Harlem Si, Tammany No

by JACK NEWFIELD

I want there to be a sign on Tammany Hall that says Aqui se habla español. —Carlos Rios

FIFTEEN YEARS after the death of Fiorello La Guardia, and a decade after Vito Marcantonio's enigmatic empire crumbled into disillusionment, a new phenomenon has begun to stir the impoverished multitudes of East Harlem. It is a phenomenon that preaches tenants' councils, literacy tests in Spanish and a $1.50 city minimum wage. The cradle of this phenomenon is the East Harlem Reform Democratic Club, an anomaly among the city's reform clubs, since it is neither white nor middle class, and its only contact with eggheads is a charcoal drawing of Pablo Casals that hangs on the wall.

On September 7, the club's volunteer brigade of teen-age enthusiasts, student socialists and working-class Puerto Ricans rose up to smite the once invincible Tammany machine, and elected Carlos Rios the first Puerto Rican district leader in the city's history. The victim of this patchwork crusade was John Merli, the incumbent of fourteen years. The social forces that achieved the victory were those of Puerto Rican representation and a decade's accumulated hatred of slum landlords. The regular Democratic organization in East Harlem, either through venality or stupidity, counterposed itself to these forces.

Heart, brains and founder of the East Harlem reform club is thirty-three-year-old State Assemblyman Mark Lane, who launched the club in the winter of 1960, after spending five years in Spanish Harlem, where he waged war on landlords and police brutality, and took up the cause of minorities and civil liberties, generally in the same case. His club's first public act was to throw a picket line around S. H. Kress and Co. on the corner of 106th Street and Lexington Avenue, three days after the first sit-in in Greensboro. Lane believes it was the first sympathy picket in the north. His credentials as a civil rights militant gained further certification this June when he and Manhattan N.A.A.C.P. President Percy Sutton were arrested in the white waiting room of the Jackson, Mississippi Trailways Bus Terminal. His trial has been scheduled for November 7.

In March of 1960 Lane won the reform nomination from Manhattan's Tenth Assembly District, which extends from 74th Street to 106th Street, and from the East River to either Third, Park or Lexington Avenues, depending on how badly a specific block has been gerrymandered. All three reform clubs in the 10th A.D. voted Lane their endorsement, but only after he was subjected to grueling attacks on his past left-wing and Marcantonio associations by the membership of the club in the 10th A.D. Middle, and after the female co-leader of the club in the 10th A.D. South had resigned when Lane received an 82-3 vote of confidence.

Lane won the June 7 primary by 900 votes, and in November Kennedy's coattails helped elect him much less than the 3,100 Puerto Ricans the East Harlem club registered for the first time during one week in October.

Prior attempts to bring the thousands of unregistered Puerto Ricans of the community into politics had all ended in failure. In 1957 the Council of Spanish Organizations estimated that only 85,000 of the potential 266,000 eligible Puerto Rican voters in New York City were registered. Any attempt to pin this apathy to the Puerto Rican culture, however, was shattered by the eighty-three per cent turn-out in the island's 1960 Presidential elections.

THE causes of the small registration in East Harlem were numerous. Many Puerto Ricans sensed the insincerity of every candidate who tramped across the East Harlem landscape between Vito Marcantonio's death in August of 1954, and Lane's campaign of 1960. Then, too, the dominant Merli organization understandably made no effort to bring them into politics. But the major roadblock was the requirement that registrants pass the literacy test in English. Many Puerto Ricans were embarrassed to try; others were warned not to try.

The three major groups of unregistered voters consisted of elderly people who had lived their entire lives not voting; those who withdrew from politics in disgust after the three major parties formed an alliance to purge Marcantonio from Congress in 1950; and those who had moved into the neighborhood since 1955.

The number who withdrew after Marcantonio's defeat has never been calculated, but is probably a

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considerable figure. Running on the American Labor Party ticket in 1951, Manuel Medina, Marcantonio's protégé, polled 28,000 votes to Merli's 35,000 in a race for the City Council. When this is compared to the 8,500 votes polled by José Loman on the Liberal ticket in 1957, in a race against Merli, the depth of Marcantonio feeling in the Puerto Rican community becomes apparent.

