

By Andrew Hsiao,
with Karen Houppert

It's a perfect afternoon for protest. The cops are absent. The sun is shining. The sky is blue. Spring is in the air and New Yorkers are about as congenial as they get.

"Stay the fuck off my car," a suit in a green Oldsmobile shouts to demonstrators. He inches his car into a group of activists who, after nonchalantly milling around the entrance to the Midtown Tunnel, have converged into the rush hour traffic. The protesters respond with a chant: "People with AIDS under attack, what do we do? ACT UP, fight back."

The 75 protesters stretch their banners across the entrance to the tunnel, and before long traffic is backed up all the way to 42nd Street. When cops arrive to arrest them, the activists cheer. They lie down as cops swarm. They patiently wait their turn for arrest. It becomes clear that this is an exactly planned offense—and one the NYPD had not predicted.

And then the kicker comes in over police scanners: this protest is only one part of a coordinated action. Four major arteries to the city—the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, the Manhattan Bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge, and, of course, the Queens Midtown Tunnel—have been blocked by groups shouting their opposition to unprecedented budget cuts and punitive policies coming from Congress, the statehouse, and City Hall.

But lost in the uproar over last week's protests was a development of greater importance than the sheer numbers of people taking to the streets: the character of the protest and the activists who organized it. At the Manhattan Bridge, for example, an unlikely alliance of Asian, Latino, black, and white protesters wore coordinated banners denouncing police brutality and racist violence as they stretched across the Canal Street entrance. In the middle of the access road to the Brooklyn Bridge, homeless people knelt next to students, all calling for housing and jobs. For a brief moment, it seemed like there was a protest for everyone.

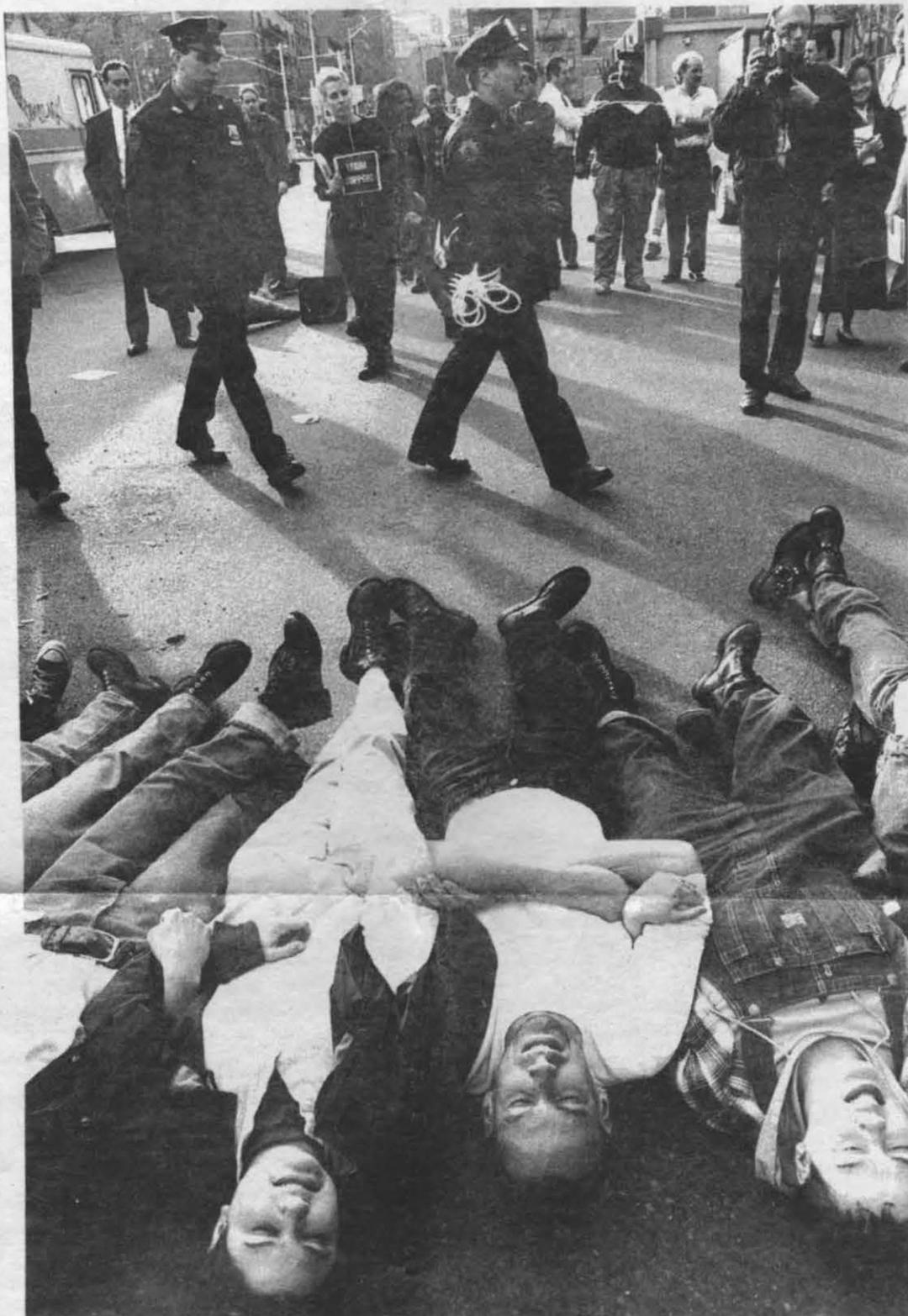
Indeed, April 25—with its coordinated actions by more than 30 groups and hundreds of demonstrators from all over the city—marked a halting first step in the attempt to build a new, broad-based progressive movement—on unmistakably '90s terms.

