Badillo smears immigrants

New York protests continue over City University chief's racist diatribe

Bill Vann
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More than two weeks after Herman Badillo, the chancellor of the City University of New York (CUNY), launched into a racist diatribe against Mexican and Dominican immigrants, protests against the politically connected lawyer and ally of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani are continuing.

Demonstrators demanding Badillo's resignation succeeded in surrounding a startled Giuliani outside City Hall on October 8, slipping through the extensive security measures that have turned the building into one of the most restricted areas in the city.

The reason for the protesters' ire was a talk given by Badillo last month to a group of educators brought together by a private foundation. He told his audience that "the biggest problem" facing the educational system in New York City is students "from the hills of Mexico and the Dominican Republic, who have never been to any schools."

The CUNY chairman continued, "The problem is that in Mexico and Central America, there never has been a tradition of education."

Badillo, a Puerto Rican-born politician, said many of the new immigrants are "pure Indians—Incas and Mayans who are about 5 feet tall with straight hair." He went on to complain about increasing numbers of Mexican stores opening up in the Barrio, the upper Manhattan neighborhood where he grew up. "That's a Puerto Rican neighborhood," he said.

The statements provoked outraged protests from Mexican and Dominican groups as well as a number of Hispanic politicians who called upon Governor George Pataki to dismiss the CUNY chairman. "I'm furious that a prominent leader of our community would prove to be so callous and prejudiced," said Juan Figueroa, president of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund.

Largely lost in the outrage over the racist tone of Badillo's remarks was their sheer ignorance. Discovering the origin of Mexicans and Dominicans in the Incas, a people native to the South American Andean region, is a unique contribution of the CUNY chairman.

Mayor Giuliani initially attempted to dodge questions regarding the CUNY chancellor's remarks. Asked for a response to the demands for his resignation, the mayor attempted to deflect the question back to his current right-wing hobbyhorse in his run for the US Senate. He said he hoped "those who say they were outraged by Herman Badillo's statements would join me in being outraged at the Brooklyn Arts Museum." Pressed on the subject he defended Badillo, asserting that he had "said the same thing about Italians," and accusing the CUNY chief's critics of attacking him "not for what he said, but for what he's doing to change CUNY."

From the perspective of the working class, minority and immigrant students that CUNY has traditionally served, however, there is a direct connection between what Badillo said and the policies that he has attempted to implement.

Badillo, who was himself the beneficiary of CUNY's free tuition policies of an earlier epoch, has spearheaded the drive to exclude from the system's 11 senior colleges all those unable to pass a battery of placement exams and to eliminate all remedial education in these schools. The new requirements are forcing many poor and immigrant students to abandon their plans for a college degree in the face of having to pay for expensive remedial courses before they can

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enroll in college and become eligible for financial aid. These new attacks on the right to a public higher education come at a time when tuition is already at an all-time high.

While CUNY was founded with the ostensible mission of serving those New Yorkers most in need of an education and least able to afford one, the policies pushed by Badillo, Giuliani and Pataki are aimed at bringing the system more into line with the stark inequality that pervades all aspects of life in the city. Under the slogan of "standards," they are attempting to transform the system into one that can educate a limited number of the academically elite to fill positions required by the Wall Street finance houses, law firms and corporate headquarters that dominate the city's economy. As for the vast majority of low-wage, service industry jobs created in recent years, little or no higher education is required.

The remarks of the CUNY chancellor, moreover, were directed not so much at the immediate problems faced by the city universities, but at the public schools themselves. The conception that the "biggest problem" that these schools face is the dramatic influx of immigrants that has driven up enrollment year after year for the past decade is an argument for a form of educational triage, excluding those facing the greatest educational challenges, while focusing resources on the more privileged layers. Mayor Giuliani's and Governor Pataki's advocacy of school vouchers and charter schools as the solution to the city's schools crisis is aimed precisely at such a "solution," culminating ultimately in the privatization of public education altogether.

Badillo's political career is itself a clear expression of the city's social stratification and the turn by a layer of the privileged middle class to the right. The 69-year-old CUNY chancellor began political life as a liberal Democrat, serving as Bronx borough president in the late 60s and then holding a seat in the US House of Representatives from 1970 to 1978. He was deputy mayor for two years under Ed Koch, then switched to the Republican Party, becoming Mayor Giuliani's top education adviser.

In addition to his CUNY post, Badillo is a senior partner in the law firm Fischbein, Badillo, which has raked in millions from clients seeking to do business at City Hall. The other key partner at the firm is Raymond Harding, the boss of the Liberal Party, who provided Giuliani with crucial support in both his mayoral races and has remained a political adviser to the Mayor and a conduit for political favors.

Badillo is expected to seek the Republican and Liberal nominations to succeed Giuliani as Mayor in 2001.

While Badillo apologized for his remarks and Giuliani acknowledged that the "words he used were wrong," both men aggressively support the reactionary policies that the remarks were meant to defend. In reality, the episode was merely the case of a reactionary political representative of New York's financial elite expressing in public what he and his cohorts routinely say in private.

See Also:

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