But there are reasons why the registration drive of 1960 succeeded in East Harlem where others had failed. One was the youthful zeal of the campaign workers, who provided baby sitters, transportation and moral support in order to prod, convince and cajole more than 3,000 Puerto Ricans into registering for the first time. The same drive also enrolled 1,100 new voters who were not Puerto Rican.

The principal reason, though, was that Lane turned the registration drive into a frontal assault on the literacy test requirement, as he argued from every street corner in East Harlem: "The Spanish-speaking people who read *El Diario* or *La Prensa* are infinitely more informed on the issues than anyone who reads the *Daily Mirror*. . . . This test is blatantly discriminatory." And he cited a federal survey which charged New York State (along with Georgia and Mississippi) with discrimination in voting rights.

Lane was so anxious to test the legality of the literacy test that he broadcast the answers to it from a sound truck, daring arrest, and he maintains now that even more new voters would have been enrolled if it weren't for harassment by desperate Merli poll watchers on the last day of registration. Next October Lane vows to ask Attorney General Kennedy to send federal registrars into East Harlem.

That registration drive, coupled with Lane's victory, set the stage for Carlos Rios to challenge Merli's district leadership for the first time in a primary struggle. Rios came to East Harlem from Puerto Rico in 1949, and for twelve years his mournful eyes gazed upon the daily, unremembered tragedies that are the history of every slum. He saw rat-infested schools that made no provision for the hundreds of children who spoke only Spanish. And he became the secretary of a P.T.A. He saw sweatshops that flourished in the community. And he became an organizer for the Cap Makers Union. He saw the youth of the community clubbed by police and seduced by narcotics pushers. And he became a lay preacher with the East Harlem Protestant Parish. He saw Puerto Ricans cheated out of political representation. And he became a candidate for district leader.

THE tempo of the campaign modulated slowly, like a bolero, through the scorching summer. When the petitioning period began on June 21, more than half of the 10th A.D. North's sixteen election districts were bereft of captains. Rios, who was recovering from a mild heart attack, suffered while helping move the furniture of an evicted friend, was unable to campaign. Funds were low and campaign workers scarce.

But in early July the New York chapter of the Young People's Socialist League committed a dozen of its less sectarian members to work in the campaign. Several days later, the F.D.R.-Four Freedoms Club, a band of twenty-eight idealistic high school students, entered the campaign, and quickly became the backbone of the club, their members often staying to four and five in the morning to get out a mailing. And then individuals began walking into the club.

The intense magnetism the club holds for the youth of the city is the wellspring of the phenomenon of East Harlem. One of the reasons for the attraction is that the club offers a unique opportunity for day-to-day contact with men and women who carry the scars of exploitation and bigotry. To read in a textbook that East Harlem has twenty per cent chronic unemployment or the highest rate of narcotics addiction in the country is one thing. To walk through the hot, ugly streets and see these statistics etched in the faces that stare out from every open window is something else. A second reason is the public acceptance of Lane as a moralist and idealist. He has managed to identify himself with most of the coherent left-of-center movements on the college campus, including the civil rights movement and the drive to abolish the House Un-American Activities Committee. He has also gained the allegiance of the historically apolitical beats of Greenwich Village through his defense of the coffee-house owners in their battle against alleged police shakedowns, and the Village artists, whose lofts are menaced by a new city ordinance.

On July 28th the campaign reached its first crest, when Mayor Wagner, wed to the reform movement three days before at a shotgun ceremony, reluctantly accepted Lane's plea that he tour the block of East 100th Street, between First and Second Avenues, a block of 4,200 people crammed into twenty-seven rotting tenements.

The Mayor of New York came to the city's cruellest slum in the middle of a hot afternoon. He saw rats, roaches and vermin. He saw junkies lounging in hallways. He saw mounds of decaying garbage in backyards. Lane took Wagner into an apartment at 311 East 100th Street where rats had eaten the stuffings out of the sofa. He took him into another apartment where the toilet bowl overflowed a foul smelling river each time it was flushed. He took him into a backyard where the stench from rotting garbage was intolerable and a swarm of mosquitoes buzzed around the mayor's head.

