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Building power: one of the city's most powerful Latino organizations has figured out how to get a seat at the table

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At the center of the elegant Hyatt Regency Hotel ballroom, past the strolling mariachis, past the grade school kids turning karate kicks, past the diners who had paid \$300-a-plate admission, stood a raised VIP table that pulled together some of the political pashas of Chicago's burgeoning Latino community. Mayor Richard M. Daley, the night's guest of honor, was being feted for his leadership over 10 years of school reform by the fundraising banquet's host, the United Neighborhood Organization--known simply as UNO--a primarily Mexican American nonprofit ally of the mayor's since his first successful run for office in 1989. Daley had run as "the mayor of education," and UNO had joined him in spearheading a school reform movement to get Local School Councils elected.

At the banquet, another parallel was drawn. Just as Daley had taken on political risk when he assumed control of the public schools in 1995, UNO had taken a risk on charter schools that once came close to failing.

"UNO has been thinking outside the box," Daley told the audience of nearly 200 during the December event at the Hyatt on Wacker Drive. "That's why this grassroots organization is so meaningful to so many communities, because they get it," Daley said.

What UNO also "gets" is how Chicago works and, quite literally, a seat at the table.

On the dais were the CEO of UNO, Juan Rangel; the group's director of policy, Phil Mullins; Chicago Public Schools Superintendent Arne Duncan and Chief Operating Officer David Vitale; Victor Reyes, leader of the Hispanic Democratic Organization, or HDO; 12th Ward Alderman George A. Cardenas; 14th Ward Alderman Ed Burke; former UNO director and 25th Ward Alderman Daniel Solis; Lizveth Mendez, Latino liaison for Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan; and Jorge Perez, president of the Calumet Area Industrial Commission.

UNO is not a political operation and, as a nonprofit, lawfully bound to stay out of politics. But UNO is interested in building power for Chicago Latinos in ways traditionally associated with political groups. Over the past decade, with an effectiveness that might put other nonprofits to shame or envy, UNO has done it all while building political muscle. The group has developed political connections from City Hall to the White House, steering their employees and volunteers into high-ranking government jobs or appointments on influential boards and commissions.

Big-time national players have taken notice. Former President Bill Clinton once courted UNO. The group has promoted the interests of North America's largest waste hauler, Waste Management Inc., utility giant ComEd and Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.

In this sense, UNO is a case study in the way Latinos may come to exert their political power in Chicago, outside the traditional routes of the ballot box or the precinct captain. Besides the services it provides in Latino neighborhoods, UNO is putting a new twist on community activism by providing leadership training to a Hispanic elite, some of whom have gone on to land city and state government jobs.

If Latinos ever come to dominate city politics, they will owe it partly to the loud waves generated by reform-minded neighborhood activists and political operations like the Hispanic Democratic Organization. But Latino power is also being achieved through the insider connections quietly being fostered by UNO.

Organizers and reporters know UNO as a politically connected community group that traded its confrontation tactics of the 1980s for insider access at City Hall in the 1990s and today. It is a group that once cornered a male U.S. Senator in a women's restroom over his refusal to meet with their leaders and now holds fundraising banquets to which the mayor lends his name.

UNO hasn't abandoned its roots in radical Alinsky-style organizing tactics so much as applied them in a way a rabble-rouser could scarcely imagine--to court large corporations and train young, Latino professionals in law, finance and business for politics and public service.

The group still serves the community by helping naturalize tens of thousands of immigrants, linking low-income Hispanics with health care, and providing Latino families with blockbuster field trips like a free day at the Field Museum and taking 1,500 families to hear the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. In addition, the group has a solid record of running charter schools, training Local School Council candidates to get elected, and forcing government to build elementary schools and vocational centers.

"UNO is still challenging the status quo," says Rangel, who has headed the organization since 1996.

It's a phrase that comes up often in Rangel's public speeches, his interviews with press and in UNO publications. At first, it can be confusing to see what status quo to which he is referring. As UNO's executive director, Rangel has frequently been quoted in the press supporting Daley's school closures under Renaissance 2010, the University of Illinois at Chicago's expansion into Pilsen, English-only immigrant education and the reopening of a South Chicago dump, which UNO helped close nearly 20 years ago.

But it appears that the status quo to which he refers is not the one on the fifth floor of City Hall or headquartered at the Chicago Public Schools' central office. It's the status quo of Latino and other community activists groups wedded to a '60s style of community activism and left-liberal politics.

