CORRECTING PAPERS

The CUNY Protest You Didn’t Hear About

By James Ledbetter

The CUNY demo appears to have ushered in a new era of police violence against the working press. Meets from Gulf War protests to Tompkins Square have seen individual journalists roughed up by police. But the breakout of violence at City Hall last week was, according to many media vets, the first time that police systematically used gas against a team of journalists trying to cover a news story.

"I was right there at the barricades — I could see the police getting ready to attack the crowd," said freelance photographer Peter Levasseur. "I had a good vantage point, and they sprayed directly in the eye and face stung for hours, whereas pepper spray is supposed to fade relatively quickly."

The police response merely echoed the attitudes expressed by the state's highest officials and by the press: that CUNY students — many of them poor, immigrants, and people of color — are inedible brutes who don't deserve a first-rate university. This pervasive attitude was not lost on students. One who took the microphone at the rally pointed out that the state is building prisons while cutting education.

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Responses to the demonstration from the mayor and governor responses that went virtually unchallenged in the press — expressed blatant contempt for CUNY students, for the principle of public higher education, and even for the democratic act of protest. "Instead of protecting," Giuliani suggested, students should "go find a job for the day," as if two-thirds of the students at CUNY senior colleges don't already work 20 to 40 hours a week. He dismissed the projected $1000 tuition increase as "a few hundred dollars," unaware, perhaps, that 91% of students at Hostos Community College who live beneath the poverty line, the difference is crushing.

If Giuliani was offering a tough-on-crime response to student protest, Pataki revealed the same ideology in the language of top-down management. He chided professors for "cancelling" classes to support student protests, and compared protesters to those "barricades-wallahs" when, in fact, Queens College professor and faculty activist Barbara Bowen, "Professors who attended the rally and agreed to student requests to be excused for the rally scheduled make-up classes for students need not be exposed to the state's highest officials and by the press: that CUNY students — many of them poor, immigrants, and people of color — are inedible brutes who don't deserve a first-rate university. This pervasive attitude was not lost on students. One who took the microphone at the rally pointed out that the state is building prisons while cutting education.

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poor and immigrant students have any right to expect.

By lapsing conveniently renders irrelevant the fact that New York ranks 47th in the U.S. in state spending on public education, and that Pataki's proposed 25 per cent cut is much higher than that sustained by any public education system in the country—facts that none of the dailies reported last week.

Indeed, the media collided in the portrayal of CUNY as a waste of taxpayer dollars. All the dailies—and the mayor—made much of student placards that had Giuliani's name spelled wrong. (Curious that none of them pointed out such errors a few years ago when police officers rallied with misspelled signs supporting Giuliani's candidacy. And never mind that the mayor probably couldn't spell any right to expect.

This assumption conveniently does not distinguish between the abundance of creative and competent students at CUNY and the large numbers of poor and immigrant students who have been excluded from the city's most prestigious campuses. Those who claim to support mainstream student participation in CUNY say they want to make sure that the city's taxpayers' money is spent on educating students who are engaged in productive pursuits. Yet the dailies did not report Ila t week.

Despite many news reports and Giuliani's remarks, the faculty did not "lead" the protest—though the march of 3000 professors dressed in caps and gowns across Brooklyn Bridge was a powerful, dignified image of resistance that did not make it into any of the dailies. The rally was the result of weeks of organizing by hundreds of CUNY students. And for the vast majority of the press it came on Thursday—many in the media colluded in the portrayal of CUNY as a waste of taxpayer dollars. All the dailies—and the mayor—made much of student placards that had Giuliani's name spelled wrong. (Curious that none of them pointed out such errors a few years ago when police officers rallied with misspelled signs supporting Giuliani's candidacy. And never mind that the mayor probably couldn't spell any right to expect.

Nevertheless, Tannenbaum said he plans to sue the city to recoup his medical expenses (after hospital treatment, his thumb is in a splint). The only comparable experience Tannenbaum has had professionally, he said, was getting hit with a rock on the Gaza Strip.

Ironically, staffers at the generally cop-friendly New York Post and Daily News were also assault ed. News photo Misha Erwitt was sprayed moments after photo graphing a mace-wielding cop, though overall he thought the police were relatively restrained. In all, the Voice has learned of eight separate allegations that members of the press—not all wearing credentials—were roughed up (including Voice reporter Esther Kaplan, whose notebook was swatted out of her hands and whose glasses were broken). Why the rash of violence against the media? Some of the roughed up photographers believe that the police were preparing a massive assault against the protesters, and wanted to insure that there would be no documentation. One photographer offers a different explanation: "Since Rudy gutted DCPI [the police public information office], there's no buffer. Usually there'd be a couple of recognizable lieutenants out there to act as liaison."