

The Working Families Party: Stumping for Jesus

September 7, 2011

An isolated Assembly race in underserved North central Brooklyn in an election off-year wouldn't normally attract much interest — witness grudging coverage in *The New York Times* on the Saturday of the Labor Day weekend. It surely would be a snoozer to a national audience or to those *New Politics* readers who consider mainstream politics to be mad, bad and dangerous to know — the elephants' graveyard of classic social movements, as though the movements weren't already among the walking dead. Plus, following election races can be a hobbyist's game when unions are getting bashed, the Obama administration is inert when it's not otherwise shilling for finance capital, or when August job growth was stagnant and just 57 percent of the working age population hold any sort of job.

Still, the race of Jesus Gonzalez, a 26-year-old community activist running as a third party candidate in the 54th Assembly District, which comprises all of once devastated and landlord-torched Bushwick as well as parts of Cypress Hills and Bedford-Stuyvesant, is worth a look.

Gonzalez is running against type, battling two separate Kings County machine war horses. The candidate, a first-generation American of Dominican-Puerto Rican parentage who anglicizes his given name, is running on the Working Families Party (WFP) line, a more-or-less left-leaning party comprising labor union political directors, leaders of community-based organizations and a smattering of active general members. WFP rarely runs or even nurtures its own candidates. Instead, it takes advantage of New York State's fusion election rules by co-endorsing and running mainstream hopefuls — invariably Democrats — on its own ballot line.

Not this time.

Garnering some 200,000 votes statewide in 2010 — which is nothing to sneeze at for a third party — it polls just behind the Conservative Party, a GOP kingmaker. In its 13 years the WFP grew from a curiosity to something of a Mighty Mouse, whose endorsement and ballot line is widely sought even by shoe-ins. With growing visibility, the group got targeted by the Right, survived an attack by former Giuliani operatives falsely charging it with funny-money handling. While a federal investigation led to no charges filed, it beat a strategic retreat when it agreed not to badmouth then gubernatorial candidate Andrew Cuomo once he was elected — something even WFP staffers acknowledge in private was a Faustian bargain — in order to slate Cuomo as its own 2010 candidate and gin up enough votes to keep its ballot line for another four years.

Then came the Gonzalez race.

Slating Gonzalez, an organizer with the Youth Power project of Make the Road NY — the city's largest Latino-based activist organization — the party seems to be doing what its founders promised it would do, which was to promote independent candidates when the Democratic hopeful was hopeless or reactionary, and where an independent candidacy was viable. A Sept. 6 party fundraising pitch reads: "If [Gonzalez] wins, for the first time in history, our legislature in Albany will include not just Democrats and Republicans, but also a proud and independent voice for the Working Families Party. Jesus isn't carrying any other party's banner but ours."

As reported by WNYC, the city's public radio affiliate, "The Gonzalez campaign is re-establishing

WFP as a force to be reckoned with by the Democratic establishment. A win would put a new member into the Assembly who is highly sympathetic to the party [WFP] and its labor base. A loss would reinforce the narrative that WFP isn't the powerhouse it once was."

Gonzalez also benefits from a split in the borough's Democratic Party machine. Brooklyn, as Kings County, has the largest voting population in the country, and now features a fractured Democratic machine with two leading factions running their own candidates. Each faction has troubles. The county leader is Vito Lopez, an Assemblyman currently up to his nose hairs in corruption investigations. His candidate, Rafael Espinal is running on the Conservative Party line as well. A third candidate, Deidra Towns, is running on her own cobbled-together party after failing to win the county leaders' backing. She is the daughter of long-time African American Congressman Ed Towns, and sister to Darryl Towns, who resigned his Assembly seat to take the commissioners' job in a reconstituted state housing agency. The resignation allowed the party organization and not its primary voters to choose a candidate for the special Sept. 13 election.

Still, Gonzalez's election is no slam dunk. Even if Lopez is one step shy of jail and the Towns dynasty is aging out, both of the older factions know the district terrain. That's vital in an off-year election, when pulling out supporters to vote is key. In this context, Lopez's legal problems or Towns' fading power in an increasingly multiracial and Hispanic district matter less than in super-hyped city, statewide or national elections, where voting is at least a festival of the depressed. So while Gonzalez does have the support of neighboring Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez plus 1199/SEIU and its estimable political operation — particularly effective among communities of color — some of his other endorsements are iffy. Communications Workers District 1, an early Gonzalez backer, is mired in contract talks with Verizon for its 45,000 long lines and FIOS workers so it can't be expected to play much of a role in phone banking, door knocking or election day get-out-the-vote efforts, the things that win pull operations. Plus, public employee unions, those with the most consistent work with politicians on a national, state and local levels, are either taking a pass — "why make enemies," is the thinking — or are backing one of the two connected candidates. Sure, a host of borough reformers are on board for Gonzalez, but except for staff members at Make the Road working as volunteers, few have immediate area creds.

For the left — certainly for readers of this blog — an abiding question is whether the WFP effort represents a turn toward more independent and multifaceted political work by the party or results only in a change of clothing for a fresh-faced, attractive insurgent who even as a winner will have nowhere to go post-victory but back into the Democratic Party leadership's fold. Or as a loser, someone with name recognition positioned for the 2013 City Council races. A Gonzalez win on Sept. 13, or even a strong showing, will give the WFP the bragging rights and sharpened elbows it craves to restore its reputation as a player. I don't knock that effort; it's what any party, even a workers' party, would do in part. But Gonzalez himself can't affect the Assembly much, except as a vocal tribune in a legislature tightly controlled by its leaders. With the New York State Assembly's overwhelming Democratic majority, Gonzalez will likely caucus with the Democrats, which is something the independent Bernie Sanders does in the U.S. Senate. Either that or find himself a one-trick pony out of tricks representing a district for which he couldn't bring home the bacon grease, let alone the bacon.

Can Jesus Gonzalez be an insurgent inside the caucus? If he wins, we'll see.