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POLITICAL INVENTORY - THE PUERTO RICANS IN NEWARK

by Hilda Hidalgo

Background and Introduction

In the nineteen forties and fifties, the Irish American and the Italian-American community shared the control of Newark's political structure. Dennis Carey was chairman (1954-68 of the powerful Essex County Democratic Party and Leo P. Carlin was mayor of the city of Newark (1949-53). Peter Rodino (1948-) and Hugh Adonizzio (1948-1962) were elected to the U.S. Congress. Ralph Villani had been mayor of the city from 1949-1953. In 1954 the residents of Newark voted to change their government structure from a City Commission type (one in which the mayor had virtually all the power, since the mayor appointed the commissioners that directed all the vital services) to a Municipal Council, (one in which citizens vote for representatives that are not under the direct control of the mayor and must approve budget allocations, etc.)

At the same time, the Puerto Rican migration of post World War II was having an impact in Newark; by 1960 the number of Puerto Ricans living in Newark had reached 9,698, a decade later the number had almost tripled (27,443) and in 1980 the U.S. Census reports 61,254 Hispanics in the city, the great majority of which are Puerto Ricans. (Population statistics presented are the official government figures. There is wide biased consensus that these figures represent a considerable undercount of minorities.)

The main political involvement of Puerto Ricans in the 60s and early 70s were centered around the political parties on the Island. To talk politics with Puerto Ricans was to talk - Partido Popular, the political status of the island, and what was the government of Puerto Rico doing for Puerto Ricans residents in the U.S.A. Tony Vega, director of the Puerto Rican Migrant Office in Camden, New Jersey was a political figure and many Puerto Rican-Newarkers will address political and other concerns to this office that was maintained by the Government of Puerto Rico. José Rosario from Irvington, received an expense account from the New Jersey Democratic Party and served as the Puerto Rican token in the party structure and as a political "padrino" to the Puerto Rican community. Ramón Vélez in Paterson became the first President of the New Jersey Puerto Rican Parade and later moved to political prominence in the South Bronx in New York City. All political activity in the 60s and early 70s was organized at a state-wide level, rather than at the city level, and was in control of a handfull of men from the Puerto Rican community. The Puerto Rican Statewide Parade was conceived from its inception as a vehicle of organizing the community to impact in the political structure; in my opinion it has proven to be a poor and non-effective vehicle that has failed to accomplish its political objective.

In 1961 after serving 13 years in the U.S. Congress and gaining a reputation as a concientious liberal congressman - Hugh Adonizzio saw a favorable political climate to challenge the re-election of Mayor Leo P. Carlin. Adonizzio's campaign strategy centered around a coalition

between the Italian-American community, the liberal Jewish community and the Black community. Each of these groups had considerable voting numbers. He was elected and became Mayor of Newark, 1962-1970.

George Richardson, a black state assemblyman from the Central Ward decided to challenge the control that Dennis Carey had in all the appointments and patronage - as chairman of the powerful Essex County Democratic Party. George Richardson, in organizing his revolt against the established political structure approached and recruited several individuals in the Puerto Rican community of Newark. George Richardson organized two political counter-structures:

The New Frontier Democrats and

The United Freedom Party

(The term political counter-structure is coined by the author to have a similar meaning in the political system as counter-culture has in a sociological sense.)

The United Freedom Party and the New Frontier Democrats were supported by a coalition of liberal progressive blacks, liberal whites (mostly, but not exclusively Jewish) and a few Puerto Ricans. Blacks like Kenneth Gibson, Pearly Beaty, Earl Harris, Junious Williams, were very involved in these movements. The handful of Puerto Ricans involved were: Zaín Matos, María Decastro Blake, Hilda Hidalgo,

The Adonizzio Years: 1962-1970

These were the years of Vietnam, The Young Lords, Martin Luther King, The Civil Rights Movement, Urban Renewal and Housing Projects, the War on Poverty, The Great Society, The Newark Riots, Newark becoming the New Jersey city with the largest number of Puerto Ricans and The Black and Puerto Rican Convention.

Shortly after Adonizzio was elected Mayor, he appointed two Puerto Ricans to positions of very limited patronage, power and influence: Herminio Nieves, as Aide to the Mayor, and María González to the staff of the Civil Rights Commission. Prior to becoming an aide to Adonizzio, Herminio Nieves had own a bodega in the Ironbound section of Newark; he had only an elementary school education, but had ambition and entrepreneurial skills. As aide to Adonizzio, his personal financial fortunes increased considerably. Among his business transactions was the lucrative enterprise of posting bonds for Puerto Ricans in the municipal and county courts. He was also instrumental in appointing a handful of Puerto Ricans to jobs procured thru the political-patronage route; e.g. a court interpreter, a few blue collar jobs in sanitation and housing. He procured apartments for some Puerto Ricans in the high rise housing projects that were mushrooming all over the city. He was one of the small fishes that was indicted with Adonizzio and other members of the Adonizzio Administration in 1969. For reasons never made public he was never tried for the crimes he was indicted. He returned to Puerto Rico where he still resides.

