

Camden's Latinos Take Charge

By Dave Lindorff

itself and is now trying to rebuild a city by luring businesses that will provide jobs for the largely unskilled work force and by rehabbing housing, improving schools, developing youth recreation programs and revitalizing political life.

Milan, 35, starts out with a terrible handicap: It's hard to imagine a city with more problems. Once a thriving metropolis of 125,000 people, Camden has become a vast slum. The city began to go downhill in the early '50s with the closing of the New York Ship Company, a giant facility that employed some 40,000 workers. Other companies followed suit, with RCA and others closing their factory doors in the '60s and early '70s. The final nail in the coffin came in 1990, when Campbell's Soup decided to shut its cannery. Nor can Camden count on much help from Philadelphia, its neighbor just across the Delaware River. Economically distressed itself, Philadelphia continues to lose population and jobs every year.

The repercussions of this industrial implosion are daunting.

Camden's unemployment rate is more than 20 percent, half of the city's residents are on welfare, and per capita income is less than \$7,500. Nearly 3,000 housing units in the city need to be rehabbed or torn down. There's no longer a danger of white flight: The city's white population was gone by the late '60s. Today, 47 percent of Camden's 87,000 residents are African-American and 45 percent are Latino. Murder, mostly drug-related, is at epidemic levels: 49 people were killed last year alone—an astonishing figure for such a small city.

Back in the glory days, before the New York Ship Company closed, Camden was part of the Philadelphia metropolitan area that was known as America's workshop. The outsized art-deco City Hall tower—far too big for a city of Camden's present size—stands in silent testimony to those better times.

Since then, Camden's main claim to fame was its prominence as a venue for the 1980 Abscam Scandal, when FBI agents, posing as Arab oilmen, snared a number of federal, state and local officials in a bogus bribery scheme. Among those nabbed by the sting was Camden's then-mayor, Angelo J. Errichetti, who was convicted of bribery and

forced to resign in 1981.

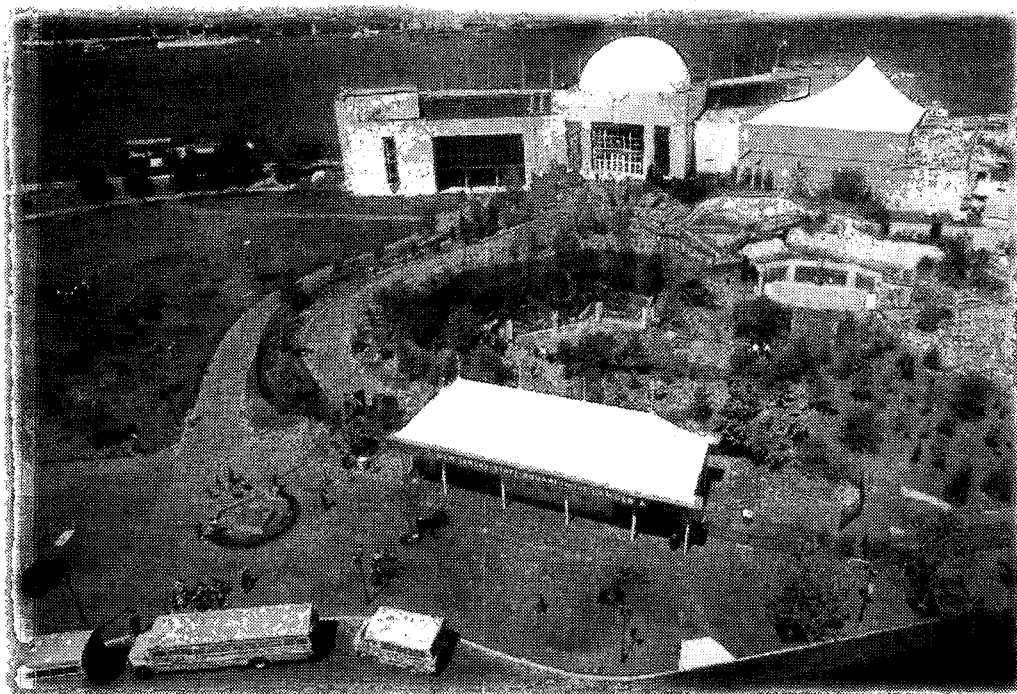
In the years since, Camden has withered. The city's politicians were mostly creatures of the Camden Democratic Party organization, a white-controlled suburban political machine that dominated Camden County. A succession of African-American mayors—some good, some lackluster—were unable to do much to rescue their city from its slow slide because the county machine wielded final authority. Even Randy Primas, the city's widely respected first black mayor who held office from 1981 to 1987, was unable to accomplish much. In his first term, he had to raise property taxes 88 per-



Milton Milan, mayor of Camden, N.J., is the first Latino to hold the job.