UNO spells it out in its mission statement, which lists the problems facing Hispanic immigrants-high drop-out rates, gang violence and teenage pregnancy-and then states, "While many have approached this scenario by casting Hispanics as a victimized community in need of social justice, UNO has worked with Hispanics as a population willing and able to take full advantage of American possibilities."

To critics, the group's conservative, up-by-their-bootstraps philosophy is another way in which UNO has sold out its confrontation politics. "Just listen to Juan Rangel. It's like he's a Republican, always blaming the victim," said Wilfredo Cruz, a former Chicago Reporter employee who tracked the group for two years in the 1980s for his University of Chicago doctorate and now teaches at Columbia College.

Others doubt UNO's ability to keep close ties in City Hall and Chicago Public Schools and remain community advocates. "They're not community organizers. They're not out there agitating for justice," said Alejandra Ibanez, head of the Pilsen Alliance, a community development group. "They seem to be the official Latino spokesperson for [the Chicago Public Schools]."

Jesus "Chuy" Garcia, director of the Little Village Community Development Corporation, questions why Daley and Duncan have been featured guests at UNO fundraisers. "It's one thing to have a contract," Garcia said. "It's another to have these people lend their names to you to raise money for your organization."

But 25th Ward Alderman Danny Solis was no stranger to the radical politics of the 1970s when he helped start UNO in 1980. By that time, Solis had co-founded Latino Youth Alternative High School on the Southwest Side. "When I ran Latino Youth high school, I had Marxists, Maoists, anarchists, leftists, teaching there," said Solis. "But it's a different era."

Others pointed out UNO was also close to Harold Washington and other mayors. "They put Harold Washington on a pedestal," said former UNO South Side organizer Todd Dietterle. Washington appointed an UNO member as a City College trustee and rewarded the group with insider access to police data. That's not to say UNO's relationship to Daley and Washington are cut from the same cloth. For instance, UNO refused to take on city government contracts in the 1980s to maintain their political independence. And the group turned over the police data to the Reporter, which used it to write a September 1983 story on the unequal distribution of cops in minority neighborhoods.

However, since 2003, the group has received more than \$1 million in city contracts.

As a nonprofit, UNO is kept from direct politicking. But the plucky group owes its rapid growth to its shrewd political alliances and its ability to provide cover for politicians as a community voice.

UNO often draws comparisons to the HDO, due to its insider access at City Hall and citywide profile. But the groups are different in many ways. HDO's base is made up of blue-collar city workers, enlisted into doing campaign work as part of their membership.

Rangel declined to provide UNO member tallies to the Reporter, saying the group is not a membership-driven organization. He did say UNO has "15,000 contacts with whom they work." Those contacts include a broad range of individuals, but UNO targets middle-class professionals for its leadership training.

As Chicago's Latino communities have grown and matured, there are roughly four groups that have power in the city. Citywide, there is the HDO and UNO. In Little Village, there is a faction allied to 22nd Ward Alderman Ricardo Munoz and Garcia, a former state senator. And, on the Northwest Side, a group of largely Puerto Rican politicians is allied to U.S. Rep. Luis Gutierrez.

UNO has often sparred with the Little Village-based faction. Almost a mirror opposite of UNO, the 22nd Ward operation prides itself in its frequent disagreements with Daley and doesn't hesitate to dip into confrontational, protest politics. "It's very gimmicky where you have leaders, elected officials and community activists that are constantly doing the same old thing, the '60s thing--'We're going to fight the power,' kind of deal," Rangel said. "That's something we're not interested in."

Nowhere is UNO more known--loved and hated--than inside the Chicago Public Schools. The group started off in the early 80s fighting for schools in overcrowded Latino neighborhoods. The construction of Zapata Elementary Academy in Little Village and the West Side Technical Institute in Pilsen are some of the fruits of their aggressive community organizing.

Throughout the early '90s, UNO gained power, admiration and notoriety when Local School Council candidates it had trained started getting elected. The group also received contracts from Chicago Public Schools to operate parent-involvement programs. "We have a good relationship with the Chicago Public Schools. Is there a lot of gray area? You bet," Rangel said. "There are a lot of people at Chicago Public Schools that don't like us. They don't want to see us succeed. It's not personal. It's a power relationship because there are a lot of folks that see UNO as a threat."

After the school reform law of 1988 passed, parent-led Local School Councils, or LSCs, were established for each public school in the city. Parents could band together and get themselves elected to the councils, giving them the authority to hire and fire principals

and oversee school budgets of millions of dollars, in some cases. Power transferred from the school board to parents.