María González had gained leadership recognition thru her work in Rodino's congressional campaigns, and thru her work in the PTA of Lafayette Street School. When appointed by Adonizzio as "the hispanic representative" in the staff of the Human Rights Commission, María González quickly became the ambassador of the administration to community boards, civic groups, political organizations, etc. In her performance she demonstrated very good intentions and boundless energy. Her position was powerless - she operated in a very individualistic personalized style and had little, if any, impact in addressing issues and problems affecting the Puerto Rican community, at a broader level. However, her contribution to the Puerto Rican community was valuable and she has remained to this date an active participant in the Puerto Rican struggle. She remain in her post in the Human Rights Commission until her retirement in 1979.

The War on Poverty and its provision for community participation was launched during the early years of the Adonizzio administration. The United Community Corporation (UCC) was established to lead the community action and community development aspects of the War on Poverty in the city of Newark. The UCC served as a vehicle for the politization of the Puerto Rican community. In its inception (prior to the Green amendment that gave control of the Board of Directors to the Mayor) the UCC operated without direct control from the city administration. In this period, Hilda Hidalgo served in the first UCC board and also as member of the executive committee. At the UCC executive staff two

Puerto Ricans were employed and acquired leadership status in the community: Zaín Matos and Perseverando Mirandà. There were other Puerto Ricans employed in the UCC staff as community organizers. UCC sponsored and gave birth to one Puerto Rican Community Organization" The Field Orientation Center for Underprivileged Spanish (mostly known by its initials FOCUS). For the first time Puerto Ricans were in control of some funds, determining policy, etc. Antonio Pérez became the executive director after a series of intra-fighting and struggles for power and control of FOCUS by factions in the Puerto Rican community.

The New Frontier Democrats and the United Freedom Party ran Puerto Ricans for elected positions. The New Frontier Democrats ran Zaín Matos and Samuel Arroyo in the ticket. Later, when the United Freedom Party born out of the NFD, but with a broader base of support ran for positions at a county wide election, three Puerto Ricans ran in the ticket: Samuel Arroyo and Thomas González for New Jersey State Assembly and Hilda Hidalgo for Essex County Freeholder (1965).

The civil rights movement was sprouting in Newark and the Essex County Chapter of CORE was among the most militant. Very active in this movement were Robert Curvin, Ray Proctor, Kenneth Gibson, George Richardson and others. In the Puerto Rican community Hilda Hidalgo and Zaín Matos were the two Puerto Ricans most vocal and active in what was predominantly, if not exclusively, a struggle and effort to end discrimination and equal opportunity for blacks.

The issues of 1) police brutality and the establishment of a civilian review board to examine charges of police abuse; 2) the poor quality and lack of medical services for the poor, specially the conditions that existed in Martland Medical Center (the city hospital known in the community as Butcher Hills); 3) the displacement of black families in the name of urban renewal and 4) the exclusion of minorities in the construction trade unions were the major issues and causes of dissatisfaction and frustration in the black community. Two cases of alleged police brutality involving Henry Martínez (presently city councilman) were used to rally and organize the black community. (The cases involved two different incidents of Martinez, a police officer, shooting to death two black young men near Orchard Street and Broadway.) Kenneth Gibson of the black community and Hilda Hidalgo of the Puerto Rican community were spoke-persons advocating for a Civilian Police Review Board in a massive rally held in Military Park.

In 1967 the so-called Newark Riots exploded. Widespread knowledge of the corruption at City Hall, police abuse, rampant racism and discrimination erupted in violence. The tenuous coalitions that existed between blacks and the liberal whites (predominantly Jewish community) was dissolved. Race surfaced as the factor around which people were to rally. White Jews fled the city, Anthony Imperiale mobilized whites in vigilante para-military groups; Imamu Baraka mobilized Blacks in an Afro-American self protection and survival disciplined organizations.

Centuries of smoldering racial hatred surfaced and affected all who lived and/or worked in the city.

The Puerto Ricans were caught in the middle of lines drawn around Black-White. Some Puerto Ricans were clear on the issues - regardless of the coloration of their skin - they identified and worked in the Black efforts, but most were paralyzed, it was a new experience for the majority that have never thought of themselves a racial group but rather identified themselves in terms of their cultural heritage and nationality.

The Greater Newark Urban Coalition was born - the business community, some members of the professional community (distinguished among this group for his understanding and commitment to justice was the late Malcolm Talbott); some of the Black leadership and three members of the Puerto Rican-Hispanic Community: Tony Pérez and Hilda Hidalgo and Father Mario (Pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church). Fernando Zambrana was employed as the Hispanic Community Developer.

Two Hispanic/Puerto Rican agencies operated in Newark - both born during this period: FOCUS and Aspira Inc. of New Jersey. Focus was under direct control of the city administration. (The Green Amendment robbed UCC of its independence.) Two individuals were mostly responsible for the character, philosophy and service orientation of FOCUS: Tony Pérez and José Rosario. Tony Pérez served as executive director of FOCUS for many of its initial years. José Rosario served as president of FOCUS for several terms and after Tony Pérez retired

to attend his own business enterprises - José Rosario became executive director of FOCUS, a position he holds to this date. Both of these men have been involved in politics at the city, country and state level. Both of these men have contributed significantly and with dedication the Puerto Rican community.