Milton Milan has seen his share of rubble. As a Marine stationed in Beirut, he had the grizzly job of pulling the bodies of his buddies from the ruins of the U.S. Marine barracks after a terrorist truck bomb blew the place up in 1983. Now, as the new mayor of Camden, N.J., he's trying to clear away the rubble of 40 years of urban decay in one of America's most depressed cities.

What's happening in Camden should catch the eye of other troubled post-industrial cities throughout the country. Ignoring the overheated rhetoric of right and left, a disenfranchised community—in this case Latinos—has wrested power for



The New Jersey State Aquarium, a centerpiece of Camden's waterfront redevelopment, has left residents untouched.

cent because of the city's declining base of taxable properties.

"The political leaders in the city were black, but all the money was coming from the county party machine," says Camden City Council member Israel Nieves, who was Milan's campaign manager. "The county machine was hand-picking the city's political candidates and calling all the shots." That, he says, translated into poor top administrators and lots of incompetent patronage appointments in key departments. It also meant a loss of political clout for the city at the state level—a particularly damaging problem given Republican domination of state politics since 1993.

Long ignored by the political system, local Latino activists founded a political action group, Alianza for Hispanic Progress, in 1989 to organize the politically apathetic Latino population—especially the Puerto Ricans, who are all U.S. citizens with a right to vote. The group had a five-year battle plan. Their first target was the nine-member school board, where parental concern made organizing easier. In 1990, the Alianza's candidates took two of the three school board seats up for grabs. Then, the group turned its attention to electing Latinos to the seven-member city council. By 1996, Latinos held three council seats, with blacks holding three and a lone white member holding the balance of power. With Latino and black members voting as competing blocs, Milan was chosen council president with the support of the white member.

The Alianza knew that a Latino could never become mayor as long as the race was partisan, because the Camden Democratic Party dominated the primary process while the massive Democratic majority in the city guaranteed that the party's candidates always won. So the Alianza signed on to a ballot initiative to abolish party primaries, which passed by a wide margin in 1996. Under the new rules, mayoral candidates run without party affiliation and the person who garners the most votes in the general election is declared the winner. By

depoliticizing the mayor's office, Nieves says, it also became easier for the troubled city to get a sympathetic hearing in the state capital.

Cleverly, and with a certain irony, after helping to do away with the primary system, the Latino movement set up its own primary anyway. With the May 1997 election approaching, three Latino candidates had entered the mayor's race. Trying to keep the Latino vote from splitting three ways, Nieves came up with the idea of an unofficial Latino primary. After some arm-twisting, he got the three mayoral hopefuls to agree that whoever won the contest would get the support of the other two in the general election. Then, the Alianza organized a series of candidate forums at various Latino churches to let local residents learn about the candidates. The forums helped generate interest in the race, which boosted voter registration in the Latino community.

Milan, who won the informal primary handily, went on to win the general election by a plurality of more than 40 percent against four other candidates, including the incumbent, Arnold Webster. "We caught the party machine by surprise," he says. "They had the money, but before they had even started their campaign, we had been registering new voters. When they were starting to put up posters, we had already covered the city. On election day, they were still putting up posters, while we were driving people to the polls."

Since taking office in May, Milan has surprised his opponents by reaching far outside his Latino base in making departmental appointments. The posts of city manager and chief of police, for example, went to non-Latinos. "I'm a Puerto Rican, and when I'm in the Latino community, I'm their mayor," he says, "but I'm the mayor of all the people of this city."

Former mayor Primas gives Milan good marks. "There's a lot of excitement and enthusiasm in getting a first Latino mayor, just as there was in getting a first African-American

mayor when I took office," he says. "As a Latino, Milan has to be a role model, but it's a tightrope you have to walk to make it clear that Camden is not just Latino or just black. Milan has gone out of his way to reflect multiracial politics."