It was not exactly a spontaneous event. Planning began four months ago, when a group of about 10 organizers began meeting with dozens of community groups. At the time, says City College student William Broberg, an early recruit, the core group's notion of a unified citywide action was "basically, pie in the sky." Who, after all, could imagine homeless activists working with students, the Zulu Nation allied with Asian Lesbians of the East Coast?

After 15 years of Republican and might-as-well-be-Republican rule, culminating in a conservative governor and mayor in the capital of liberalism, New York's progressive activists have become accustomed to Balkanization. Our rulers, activists like to say, divide and conquer. They have succeeded in isolating—and even subdividing—our communities. It's so much easier to wage war on people with AIDS when Latinos spar with gays over funding and prevention strategies. The level of mistrust between

BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT?

Behind the Rush Hour Revolt



LINDA ROSIER



ANDREW GOLDBERG

April 25: Four simultaneous demonstrations, 185 arrests. Above, a die-in at the Midtown Tunnel protests draconian health-care and AIDS cuts. Below, 55 students are arrested for blocking the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel.

activists—not to mention the oppressed communities they are fighting for—can't be overestimated. When the April 25 group went calling, says Lisa Daugaard, a leader of the homeless advocacy group StreetWatch and an originator of the protests, some responded with, "I'm sorry, I'm just not up to working with white people, or gay people, those fucking communists, whatever. It's become such a reflexive way for people to explain why they don't have to expand beyond their prior range of allies."

But while liberal laments about the fragmentation of the left often target identity politics as the culprit and urge its abandonment, most younger activists find that complaint unproductive. Though many are impatient with identity movements for various reasons—Daugaard bemoans the logic by which militancy is equated with separatism; Broberg finds a lack of militancy ("the leadership of identity politics rented office space and went inside")—all are acutely aware of the historical reasons for their rise.

It's probably misleading to call the collection of activists that assembled under the banner of April 25 "young," because they included veterans like Richie Perez and Panama Alba of the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, Marian Feinberg of the Bronx Clean Air Coalition, Shakoor Aljuwani of the Harlem Hospital Community Advisory Board, and Father Luis Barrios of St. Mary's Episcopal Church.

But the group has a new-generational feel, partly because its core includes organizers in their twenties and thirties—like Broberg and Daugaard, as well as Esther Kaplan of ACT UP, Thoai Nguyen of the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, and CUNY's Peter Diaz. They have cut their teeth on identity politics, and for them there is little point in abandoning the movements that allowed them to gain a political voice in the first place.

Besides, many of the younger activists are suspicious of Big Activism. "I don't believe that people in our generation can envision a single entity that everyone can trust," says Daugaard. The quintessential '80s activist organization, ACT UP, was successful partly because of its issue-based focus and its ability to quickly mobilize a relatively small number of militant, expert activists. "The era of the big rally," says Broberg, "is over."

Which is not to say that these activists don't share a longing for cooperation. "We do need a common language," says Aljuwani, "but so much work has to be done." The challenge the April 25 movement set for itself was to forge a common language that would be flexible enough to accommodate the differing approaches and agendas of an almost giddy diverse group of organizations.

So, early on, when an emissary from a powerful union proposed that the protesters stage a single mass demonstration, the idea was canned. "The specific proposal," recounts Daugaard, "was that we all hold one rally, because it would be bigger than separate actions.

