

Left Turn on 137th Street

Is Washington Heights Incubating a New Latino Politics?



MICHAEL ACKERMAN

Los Madres: at Saturday's March for Social Justice in Washington Heights

It's a typical Saturday afternoon in a Washington Heights coffee shop just across from Columbia Presbyterian—a noisy group of hospital workers and families devouring lunch, Selena on the jukebox—when an agitated man in a knit cap carrying leaflets and small leftist newspapers storms in. “Gimme a café con leche, quick. I’m in the demonstration!” he shouts in a choppy, Caribbean Spanish. The woman behind the counter, sternly amused but unruffled, says, “Yeah? What’s the demonstration about?” “It’s against all the cutbacks and the police brutality!” he says, watching as she pours mountains of steamed milk into a plastic cup. “Oh,” responds the woman, requiring no further explanation. She shouts out the order to the cashier and looks curiously through the window as a boisterous throng marches past.

From the starting point at 137th Street and Broadway to its terminus at 183rd Street, Saturday’s March for Social Justice was greeted by streams of smiling crowds in the midst of their weekend shopping, or even just plain hanging. A woman in rollers came charging out of Carmen’s Beauty Salon, pleading for a leaflet. A group of baggy-slacked Dominican B-boys smiled and cheered as the demonstrators chanted, “¡El Gobierno Federal: Una Banda Criminal!” (“The Federal Government: A Gang of Criminals!”)

BY ED MORALES

As the throng passed the Chemical Bank on 162nd Street, the merengue band hired to entice new customers to the bank fell silent in a sign of respect.

Organized by the Latino Coalition for Social Justice (a conglomeration of more than 50 community-based groups pulled together by a coalition of Puerto Rican and Dominican activists), the crowd of about 1500 chanted a string of slogans, beat merengue drums, and denounced Giuliani and Pataki with a carnivalesque frenzy. The timing for the event, planned months ago, couldn’t have been better—during the previous week the subway fare had been increased despite a court action claiming discrimination against urban people of color; Giuliani’s office had announced the recommendation of pay raises for top staff, raises larger than most working peoples’ salaries; Pataki patronage had been put under investigation; and the federal government had been shut down. And on Saturday, as if acting as a press release for the march, the front page of the weekend edition of *El Diario La Prensa* read “CCRB: Cases of police abuse increased 32% in the last six months; Hispanics are the most affected.”

The issue of police brutality was one of the emotional and political cen-

ters of the march—a contingent of five mothers of young people who were killed by the police stood behind the banner of Parents Against Police Brutality, grim reminders of the motivation for two major disturbances in Washington Heights in the last three years. The stories of Maria Rivas (shot by Officer Frank Speringo, who was indicted for homicide last month) and Anibal Carrasquillo (shot in the back) were added to the cases of Anthony Rosario, Hilton Vega, and Anthony Baez (all of whom died in questionable police activities—the Baez case resulted in the indictment of Officer Frank Livoti). “They’re killing our kids,” said Carmen Morales, mother of Hilton Vega, during the many brief speeches, “because they’re Latino.”

Like the mothers of the *desaparecidos* in Argentina, these women, drawn into activism by the death of their children, are symbolic of the increasing militancy in the Latino community, particularly in Washington Heights. But after years of spontaneous disturbances ignited by police aggression—disturbances that were questioned by some since they came in support of youths possibly involved with the drug trade—this march was a choreographed rhetorical display that expressed positive goals. The Coalition, a pan-Latino, theoretically inclusive brigade of longtime activists, com-

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munity-based workers, and students, ties together groups that have been organizing around health, labor, and education issues for years. The suddenly glaring contradictions in the Republican agenda have heightened grassroots power, which acts mostly outside established political channels, and might be a key factor in preventing Mayor Giuliani from counting on Latinos to clinch his reelection.