At the same time that Milan is establishing a diverse administration, Nieves, his political mentor, is making sure that the Latino movement that brought Milan to power stays active, providing his base of support. Toward that end, the Alianza has signed on some 400 Latino church officers, businesspeople and community activists to serve as what amounts to party workers. Milan has also replaced old patronage appointees with his own Latino supporters in Public Works, Housing, Code Enforcement, and Health and Human Services. Nieves, who is still a key strategist in Milan's administration, says the goal now is to "build a new Latino machine," which will not oust the Camden County Democratic organization from the city, but reassert the city's power—and, of course, Latino power—in the county.

Under Camden's previous mayor, the city launched a campaign to redevelop the waterfront across from Philadelphia. It got the state and county to locate a new marine aquarium and an outdoor rock concert facility there. The whole project, however, has left Camden's residents and its struggling economy largely untouched. The new facilities, which face Philadelphia and turn their backs to the depressed city, are publicly owned and contribute no significant tax revenues to Camden. Ticket revenues go to the state and the out-of-town concessionaires, and even most jobs are held by Philadelphians or New Jersey suburbanites. Meanwhile, tourists and concert-goers can visit

the two facilities without ever stepping foot in Camden's local business section.

Rather than forging ahead with more big waterfront projects or trying to convince a giant corporation to move to the city, Milan has focused on attracting smaller employers, who can provide local property-tax revenues and long-term jobs to residents. Milan has shaken up Camden's office of economic development. According to the office's director, Marialice Stanzeski, prior administrations let the city's industrial development zones languish, to the degree that the state was threatening to take over jurisdiction. Milan has drawn up a five-year plan to develop these areas and bring in new businesses.

Local businesspeople say Milan has been present at every negotiation with companies interested in setting up or expanding in Camden. Given the cutthroat competition among communities across the United States to attract business, companies are driving hard bargains. As a result, cities like Camden, which desperately need tax revenues, have had to spend scarce funds on infrastructure projects and give property-tax breaks to persuade companies to set up shop.

In early January, Milan announced that Commerce Bank had decided to build a new full-service bank building in downtown Camden—the city's first new bank in 40 years. Milan landed Commerce Bank by helping the bank secure land in the city's industrial development zone and by offering job credits and other state and federal tax breaks.

Milan has worked to improve people's living conditions as well. For example, city schools and other public recreation facilities are now open in the evenings so young people have someplace to go. In a more controversial move, he got the city council to pass a law closing down any eating establishment that didn't have sit-down tables, a measure targeted at all-night take-out joints that have become hangouts for drug dealers and prostitutes. Because many of these businesses are Chinese-owned, some in the Asian community have charged that the new law is discriminatory.

Part of the effort to restore the city has involved persuading the county, state and federal governments to do their part to help. Milan has demanded that the state clean the state highways that run through the city, something that the state has not bothered to do for decades. He has also pressed the county, which owns and shares use of the dilapidated city hall building, to fix it up so that citizens will find it less dark and intimidating.

It's too early to say whether this ex-Marine will be able to restore public confidence, lure back industry, and compel county, state and federal governments to provide Camden with the same kind of help that they routinely provide to suburban communities. But walking around the city's burned-out downtown or in city hall, it's hard not to detect the charge of excitement in the air. If Milan pulls it off, Camden will serve as an example to other disenfranchised groups—whether Latino, black or white—that political empowerment and a dose of pragmatism can make a difference in America's urban wastelands. ■

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— advertisement —

U.S. children seek help for friends in Cuba

Seventh and eighth grade classes from a New York Bruderhof school accompanied the seventh "Friendshipment Caravan" to Cuba last May. They defied the U.S. embargo to bring food and medicine to the children of the beleaguered socialist island. In Cuba they saw firsthand how the U.S. government uses children of other countries as ammunition in political wars, intentionally letting them die of malnutrition and treatable diseases to pressure political leaders. They returned home outraged and inspired, and soon released this statement:

"Now that we have been to Cuba, we feel obligated to take further actions to challenge the unjust blockade on Cuba. We have made a commitment to our Cuban friends that we will keep working to end this war against them.

"We are determined to collect 90 miles of signatures from people all over the world who do not agree with the blockade on Cuba. When we have gathered the 90 miles of signatures, we plan to present them to President Clinton in person to help educate him about the true feelings of the thinking public.

