

Police Brutality Plunges to New Depths

Keith Mitchell

1997

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On August 29, over 10,000 demonstrators closed down southern Brooklyn in support of Abner Louima who was allegedly assaulted in the basement of Brooklyn's 70th precinct. Marchers packed the trains in the early morning hours on the way to the rally's starting point. An eclectic bunch of nuns, priests, whites, Latinos, and African-Americans broke down the barriers that partition everyday life in New York's transit system, and spoke of a common disgust of the details of the Louima case and the high level of police abuse under Mayor Giuliani.

Among the groups participating in the rally were the October 22 Coalition, Refuse and Resist, Forever In Struggle Together (FIST), and ACT-UP! Tim, an activist in ACT-UP!, expressed the common ground between different groups in the city in reaction to the police "Brutality is often times used against our community as a means of intimidating, especially those who begin to speak out."

Even with the strong presence of activist groups, the majority of protesters were everyday people. A group of women spoke of how they called in sick from work to attend the demonstration. Edna, an elderly Haitian immigrant draped with an oversize banner reading "Giuliani Time = Police Brutality Time" told Love and Rage, "There's no solution under Giuliani, only with the people can we force him to change." This appeared to be the general mood of the participants. As they moved from the steps of the Main Branch of the Brooklyn Library to the arc on the thruway in Grand Army Plaza, hundreds shouted "No Justice, No peace!" and "NYPD, KKK, Same thing, Different day!". Many wore shirts condemning police brutality, adorned with caricatures of the infamous toilet plunger that was allegedly used to sodomize Louima. As the rally got under way, it became obvious that the traditional electoral channels did not have much appeal. Brooklyn Borough President Howard Golden received a cold shoulder from the crowd, as did City Councilwoman Una Clarke, and House Representative Mary Pickens. Eric Tam, coordinator of the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence drew cheers when he condemned both Democrats and Republicans for the rising tide of police brutality. Also under scrutiny was the effectiveness of the Civilian Complaint Review Board (CCRB). The Board functions as a part of the mayor's office, without any independent powers to investigate or question officers in incidents of police brutality. Hector Soto, the former head of the CCRB, remarked "The CCRB was set up to fail. We need a stronger CCRB, not only that, not someone who only reviews complaints, but someone at the head of the police department who watches everything the cops do, from training to what to do when they go outside the bounds of the law."

Motivated and confident in its tone, the crowd proceeded down Flatbush Ave., in a sea of red and blue Haitian flags and banners. The crowd, which tripled since the early morning hours, overflowed the wide sidewalks of Flatbush and swelled at points with the addition of contingents numbering to 1000. At the march's height, 10,000 defiantly yelled "No Justice, No Peace!" and rocked this usually quiet area of Brooklyn.

Store keepers and patrons on the route ran out of their places of businesses to view the marchers, while some stores shut their steel gates, fearing a possible disturbance. Workers from the Human Resource Administration put up fist signs and shouted support, and in a slight case of irony, workers from a clothing store that specializes in selling civil service uniforms (including NYPD blues), came out and cheered with the protesters. In addition to toting the now traditional toilet plungers, protesters also performed various acts of guerrilla theater. A protester dressed in a police uniform reenacted the incident between officers and Louima, while a coffin pasted with pictures of the accused officers and topped with a plunger made its way through the crowd.

Despite their long walk from Grand Army Plaza to the Brooklyn Bridge, no one complained, and the old were assisted by the young. Recalling the Civil Rights marches of the 1960s, children were carried on adults' backs. Marchers also clapped and sang to Haitian protest and folk songs. Conspicuously absent were the police. Their only visible presence was three surveillance helicopters flying overhead. The only intervention by the NYPD occurred when they attempted to box the marchers into the infamous "pig pen" (where police cage demonstrators with steel barriers), and divided the contingent. But the steel barriers were rendered useless, as hundreds jumped, or simply pushed them over. Even the attempt to form a police line to section off the crowd was futile, as the crowd overpowered them, and the police had to call a tactical retreat. Both the walkway, and the roadway of the Brooklyn Bridge were filled. Truckers, though stuck in traffic due to the protest, honked their horns in support of the cause. The energy reached such a high point that some wondered whether or not the Bridge was swaying on its own or because of the noise generated.

Upon leaving the bridge, marchers gathered inside City Hall Park to listen to more speeches. Like the rally in the morning, the meeting inside City Hall Park stressed Democratic politics.

The main speaker, former Mayor David Dinkins, blasted mayor Giuliani's plan for a task force on police brutality. Dinkins pointed out that the mayor plans to spend \$15 million on the new task force, but only spends \$5 million on the CCRB. While condemning police brutality Dinkins, however, hedged his remarks and reminded the crowd of "the 38,000 police officers who do their jobs correctly". This appeared to particularly be the sentiment of the clergy, like James Forbes of Riverside Baptist Church who said of Louima's attackers, "they are a few bad apples in the bunch."

The organizers began to liquidate the militancy of the march. But as in the morning, the protesters had their own agenda. As the sun began to cool, hundreds sang Haitian folk songs and slogans; with their backs defiantly turned away from city hall.

Update At Press Time

Louima was able to return home October 13, after spending more than two months in the hospital. He is expected to return to the hospital in December for his third abdominal operation in order to reattach a piece of his colon. FBI investigators who joined the Internal Affairs investigation have concluded that there has been no cover-up of the incident by the NYPD, and praised the department for cracking the so-called "blue wall of silence." The Giuliani Administration has proposed expanding the Civilian Complaint Review Board by adding a former police officer to help with investigation. The foxes agree; The hen house is safe but they have agreed to post an extra fox, just in case. Sonya Miller, the nurse who treated Louima might disagree. It was Miller who first reported the incident, although the NYPD "lost" her initial phone call about the abuse. Miller has since reported receiving threats and being physically assaulted by a co-worker for reporting the incident.

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Nov/Dec 1997 issue of L&R. Retrieved on 2016-06-13 from loveandrage.org1 [web.archive.org]

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