

Hard Hats On the March— Fists Swinging

One of the less controversial signs to appear on the streets of New York in this current era of protest was hand-lettered in crayon by a thin man with a crew cut who stood at the corner of Broadway and Liberty Street last week. It read: "Let's try to understand each other."

It was the kind of slogan safely indulged by President Nixon during his 1968 campaign through Middle America. Nevertheless, it raised the suspicions of a stocky worker in a green baseball cap and he immediately left a shouting, flag-waving march of construction workers and longshoremen that has become a lunch-time event in Lower Manhattan.

"I don't understand that sign," the marcher said to the picket, who extended his hand and introduced himself as Eddie. "You with the Communists, Eddie?" the worker continued. Eddie hastily said, "I want to live in peace with you. Take it easy." The worker cautiously replied: "This time I'll give you the benefit of the doubt," and he went back into the street.

There were hundreds of blue collar workers in the street with him, along with what seemed to be equal numbers of police on guard to prevent the bloody incidents of the previous week in which some construction workers and longshoremen, rallying under the Stars and Stripes, angrily pummeled peace partisans. The police were accused of ignoring warnings of trouble and even tolerating some beatings.

This new shade on the protest spectrum presented problems for the Lindsay Administration. More important than the enmity of the marchers who denounced the Mayor as a "red," was the worsening of relations with the police. The Mayor ordered an investigation into the incidents, asserting the city "witnessed a breakdown of the police as the barrier between them and wanton violence."

Not Prepared

The Patrolmen's Benevolent Association replied by contending they were inadequately prepared for the rash of demonstrations and counter demonstrations. They complained of "inconsistent directives" from City Hall, reviving charges of political interference with the police.

In later protests, a thick buffer of policemen prevented confrontation. Antiwar protesters and the helmeted workers praised the police after both factions demonstrated in the financial district last week.

As they move through the streets, the workers view the

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police as silent sympathizers. "Come on, I know you're with us," the police are told. The workers regularly switch their chant from, "U.S.A., all the way!" to "P.B.A., all the way!"

In explaining why they took to the streets, the workers talked, as family men and veterans, of being fed up with the sight of peace demonstrators on television and of feeling the need to back the President during trouble.

'Hero' Welcome

There was applause, confetti and data tape from the Wall Street canyons at times, as if the hard hats were hero astronauts. Rarerly more than 1,000 workers gathered at one time and their full ciout is difficult to assess. One thing they managed as they passed with their fist shaking and shouting was the virtual cessation of silent hand V-signs from dissenters.

As a footnote in the book of demonstration, the "patriot's" side finally matched the "peacenik's" side for profanity and vulgarity of language — a noisy fact in the workers' ranks which did not seem to offend the office secretaries and businessmen who joined the march. A woman in the march shouted, "Bitch!" at a miniskirted girl who showed thumbs down and booed the marchers.

"My husband died over there," the older woman said, breaking into tears. The younger girl began crying, too, and said: "My boyfriend's dying over there right now."

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New York

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The New York Times (by Lee Romero)

A flag-bedecked construction worker takes part in a counter-demonstration against anti-Vietnam war protesters at City Hall last week. The workers said they were "fed up with the sight of the peace demonstrators on television."