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Ethnic Leaders Attempt a Coalition

by Frances X. Clines

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Bayard Rustin, the black leader, had a homemade Italian meal served on paper plates in Mrs. Mary Sansone's finished basement in Borough Park, Brooklyn, Thursday night.

Then, after two hours of some of the more unusual, hard-boiled dialogue heard in recent times among 40 of the city's ethnic leaders, he sat on the brick stoop of the attached house, a black man who felt welcome in the all-white neighborhood.

The house, at 1451 59th Street, was the scene of the beginning of an ambitious attempt to link the city's Italian, black and Puerto Rican communities into a coalition built around such common problems as education, narcotics, street crime and employment opportunities.

"We've gone through the rhetoric of the sixties," said Frank C. Arricale, former City Commissioner of Relocation. "And perhaps we were taken in with the confrontation approach that took on a dynamic of its own, a very harmful one."

A Halting Beginning

Seated on metal folding chairs, warmed by chicken caciatore and red wine, members of the group started to feel out problems in a halting beginning.

"America has never welcomed any new ethnic group in this country historically," declared Manuel Diaz Jr., vice president of the New York Urban Coalition. Fellowship is good he said, but will it make "Al Shanker, president of the United Federation of Teachers, open up the system to Puerto Rican teachers?"

Before long, an outspoken black woman, Velma Hill, defended Mr. Shanker in her role as an official of the teachers union. After kicking off her shoes for comfort, she rose warned against blaming individuals and emphasized the need for getting the minorities to register to vote.

"The labor movement does not control Congress," she said, proceeding to blame Congress for a variety of problems.

The mix of mainly middle-class people at the gathering was chosen by Mr. Rustin and Mrs. Sansone, who is chairman of CIAO; Congress of Italian-American Organizations.

At first glance, Mrs. Sansone seems to fit the stereotype of the plain, diminutive Brooklyn housewife who stays close to home and has little to say.

Actually, she is the daughter of the late Rocco Crisalli, a Socialist who was a follower of Norman Thomas, and was "president of the Junior Wobblies (International Workers of the

World) when I was 14.” She does not only fly the flag and go to church like so many of her neighbors, she explains, “but I get along with everybody.”

A point that was reiterated at the meeting was that the participants had access to limited public power through their professional roles as city bureaucrats, union leaders and social-agency executives. “But when the people go back to their communities at the end of the day, we lose them,” said Nick Sifuni, an official of District Council 37 of the State, County and Municipal Workers.

Some were impatient to get an action program going. But Mr. Rustin, a gray-haired veteran of civil rights causes, chaired the meeting with a gentle touch, cautioning the participants against becoming too concerned with subcommittees and agenda. “Let’s not formalize things too quickly,” he said “Let’s have affection.”

Msgr. Gino Barone, who is active in promoting ethnic amity, agreed nothing that a similar effort by blacks and Polish residents of Detroit had taken two years for the initial mistrust to pass. “Firm trust is the power and ability to act,” he counseled.

There was wide agreement that the power structures depend on the “bone theory” (five dogs fighting for the same bone) to keep themselves up and the “ethnics” down.

“Let’s not have Yale and Harvard set the standards,” said Theodore Mastroianni, deputy city commissioner of parks. “Let’s have someone from City College with greater grass-roots contact.”

Even the sole outsider, a Waterfront Commission policeman named Vincent MacNair who was serving as chauffeur for one of the city officials, joined in, complaining about crime in the streets and asking for stiffer jail terms. There were a few frowns in the paneled room, but Carl Homan, president of the National Urban Coalition, thanked Mr. MacNair.

“Why is this point--a pervasive fear that often prevents gatherings such as this--always left to the reactionaries, or to liberals who go blah, blah about ‘underlying social considerations’?” Mr. Homan asked in a scolding voice.

The meeting’s guest list included Supreme Court Justice Joseph R. Corso of Brooklyn; Gladys Harrington, assistant City Human Resources Administrator for Community relations; Commissioner of Manpower Joseph R. Erazo, and Warold R. Sims, acting director of the National Urban League. The principal decision of the gathering was to meet again soon, with the goal of building a momentum of trust. President Nixon’s Supreme Court appointments next week might be a good occasion, Mr. Rustin said, because “inevitably” they will be “stupid” choices.

The fact that such a group had met at all was accepted by most as an initial bit of progress. But participants warned that they would soon have to get beyond the felling of fellowship.

“I have to go home and deal with the kind of people who are tired of dealing with abstract organizations, promising new messiahs every year,” said the Rev. Anthony Failla, a Brooklyn priest and veteran anti-poverty worker.

Joseph Crisalli, a union organizer who is Mrs. Sansone's brother, told the group before cookies and coffee were passed that "unless you get it down to the common man, you're not going to come back here except to listen to beautiful speeches.

Mrs. Sansone said later that she realized the difficulties ahead but would persist

"I go into communities and find Italians happy and willing to join with blacks and Puerto Ricans, once they discover what they have in common," she said.