

Kings of New York

As Top Cops Shuffle, Antibrutality Ranks Grow

BY ED MORALES

As the midafternoon sky darkened with the threat of a long winter's last snowfall, the "Rally for Racial Justice"—held Thursday across from City Hall and organized by over 30 community groups—seemed to get louder and angrier in response to the nasty weather. "Every minute I have left of life I will keep fighting," shouted Altagracia Mayi, the mother of Manuel Mayi, whose son was killed by a white gang in Queens five years ago. "Every minute that passes I'm suffering and dying because my son has not received justice." Minutes after her speech, she collapsed from emotion and had to be taken away by an ambulance.

But while the sight of a crying, grieving mother has been common at these '90s versions of anti-police brutality rallies, there was something different this time. After the mothers finished speaking, after sisters and fathers solemnly remembered—and sometimes threatened—the police who killed their relatives, after the Free Mumia people and the Black Panther people called for class war, a curious thing happened: street culture joined in. Antonio Fernandez of the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation, with his freaky fade haircut and his Santeria beads, rose to speak, and a swarm of teenage boys and girls raised hands in a tricky swinging, looping motion and saluted their leader. "Gangstas shed tears, too," said Fernandez, heralding a new era of hip-hop activism.

Although the 2000-strong rally was held on the anniversary of Mayi's death, and was ostensibly held to condemn all manner of racist violence, its focus was predominantly on the disturbing rise of police violence in New York's communities of color. And although the core organizers were Latinos, and many invoked Latin victims like Anthony Baez, Anibal Carrasquillo, Anthony Rosario, and Hilton Vega, the rally significantly included the sisters of 16-year-old Chinese American Yong Xin Huang—killed by a cop in Brooklyn last year—and the feisty father of Leonard Lawton, an African American youth who, when he was shot recently in the Polo Grounds housing project, became the 46th person to be killed by police since the Giuliani-Bratton team took office.

All of this was happening on a day in which a storm of controversy was swirling around the department. Earlier in the week we'd found out that we no longer had William Bratton to kick around anymore, and the mayor's choice to replace him, Fire Commissioner Howard Safir, provoked even more vitriol from First Deputy Commissioner John Timoney. In the last two weeks, a cop recklessly committed suicide at a Black 47 concert; Officer Peter Del-Debbio was found guilty of assault for shooting transit cop Desmond

Robinson in the back; and there'd been two shootings of cops, one of which had resulted in Governor Pataki removing Bronx D.A. Robert Johnson from the case because Johnson would not commit himself to asking for the revived death penalty. (Just over the weekend, Rolando Hernandez, a 23-year-old cop who had been on the job only five days, was charged with shooting an alleged prostitute four times after she left a party at his home.)

The grim reality is that the flash point of contemporary urban politics has become the police department. Whereas past mayors could point with pride to economic and cultural development, Giuliani's ace in the hole is an improved "quality of life," represented by lower crime statistics. And whereas past grassroots political action by communities of color called for better jobs, housing, and education, today's organizers seem to be fighting primarily just to keep urban youth alive. "I can't say 'respect the cops' to young people anymore," said Margarita Rosario, whose sorrow over the death of her son, Anthony, compelled her to form the group Parents Against Police Brutality. "I say watch your back when a cop stops you, 'cause he could kill you."

The point that the rally organizers are trying to make is that a chilling byproduct of crime reduction is the increasingly question-



"Gangstas shed tears, too": A new era of hip-hop activism?

able use of force by police. On Monday, the *Daily News* reported that in 1994, contrary to NYPD claims, the total shots the department fired had risen 16 per cent since 1993. The data is significant because it analyzes the first year that most police were carrying the rapid-firing 9mm guns mandated by Bratton when he became commissioner.

As Giuliani exults in taking credit for a 17 per cent decrease in crime (so much so that he's unwilling to share the spotlight with outgoing commissioner Bratton), the Civilian Complaint Review Board reports a 55 per cent increase in complaints since the two took office, 75 per cent of those

coming from people of color. The CCRB's pressure was instrumental in the recent indictment of Officer Frank Livotti in the Anthony Baez case; it seems clear that the board's efforts cast a dark cloud on the mayor's sunny anticrime reelection scenario. According to recently ousted CCRB head Hector Soto, writing in *Critica*, the newsletter of the Institute for Puerto Rican Policy, "the goal of the new administration was to handicap the effectiveness of the agency . . . by imposing inordinate delays on the hiring of investigators and attempting to reduce the budget out of proportion to the agency's size."

So with the mayor committed to

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eroding the only independent organization designed to confront this issue: the coalition behind the Rally for Racial Justice has had no choice but to organize. What was once a group of parents of victims and their sympathizers has grown into a diverse network of students, community groups representing Dominicans, Asians, African Americans, Jews, construction workers, and now, increasingly, "independent street organizations" like Universal Zulu Nation, Association Pro-Inmates Rights/Netas, and the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation.

At weekly meetings presided over by ex-Young Lord and leader of the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights Richie Perez, the mothers shared the floor with the gangstas. At the last premarch meeting, Latin King Antonio Fernandez, sounding as rhetorically smooth as Perez, said, "This is giving us a chance to show our true colors. If I can stand next to a Neta or a Zulu and a parent, it shows we're making a change. They say [Bronx D.A.] Johnson broke the law. Who is Pataki to tell that man how to do his job? Now that the government has taken over the court system, where's justice going to be?"

Fernandez was welcomed by Antonio Rosario, Margarita's husband, who said, "These are the people that are going to make the future." The other parents appeared to fully accept the involvement of these groups, who have been called everything from drug dealers to street gangs. People like Antonio Fernandez and the imposing, shaved-headed King Honesty have been politicized by the justice system and are concentrating most of their efforts on being prisoner advocates, but at the same time they're making a commitment to their own conception of Latino family values. "We bonded together because they lost people in their lives," said King Honesty. "We go to funerals once a month. We know the pain."

While the Rally for Racial Justice served its purpose of expressing grief and anger over unchecked abuse of urban communities, organizers don't want it to amount only to venting. Perez reveals that the coalition agenda is a far-reaching one. "We are reaching a point where we wonder whether we have to close down the city. The school system is being destroyed, there are no jobs for young people. We want an independent prosecutor in all police brutality cases, and a federal investigation into the pattern of police killings and cover-ups in New York," said Perez at the last planning meeting. "And we're kicking off a voter-registration drive."

As the rally's parade of speakers taunted Giuliani, the freezing rain and wet snow began to make even tough OGs shudder. Popping out of the crowd, a slight, baby-faced college-type homie approached a huge Latin King milling about City Hall Park. "Yo, man, are you registered to vote?" Annoyed and agitated, the man in colors grunted, "I'm trying not to hear that!" The homie insisted, "This is about getting Giuliani out, and the best way to do that is to vote him out, right?"

The King said nothing for a moment, but you could tell he was doing some serious thinking.