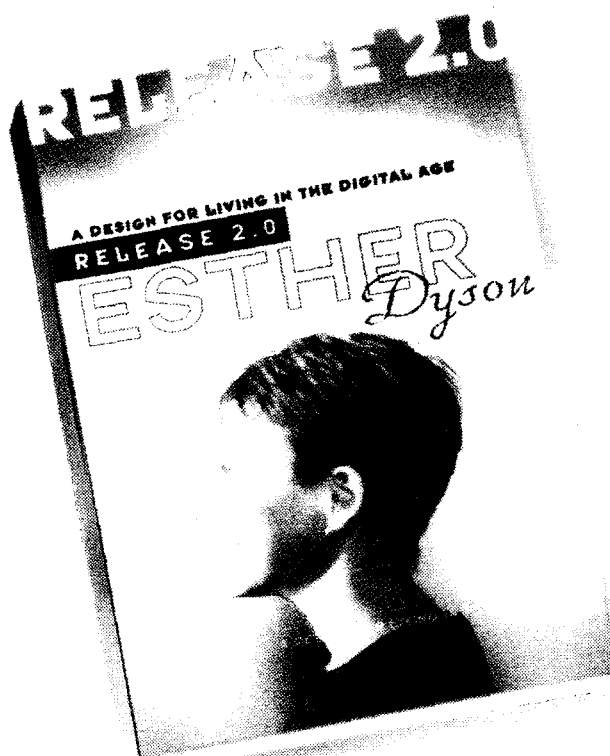
"Please help by adding your name and address to the petition and getting at least ten friends, neighbors and relatives to do the same."

Mail full sheets to: Cuba 90 Miles, New Meadow Run School, Farmington, PA 15437, e-mail to: 90miles@bruderhof.com, or sign at <http://www.bruderhof.org/petition.htm>.

Cyber Pundit

Release 2.0:
A Design for Living in the Digital Age
 By Esther Dyson
 Broadway Books
 307 pages, \$25

REVIEWED BY PAT AUFDERHEIDE



If you're just beginning to realize that you're going to have to take the Net seriously—that just sneering at *Wired* and muttering grumpily about e-mail spam will not do—then Esther Dyson's *Release 2.0* will be a useful introduction to cyberspace. If you've already put your money where your mouse is, as they say, you may find it just a little pat. A book that ends with an advice list, including "be generous," "have a sense of humor" and "don't get into silly fights," may verge on Fulghum-ish parody of business consultancy. But Dyson's core take on the Net is sensible, inclusive and encouraging to novices.

Her timing, as usual, is right. The first exciting flush is over in cyberspace, making reasoned predictions about its future more possible. And cyberspace has become hospitable to the unannointed many. Dyson, a financial journalist who specialized early on in the Net, runs a wildly successful newsletter (*Release 1.0*) and an annual seminar on Net business and culture. For years, she has been a nerds' guru, and now she is ready to share what she knows. *Release 2.0* is a book of punditry, providing

analysis and predictions that enlighten the field.

"I want to take away the mystery and the technical mumbo jumbo," she says at the outset, "so that you can see the Net for what it is: a place where people meet, talk, do business, find out things, form committees and pass on rumors." As we all become Net users, we face a common challenge, she writes, "to do a better job with the Net than we have done so far in the physical world."

Tempered utopianism pervades the book. In a prose style that ranges between the plain and the flatfooted, she argues in chapters on communities, governance and education that the Net's decentralizing capacity will challenge and change our basic institutions. She goes on to look at the obstacles to civilized and commercially viable Net expansion in chapters on property rights, privacy, anonymity and security. She sounds so resolutely reasonable that it's easy to forget that she's weighing in on controversial issues.

How, for instance, shall we think about the Net? Is cyberspace a tool, an instrument to accomplish a goal, or is it a

place, a landscape to be inhabited? You have different expectations of, and rules about, say, a screwdriver than you do about a frontier or a park. Wireheads laugh knowingly when wonks say things like "superhighway" because it's so linear, so mechanistic, so second wave. Treating the Net like a tool doesn't take into consideration its vast potential or the ways that people use and experience it.

Dyson says the Net is indeed an environment, like a house or even a whole urban landscape—one in which you'd want to ask whether there's a public library. But it's also, she argues with healthy eclecticism, a tool. In her chapter on communities, she says, "the Internet doesn't actually do much. ... it's a way for people to organize themselves." Communities develop on and through the Net, creating new uses for it. Some are more significant and enduring than others, but the fact that they exist changes the terms for all communities, since people will have more options and opportunities to take an active role in some kind of community life. (Douglas Schuler's *New Community Networks: Wired for Change* does a better job of