Using names it had collected from community events in Latino neighborhoods, like health fairs, UNO developed a massive phone banking operation. One of the hopefuls the group called was Rangel, then a 24-year-old graphic illustrator who would come to head UNO seven years later. "I thought the UNO training was going to be about education, what school reform is, the role of an LSC, and the powers of LSC, what you do if you get elected, or even about issues that schools face," Rangel said.

It wasn't. Instead, the training was all about how to win a seat. The message was, Rangel said, "If you honestly want to get something done, then get yourself a seat on the council. If you're not willing to try, then get out of the way."

So, when Local School Councils that had been slated and trained by UNO started winning elections en masse and taking the inevitable step of firing principals the council members had long considered incompetent, observers saw UNO flexing power at the risk of children's education. "It was CPS principals' jobs that UNO threatened. There was a status quo in each school. Some folks saw it as a pure power move," said Dietterle, who directed UNO's organizing on the Southeast Side in the early '90s. "You have to have power to make changes."

But, by 2001, UNO would find itself in two places it had never imagined--running the day-to-day operations of a charter school and losing the argument with a political rival about where a new high school would be built.

In 1998, UNO opened the Octavio Paz Charter School, split over two campuses in Little Village and the Near West Side, that promised an English-immersion model in the fundamentals of math and reading. UNO had contracted with the Boston-based Advantage schools, a now-defunct educational management organization, to run the school. But soon the school, whose student population is made up of blacks and Latinos, saw the students posting some of the worst test scores in the city. "I think there were a lot of people hoping that would be the end of UNO," Rangel said. "The school was failing, and UNO was getting clobbered for having a failing charter school."

Ultimately, UNO took over the day-to-day operation of the charter school and, by 2003, reversed its decline in test scores. It now has some of the highest test scores among the city's charter schools. UNO opened a second charter elementary school, Rufino Tamayo, in Gage Park on the Southwest Side at the start of this school year. At the December banquet honoring Daley, Veronica Alanis, the head of UNO's board turned to Duncan and publicly asked for the go-ahead to open two more charter schools in the 2006-2007 school year.

In May 2001, the scene of fasting Mexican mothers and grandmothers on a vacant, industrial lot in Little Village played nightly on the news. Ostensibly, the women camped out at the corner of 31st Street and Kostner Avenue for a hunger strike--a public protest to make Chicago Public Schools build a high school it had promised for years. But the issue would soon turn into a turf war.

On one side were the hunger-striking women, the Little Village Community Development Corporation, and Munoz, who has often clashed with UNO.

On the other side was UNO, which took out full-page ads in the Latino press claiming the high school site preferred by Munoz and the development corporation would endanger children attending a nearby grade school, and that an alternate location on 31st Street and Kedzie Avenue would better serve Little Village students. Munoz countered by leading mariachis through school board meetings and blasting the board for its cozy relationship with UNO.

In short, it was Daley allies versus Daley critics, '60s-style public spectacle protest politics versus UNO's insider political culture. And, surprisingly, it was a battle UNO lost.

Chicago Public Schools would build the school on the west side of Little Village, giving much say in the development of the school's curriculum and layout to the Little Village Community Development Corporation. "I think our energy could have been better used on other things. But I don't regret it," Rangel said in retrospect. "I still think that our plan would have been a much better plan than what was eventually built."

On the heels of their success with school reform, UNO turned its attention to the tens of thousands of immigrants, eligible for citizenship under Clinton's 1994 immigration reform efforts.

During the 1990s, UNO naturalized nearly 50,000 immigrants, often in mass ceremonies, including one attended by 18,000 immigrants at Soldier Field. The naturalizations attracted not only the attention of city and state political figures but also members of Clinton's staff. "We had all sorts of politicians approaching us with questions about the list," said Dieterle.

As director of UNO, Solis exchanged correspondence with the Clinton administration about these new voters' potential.

"Naturalized citizens take their status of being citizens more seriously than people who are born citizens," Solis said. Around this time, UNO received national media exposure, being labeled a Democratic activist group by a syndicated columnist and The Washington Post.

Solis would even meet with President Clinton in 1995 over dessert at a Chicago restaurant. The entire Solis family attended Clinton's 1996 inauguration. And the family's relationship to the Clintons remains intact. Patti Solis Doyle, the alderman's sister, who once worked as Hillary Clinton's scheduler, is now running her 2006 re-election campaign for the U.S. Senate.

