that. We talked about alternative tax credits, flex-time, daycare centers and the so-called enterprise zone.

BE: Was this budget similar to the Black Caucus’ budget?

Hooks: Our budget was not something that could be passed. It was to be used to formulate...