As Wagner walked back towards his shiny limousine, he was approached by a craggy-faced man carrying

a cigar box. He told the mayor he was trying to collect enough money to pay for the funeral expenses of his eighteen-month-old son, who had toppled from a fifth floor window the day before. On July 30th the block was declared a Play Street, and a volleyball net was set up in the middle of the street, presumably to exterminate the rats and cure the junkies.

BY THE FIRST week of August the club had borrowed sound truck equipment from the A.D.A., and whenever they could borrow a car (mostly Lane's) the mobbed streets of East Harlem echoed the sound of Rios' speeches, delivered in hoarse, passionate Spanish, and the pungent lyrics of Gil Turner's folksongs. The repetitive themes of the street corner oratory were discrimination, housing conditions and Puerto Rican representation. "Ninety-sixth Street," Lane would shout a dozen times a night, "is the Mason-Dixon line of New York City. . . . Housing is more segregated here than it is in Jackson, Mississippi."

One night a policeman ordered the truck off the streets because it was 10:30. "Leave it alone," a ten-year-old told the cop on the beat, "they're for the tenants. Go chase Merli's truck, he's for the landlords."

The campaign moved into its last weeks, building relentlessly towards the crescendo of primary day. More tenants' councils were organized. More petitions for reductions in rent were filed. Money began to trickle in from the wealthier reform clubs as the scent of possible victory floated downtown. More mailings went out.

And so too did the tempo of the Merli campaign increase. His sound trucks nightly roared "The truth about slimy Mark Lane, that racist who went on a Freedom Ride only to spread more hate and bias . . . that pro-Communist who wants to destroy The House Un-American Activities Committee . . . that Jew whose real name is Levine." The references to Rios were less frequent. They said he was "only for the rich Puerto Ricans," and that he preached his sermons "dressed in a tuxedo." They put up posters depicting him as Lane's puppet.

On August 21, while Lane was attending a special session of the Legislature in Albany, four men charged into the Rios headquarters and threatened several campaign workers with a lead pipe. On August 29, while riding to a rally with Eleanor Roosevelt in an open car, Lane was struck with a beer can hurled from a rooftop. Four stitches were required to close the wound in his scalp. The incident, which received considerable coverage in the daily press, proved to be a potent weapon during the last days of the campaign.

The outpouring of voters on primary day dwarfed everything in the turbulent history of East Harlem politics. In some election districts the vote was as high as eighty per cent. The Rios poll watchers, not one of whom was over thirty years of age, successfully challenged hundreds of non-residents who tried to vote, while squads of "pullers" worked frantically to get out the favorable voters.

By 10 p.m. when the polls closed, a noisy clot of five hundred people was crammed into the tiny reform clubhouse. By 10:15 the first three election districts, with large Italian and Irish populations, had reported. They showed Rios and Merli running neck and neck. Next came the returns from two heavily Puerto Rican districts. Rios carried them handily. Then Roberto Verdejo, captain of the populous 50th election district, raced into the clubhouse waving his tally sheet. Rios had carried his district by a margin of 5 to 1.

At 10:28 Lane stood on a chair and shouted "We've won." The final results showed Rios carried twelve of sixteen election districts, winning 2,839 to 2,038.

Then followed a jubilant parade through the streets of East Harlem. Gil Turner, riding on a sound truck, led the marchers, and hundreds of others standing on fire escapes and street corners, in tuneless but wildly enthusiastic renditions of "East Harlem's My Home," and "Que Bonita Bandera." By the time the parade reached a delirious midnight climax, the ranks of marchers had swelled to almost 1,000.

On 100th Street a woman raced out of a tenement hallway and grabbed Lane in a violent embrace. "Today is our Independence Day," she screamed in Spanish.

But September 7th was really only the beginning. One district leader and one Assemblyman do not make a social revolution. Rios, a man who was shaped by years of living in the bowels of a slum, will probably accede to Lane's seat in the Assembly next year. Lane has said many times that his mission in East Harlem was to serve as a friend until the day of Puerto Rican representation came. He believes that day has come with Carlos Rios.

And what of Lane's future? He is, I think, at thirty-three, destined to help fill a great void in American political life. Someday, if the Senate of the United States is very lucky, Mark Lane may be its gadfly.