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United Front Builds then Shuts Down Bridges

Suzy Subways

1995

On Apr. 25 a diverse group of activists successfully shut down four major New York City bridges. Traffic was blocked, during rush hour, from 15 minutes to an hour at each location. The locations were divided between 4 groups: ACT-UP and neighborhood groups protesting Medicaid Cuts and hospital closings; CUNY (City University of New York) students and public school teachers protesting budget cuts in public education; and groups opposed to police brutality and racist and homophobic violence (including the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, the Congress for Puerto Rican Rights, and families of those killed by police). 185 people were arrested.

This action was significant both because of its effectiveness in disrupting the functioning of the city and because it united in practice activists from a broad range of communities. Using the focused, media-savvy civil disobedience technique that ACT-UP perfected, the action got the city's attention. This successful cooperation between different radical, grassroots groups has been an inspiration to many New Yorkers who

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have been hoping for a new, radical mass movement to emerge.

The simultaneous demonstrations were held the day before Mayor Giuliani presented his budget for New York City. The budget includes, among other cuts in social services, deep cuts to CUNY health care, and establishes a 90-day limit for the receipt of Home Relief money. The protests were coordinated to emphasize the fact that these cuts will be hurting many of the same people—homeless people with AIDS, for example. In the past, activists have often been divided, as one group may prevent certain budget cuts while other social services are cut deeper to compensate.

The planners of the action sought to break out of this pattern of division. It took a lot of work and months of secret, invitation-only meetings to build the coalition. Many of the groups involved in the action have identity-based politics that have nurtured a distrust for other groups. But organizing for Apr. 25th, each of the groups having its own site and demands had enough autonomy to build a sense of trust among groups. They didn't have to resolve all of their differences to work together.

Each of the four site-groups in turn was made up of a coalition of groups uniting around one basic issue. Activists from the Coalition for the Homeless organized homeless people, shelter residents, formerly homeless people, college students and law students to block the Brooklyn Bridge. Members of the Zulu Nation, a Black and Latino street organization, the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, and Asian Lesbians of the East Coast worked together with families of teenagers killed by the police to block the Manhattan Bridge. This coalition work, based on a consciousness of racism, sexism, and homophobia within the movement—a consciousness raised by identity politics—is more inclusive than the practice of the movements of the '60s, when issues raised by subordinated groups were often ignored.

The secrecy maintained during the months of planning helped make the protest effective. It was well organized and caught the police off guard. It went beyond the acceptable forms of protest in New York City—authorities were outraged that activists did not notify the police before the civil disobedience.

Before the protest, activists planned to carry their solidarity into jail. That solidarity was tested when the authorities decided to put most of the activists through the system—which meant at least another 24 hours in jail.

In the women's holding cell, about half of the jobs and housing group—each of whom was given a summons and told to leave—refused to go until everyone was let out. The group was not large enough to coerce the police into letting everyone go. But the symbolic gesture of solidarity meant something to CUNY students who have been targeted for their movements militancy and recent media success.

Most of the people involved in the Apr. 25th protest were not new activists, but there was a new sense of energy. CUNY students jumped over barriers and ran out into highway traffic. A woman who lives in a shelter refused to move as a cop tried to drag her out of a jail cell and defeat her act of solidarity. The sense of hope that inspired these acts did not just come from a possibility of defeating the budget cuts, but from the new sense of unity achieved in organizing this action. This unity was not the result of abstract calls for unity that exists when one group subordinates its interests to another. It was unity built in practice on the basis of respect for the actual diversity and differences of experience among the groups involved. Rather than rejecting or denouncing the limitations of identity politics, Apr. 25th drew from their strengths to transcend their weaknesses. Apr. 25th represented the potential such diverse grassroots groups have for building an actual radical mass movement when we work together.