It's a perfect test. The cops are absent. The sun car into a group of activists who, after nonchalantly milling around to demonstrators. He inches his entrance to the Midtown spond with a chant: do ?

banners across the entrance to the backed up all the way to 42nd Street. When cops arrive to arrest down as cops swarm. They them, the activists cheer. They lie patiently wait their tum for arrest. It actingly planned offense—and one action. Pour major arteries to the over police scanners: this protest city—the Brooklyn Battery have been blocked by groups; funding statehouse, and City Hall.

But lost in the uproar over last week's protests was a development of greater importance than the sheer numbers of people tak ing to the streets: the character of the protest and the activists who organized it. At the Manhattan Bridge, for example, an unlikely alliance of Asian, Latino, black, and white protesters were coordinated banners denouncing police brutality and racist violence as they stretched across the Canal Street entrance. In the middle of the access road to the Brooklyn Bridge, homeless people knelt next to students, all calling for housing and jobs. For a brief moment, it seemed like there was a protest for everyone.

Indeed, April 25—with its coor dinated actions by more than 30 groups and hundreds of demonstrator from all over the city—marked a halting first step in the attempt to build a new, broad-based progressive movement—an unmistakably '90s terms.

It was not exactly a spontaneous event. Planning began four months ago, when a group of about 10 organizers began meeting with dozens of community groups. At the time, says City Col egue student William Broberg, an early recruit, the core group's notion of a unified citywide action was "basically, pie in the sky."

Who, after all, could imagine home less activists working with students the Zulu Nation allied with Asian Lesbians of the East Coast? After 15 years of Republican and might-as-well-be-Republican rule, culminating in a conservative government and mayor in the capital of liberalism, New York's progressive activists have become accustomed to Balkanization. Our rulers, activists like to say, divide and conquer. They have succeeded in isolating—and even subdividing—our communities. It's so much easier to wage war on people with AIDS when Latinos spar with gays over funding and prevention strategies.

The level of interest between activists—not to mention the op pressed communities they are fighting for—can't be overestimat ed. When the April 25 group went calling, says Lisa Daugaard, a leader of the homeless advocacy group StreetWatch and an organi zer of the protests, some responded with, "I'm sorry. I'm just not up to working with white people, or gay people, those fucking communists, whatever. It's become such a re flexive way for people to explain why they don't have to expand beyond their prior range of allies."

But while liberal laments about the fragmentation of the left offer target identity politics as the culprit and urge its abandonment, most younger activists find that complaint unproductive. Though many are impatient with identity movements for various reasons—Daugaard bemoans the logic by which militancy is equated with separatism; Broberg finds a lack of militancy ("the leadership of identity politics rented office space and went inside")—all are acutely aware of the historical reasons for their rise.

It's probably misleading to call the collection of activists that as sembled under the banner of April 25 "young," because they includ ed veterans like Richie Perez and Panama Alba of the National Con gress for Puerto Rican Rights, Marian Feinberg of the Bronx Clean Air Coalition, Shakoor Aljuwani of the Harlem Hospital Community Advisory Board; and, Father Luis Barrion of St. Mary's Episcopal Church.

But the group has a new-gener ational feel, partly because its core includes organizers in their twen ties and thirties—like Broberg and Daugaard, as well as Esther Kaplan of ACT UP, Thoi Nguyen of the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, and CUNY's Peter Diaz. They have cut their teeth on identity politics, and for them there is little point in abandoning the movement that allowed them to gain a political voice in the first place.

Besides, many of the younger activists are suspicious of Big Activi sm. "I don't believe that people in our generation can envision a single entity that everyone can trust," says Daugaard. The quintessential '80s activist organization, ACT UP, was successful partly because of its issue-based focus and its ability to quickly mobilize a relatively small number of militant, expert activists. The era of the big rally, " says Broberg, "is over."

Which is not to say that these activists don't share a longing for cooperation. "We do need a common language," says Aljuwani, "but so much work has to be done." The challenge the April 25 movement set for itself was to forge a common language that would be flexible enough to accommodate the differing approaches and agendas of an almost giddily diverse group of organizations.

But early on, when an emissary from a powerful union proposed that the protesters stage a single mass demonstration, the idea was canned. "The specific proposal, recalls Daugaard, "was that we all hold one rally, because it would be bigger than separate actions.

April 25: Four simultaneous demonstrations, 185 arrests. Above, a die-in at the Midtown Tunnel protests draconian health-care and AIDS cuts. Below, 85 students are arrested for blocking the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel.
And we said, you know what? No one wants to come to one rally because they feel that they won't be heard, they won't have control, their people will be washed out in the numerical splendor of the big union or whoever is going to be the dominant thing there." (As it turned out, the unions staged their own march on April 4, to much less fanfare than the April 25 demos.)

Ultimately, the activists settled on a strategy of coordinated, simultaneous protests. An internal memo circulated early on in the project articulated the theory behind the actions: "The bridge plan might succeed only because it does not require us to work as one, to resolve our contradictions and suspicions, in order to pull it off. Ironically, once it is achieved, a logistical and symbolic success does not require us to work as they feel that they won't and suspicions, in order to pull it off. Ironically, once it is achieved, a logistical and symbolic success may be a compelling illustration to all involved... of the benefits of coordination and alliance. But we cannot wish that comprehension and resolution into being—we must achieve it tactically, through demonstration of the power of working together."

The bridge event was, says Kaplan, "the perfect balance of unity and autonomy." Several months of intense discussions and innumerable meetings ensued. Groups dropped in; groups dropped out. "It was a learning experience for us," says Perez. "Older activists like myself had a different perspective; we grew up with successful multiracial movements. If nothing else, the veterans could communicate their optimism. "Some of the younger Latinos, for example, didn't know any Asians. Some did, of course, but had almost no experience working together." And older activists learned from younger: "The use of technology, the sophisticated media operations—we didn't have that," ACT UP, as we all know, does.

In the end, novel strategies and workable structures are necessary but insufficient. Any strategy involving civil disobedience depends on one thing, as Alijuwani says: "people who are willing to do a frightening thing—put their body on the line." And the April 25 organizers nurtured this, at the very least: 185 people from virtually every corner of the city, who were willing to risk injury, arrest, and jail time to throw down an ethical challenge; who endured the curses of angry New Yorkers seemingly more concerned about a delay in their commute than the destruction of lives being committed in their names; who suffered unusually harsh treatment from a vengeful city police force.

But in doing so, they may have kicked-started a movement that has never been more fervently longed for nor more necessary than now. It certainly has begun for those who spent the night in jail. As Perez says, "There's no greater bonding site than the Tombs."

Or as William Broberg puts it, "I'm a student, but since I've been homeless, I'm in jail. I was going to help get the meetings on the ground for that group. And having been an ACT UP activist for a long time, I'd been just as comfortable working with them. So there were three places where I felt totally comfortable getting arrested. Then in jail I realized that a lot of people had a similar dilemma, and I hope the next time we do something even more people have that dilemma, and then the time after that it won't matter which action we do. And it's down that road that we hope we've sent politics in this city."

Sure, people make history, but not under conditions of their own choosing, right? Are the conditions ripe for a broad-based movement? Has the historical moment arrived? As if practicing the dialectic or propelling zen koans, the April 25 activists turn the question on its head: if you can't swim, you don't want to leap into the ocean—but there's only one way to learn. "The only way we'll get to the point where we can trust each other enough to work together is to work together," suggests Perez. "It can only be done by deeds, reflection, then more deeds."