Aspira Inc. of New Jersey had as its major purposes, 1) the tasks of providing educational opportunities for the Puerto Rican youth that had ambitions to go to college but found close doors in high schools and in the colleges and universities - where their ambitions should have been nurtured and realized; 2) to be an advocate in the educational establishment for the Hispanic community specially in the areas of bilingual education and educational/vocational guidance. The leadership in Aspira has always been in the hands of the young. Juan Rosario, its first executive director, Trinidad González, Grizel Ubarry (the present executive director). These three young persons have gained the respect of the community for their professional skills, and their commitment and service to the community. Many of today's professionals and leaders in the Hispanic community are former aspirantes.

The Young Lords were also established in Newark during this period. Under the leadership of Ramón Rivera, they were a progressive, militant force advocating for social change and influential in the politization of the young Puerto Ricans.

The sixties were coming to a close; the Adonizzio decade was coming to an end. A coalition of three Black leaders: Imamu Baraka, Robert Curvin and Gustave Heningburg were the brain power in developing the concept and strategy of The First Black & Puerto Rican Convention. The participation and leadership of the Puerto Rican Community in that effort was taken by Hilda Hidalgo, who became secretary of the Convention. Puerto Rican participation came mostly from the young idealists committed to the struggle, with endless energy, little experience and lacking in recognition from the older more established Puerto Rican leadership.

The First Black and Puerto Rican Convention became the political force of the Newark minority community. The Puerto Rican involved in that movement agreed on a strategy that excluded persons like Hilda Hidalgo, Zaín Matos, Ramón Rivera, who had been at the front of more progressive and radical movements to run in the ticket to be endorsed by the convention. The strategy called for a person more middle of the road - one that could approach the more conservative members of the community - Ramón Añeses was identified as being such a person. He was contacted and agreed to run in the ticket as councilman at large. Up to this date he remains the Puerto Rican that obtained the largest number of votes in any election in the city of Newark: 39,095 votes, in the run-off election that elected -

Kenneth Gibson, Mayor of Newark and

Anthony Guilliano, Michael Bontempo, Ralph Villani, Earl Harris, Donald Tucker, Theodore Pinkney and Calvin West to the city council on June 16, 1970. Ramón Añeses lost by trailing 1,390 votes behind Calvin West. The Adonizzio Years were over, and the Puerto Rican community thought and hoped that Kenneth Gibson would address their needs. Naively, the Puerto Rican community thought that the new Mayor Kenneth Gibson would address their needs and give them representation and decision-making powers in his administration; after all, Hilda Hidalgo had given the nomination speech for Kenneth Gibson in the Black & Puerto Rican Convention and the community had been very active in his campaign.

The Gibson Years: 1970 -

It was during the first term of the Gibson administration that the Puerto Rican community lost its first real opportunity to develop a power base that will work for its collective well-being. During the Adonizzio Administration the position of Deputy Mayor had been a powerful position commanding resources, making policy, and having significant administrative responsibilities. The Board of Education also had large resources at its command and related to one of the major concerns of the Puerto Rican community - the education of our youth. Mayor Gibson appointed two Puerto Ricans during the first month of his administration: Ramón Añeses as deputy mayor and Fernando Zambrana to the Newark Board of Education. Intra fighting among the Puerto Rican community, ego necessities and insecurities on

the part of the individuals appointed, lack of experience, all contributed to the fact that these positions became the token payment to the Puerto Rican community. The role of the Deputy Mayor was limited to ceremonial-window dressing activities and the functions of a welfare worker.

Ramón Añeses finally resigned and in a final act of courage denounced the Gibson administration handling of the Puerto Rican community and its issues.

Fernando Zambrana after serving three years in the Board of Education disagreed with the Gibson administration - at the same time his superior Gustave Henningburg (Fernando was an employee of the Urban Coalition) had also gained the disfavor of the Gibson administration - and Fernando lost his appointment to the Board of Education.

There have been several efforts to elect a Puerto Rican councilman - all have failed.

The Puerto Ricans appointed to the Board of Education have been used as political footballs by the administration. If they refuse to play educational Russian roulette with the life of the youngsters in the system, they are not re-appointed - or if they agreed to sign an undated letter of resignation prior to their appointment, the resignation letter is promptly dated and their service in the Board terminated.

At the office of the Mayor - Miguel Rodríguez is the Puerto Rican Mayor's Aide, the token. There are a few Puerto Ricans employed here and there in several of the city agencies. There is some pomp and ceremony in relation to the Puerto Rican Parade celebration. The Puerto Rican flag flies in a mast in City Hall at that time.

The Puerto Rican community remains defranchised, powerless, oppressed, unrepresented, engaged in petty intra-fighting, dreaming grandiose plans, without translating those plans to work, to organization.

The Gibson years just gained the community a few more token jobs - y ahí ES donde estamos - ¡AY BENDITO!

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NOTE: This paper represents a hurried recollection and limited research by the author. Time and resources did not permit the author to make thorough library research, and in-depth analysis. This task remains to be done - it is a task that is of great importance to the Puerto Rican community.

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