The New Latino Activism seems to be knocking at the City Council's door. Washington Heights City Councilman Guillermo Linares, whose activist past helped him smooth over tensions in the 1992 insurrection, but who, according to some in the march, has kept his distance of late, was compelled to appear at the noon press conference the Coalition held on Wednesday in front of City Hall. Giving a small address, Linares mentioned the "hardships people in the community will face" due to the politics of cut and slash emanating from Washington and City Hall. While he did not attend the march, his endorsement of what many would consider an expressly leftist agenda may yet cause ripples among his colleagues. During the press conference, Bronx Representative Jose Rivera, whom marchers regard with the same ambivalence as Linares, dropped by and briefly conferred with one of the organizers of the march, Vicente "Panama" Alba.

The activists are happy to see mainstream politicians responding to grassroots pressure, though organizers maintain their skepticism. "I've known Jose Rivera longer than he's been a public official, when he was a community activist," said Alba as he marched up Broadway on Saturday. "I have his ear on some things, and not with others, because he functions as part of the political machine." "Jose Rivera is tied up by his alliance with Ruben Diaz—he maintains him on the CCRB," added Richie Perez, Alba's comrade from the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights. And as for Linares, argued Alba, "He showed at the press conference because this is his district." The evidence of the grassroots domino effect on local pols came into focus around this march, but it's been happening quietly elsewhere, as some New York Puerto Rican politicians have been bucking the trend of people-of-color conservatism championed by the likes of Colin Powell or Ruben Diaz. Bronx House member José Serrano blatantly curried favor with Fidel Castro at both the Abyssinian Church and Jimmy's Bronx Café legs of the bearded one's tour of New York last month. Brooklyn Representative Nydia Velázquez has recently been outspoken in protest of the lengthy prison sentences being served by several Puerto Rican nationalist prisoners. In a statement issued through her office, Velázquez said that only her commitments in Washington prevented her from taking part in the march.

As the country seems ambivalent about the government shutdown and the new, improved Republican balanced budget, the city, which stands to lose so much due to these policies, is perhaps shifting to the left with an anti-budget-cut sentiment that can no

longer be perceived as a special interest. In New York, last year's rush to neoconservative posturing may be giving way to relative isolation for Giuliani coattailers. Alba says, referring to the Rudy-friendly City Council member from the Lower East Side, that "if I were Antonio Pagan, I'd be nervous."

In its long-term attempts to shape a grassroots movement, the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights is emerging as a major nexus of younger and older Nuyorican activists. Perez had just given a lecture two nights before on the building of the original Rainbow Coalition in the early '70s, one he had been a part of while working with the Young Lords. "It's funny how there were the same questions 25 years ago as there are now," mused Perez. "How do you build a true coalition politics?"

For starters, the National Congress is teaming up with Alianza Dominicana, a Washington Heights-based group, for a community discussion on building ties between Puerto Rican and Dominican activists. The Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence sent a speaker to the march and has Perez's group's cooperation. And, especially since the anti-tuition-increase insurrection at CUNY six years ago, there has been a surge of activism among the city's Latino college students.

Melissa Mark, coordinator of Muevete, an annual youth conference that is trying to be incorporated as a year-round organization, was also at the march, enthused at the huge turnout for last week's conference. "We got people at the community level to address the issues that are affecting them right now," she said, "specifically the cuts that are happening. The politicians in office sometimes compromise the community for other political reasons and that's a problem. When young people get involved and put pressure on the establishment, we affect the way they think and address issues. It's a slow process but I think it's working."

"This is a victory in all senses of the word," said Tom Soto, a longtime activist in the Dominican community who was dramatically arrested during the disturbances in Washington Heights this past summer. "We couldn't have had this march six months ago. The police would tell us we didn't have the right to march. We had to threaten to sue them and go to court. We negotiated with the police for three weeks."

"The reason why they indicted the policeman in the killing of Maria Rivas is because the people of the community hit the streets. The only reason they're investigating anything is because the mothers of these murdered children hit the streets. The only way we're ever going to get anything is to go out into the streets and demand justice."

As the afternoon wears on, the air gets a little warmer, and the Caribbean root vegetables, batata, yautia, yuca, are disappearing from the beat-up wooden shelves of the local markets, going home for someone's dinner. Sonia Gonzalez, a film editor and activist for several young Latino organizations, is calling to the animated youth standing on the benches in the middle of Broadway. "They're not ready to join in," she said. "But I think they're proud of us." ♦