And we said, you know what? No one wants to come to one rally because they feel that they won't be heard, they won't have control, their people will be washed out in the numerical splendor of the big union or whoever is going to be the dominant thing there." (As it turned out, the unions staged their own march on April 4, to much less fanfare than the April 25 demos.)

Ultimately, the activists settled on a strategy of coordinated, simultaneous protests. An internal memo circulated early on in the project articulates the theory behind the actions: "The bridge plan might succeed only because it does not require us to work as one, to resolve our contradictions and suspicions, in order to pull it off. Ironically, once it is achieved, a logistical and symbolic success may be a compelling illustration to all involved... of the benefits of coordination and alliance. But we cannot wish that comprehension and resolution into being—we must achieve it tactically, through demonstration of the power of working together."

The bridge event was, says Kaplan, "the perfect balance of unity and autonomy." Several months of intense discussions and interminable meetings ensued. Groups dropped in; groups dropped out. "It was a learning experience for us," says Perez. "Older activists like myself had a different perspective; we grew up with successful multiracial movements." If nothing else, the veterans could communicate their optimism. "Some of the younger Latinos, for example, didn't know any Asians. Some did, of course, but had almost no experience working together." And older activists learned from younger: "The use of technology,

the sophisticated media operations—we didn't have that." ACT UP, as we all know, does.

In the end, novel strategies and workable structures are necessary but insufficient. Any strategy involving civil disobedience depends on one thing, as Aljuwani says: "people who are willing to do a frightening thing—put their body on the line." And the April 25 organizers nurtured this, at the very least: 185 people from virtually every corner of the city, who were willing to risk injury, arrest, and jail time to throw down an ethical challenge; who endured the curses of angry New Yorkers seemingly more concerned about a delay in their commute than the destruction of lives being committed in their names; who suffered unusually harsh treatment from a vengeful city police force.

But in doing so, they may have kick-started a movement that has never been more fervently longed for nor more necessary than now. It certainly has begun for those who spent the night in jail. As Perez says, "There's no greater bonding site than the Tombs."

Or as William Broberg puts it, "I'm a student, but since I've been a homeless organizer, I was going to help get the meetings off the ground for that group. And having been an ACT UP activist for a long time, I would've been just as comfortable working with them. So there were three places where I felt totally comfortable getting arrested. Then in jail I realized that a lot of people had a similar dilemma, and I hope the next time we do something even more people have that dilemma, and then the time after that it won't matter which action we do. And it's down that road that we hope

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME



ANDREW GOLDBERG

Despite more than 100 arrests in three weeks, the student movement continues.

AMID ALL THE HOOPLA over last week's rush-hour revolt, the continuing hunger strike by members of the CUNY Coalition Against the Cuts has been overlooked. Since Monday, April 24, 10 students from various City University campuses have subsisted only on water or juice, many while carrying a full course load as well as holding down part- or full-time jobs.

"I'm going as long as it takes," said one hunger striker on Sunday night. "I caught a cold and the doctor told me to eat, but I refused. It's my decision and I'm committed."

The students have called the hunger strike to protest all the cuts, not just those in education. And they hope to work with community activists in future actions. Meanwhile, their battles with the CUNY administration and in the New York City court system continue. A show of student solidarity is planned at CCNY and Hunter this Wednesday, during the administration's "Town Meetings" to unveil budget cut specifics. Students are also demanding immunity from disciplinary charges for

protesting, and they want the campus police force—which busted more than 40 students three weeks ago—dismantled.

And on May 8 and 9, students will be in Criminal Court facing charges of disorderly conduct and resisting arrest from their March 23 City Hall demo and April 11 campus sit-in. Support rallies will be held both days at 9 a.m. outside the courthouse at 100 Centre Street.

Up next: participation in the mass rally that's been called for May 6. At a meeting of the Coalition last Saturday, students voted to take part in the Times Square demo, part of the "National Day of Protest to Defeat the Contract on America," organized by the National People's Campaign. They'll be joined by more than 400 organizations in protests in over 40 cities.

—NATASHA STOVALL

The CUNY Coalition will meet on May 6 outside 33 West 42nd Street at 12:30 p.m. Coalition info: 718-982-3091. The Times Square rally will start at 1 p.m. Info: 633-6646.

we've sent politics in this city."

Sure, people make history, but not under conditions of their own choosing, right? Are the conditions ripe for a broad-based movement? Has the historical moment

arrived? As if practicing the dialectic or proffering zen koans, the April 25 activists turn the question on its head: if you can't swim, you don't want to leap into the ocean—but there's only one way to

learn. "The only way we'll get to the point where we can trust each other enough to work together is to *work together*," suggests Perez. "It can only be done by deeds, reflection, then more deeds." ■