More recently, UNO's national profile has attracted attention from huge corporations looking for grassroots support for controversial business plans in black or Latino communities. In Chicago, UNO has often been the exclusive Latino group tapped for these efforts.

In 2004, Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. funded "Don't Count Us Out," a coalition of racial minority groups including UNO and others in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles to challenge the use of Local People Meters operated by Nielsen Media Research. The meters allegedly undercounted black and Latino viewers. The Murdoch-owned FOX network aired shows geared toward racial minorities.

That same year, a coalition of groups, including the American Lung Association, chose UNO as the organization to promote the Chicago smoking ban, focusing on the safety hazard to Hispanic restaurant workers as the victims of secondhand smoke. "Who are the people working in these smoky clubs and bars?" asked Rangel in an interview with the Reporter. "It's our people."

Rangel was also described by Crain's Chicago Business as one of the "leading minority figures" to join Consumers Organized for Reliable Electricity, or CORE. It's a group that received seed money from ComEd and is advocating deregulation in Illinois--a move that could push electric bill charges up by as much as 20 percent if ComEd meets no regulatory resistance when its 10-year rate freeze expires in 2007. Crain's also reported that most of the members of CORE, "are business folks who instinctively oppose government regulation." But the presence of a Latino leader like Rangel and African Americans like Rainbow/PUSH leaders Martin King and the Rev. Jesse Jackson have raised questions about how much influence ComEd has in minority communities.

Another large corporation has turned to UNO to muster grassroots support for a business plan some have questioned.

The mass dumping of solid waste in Chicago neighborhoods has been banned since the 1980s, due in no small part to the aggressive, grassroots organizing of UNO, then a young, upstart Latino activist group.

So it came as a surprise to some Southeast Side activists when UNO organizers breezed into their office last summer and asked them to collect signatures. "They were looking for workers," said Nora Coronado from the Juan Diego Community Center. "They said it was to get a park in the area. They were looking for \$20 for every page of signatures."

But what Coronado said the organizers didn't mention is that Waste Management officials wanted to dump waste for five years in the "valley" between the two peaks of its landfill on the Southeast Side. At the end of the five years, Waste Management planned to build a park on top of the landfill, donate a nearby marsh to the city and the company said the new dumping would provide 200 jobs. Waste Management also promised to put \$16 million in an endowment for local community and environmental groups, said Bill Plunkett, a company spokesman.

Coronado feels the UNO organizers misled her but admits she may have been naive in not asking for a more detailed explanation of the petition drive. "All they told me is that we were going to get a park in the area," said Coronado. "They never said they wanted to start throwing garbage in the dumps."

But Rangel told reporters that paid petition collecting is standard practice for advocacy organizations. "Then, as is still the case today, UNO's primary concern about landfill expansion in South Chicago centered around the use of additional nearby areas, including the Big Marsh, as landfill," he wrote in a letter to the Daily Southtown, which featured the most comprehensive coverage of the dump debate.

While UNO initially made its name in South Chicago, getting modern health clinics and schools built, the group hasn't actively organized in the neighborhood for more than a decade.

The group got reacquainted with Southeast Chicago and Waste Management through a contact in their leadership program for young Latino professionals, the Metropolitan Leadership Institute, dubbed MLI. "I introduced Juan [Rangel] to Waste Management," said Perez, head of the Calumet Area Industrial Commission and a lifelong Southeast Sider.

When asked why UNO would associate itself with a former adversary, Solis said: "There are no permanent friends and no permanent enemies." Solis was a part of the original drive to establish the moratorium in the 1980s.

UNO is poised to fill a leadership void that the HDO may soon be leaving behind. In Latino political and social circles, there's a lot of open talk of what will replace the HDO. For years, it's been the city's pre-eminent Latino pipeline for registering voters, getting and maintaining city jobs and electing Daley-backed Latino candidates. But, recently, the organization has been named a co-conspirator in a City Hall patronage scheme in documents filed by U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald and has been linked to the Hired Truck Scandal.

For the first time, a group of candidates running for state, county and city posts is openly running as an anti-HDO slate. In December, Representative Gutierrez, with veiled

references to the HDO, announced his formation of an as-yet unnamed Latino political organization. Homero Tristan's Chicago Latino 100, a fledgling political action committee that has met only half its goal of recruiting 100 well-heeled Latinos, says the HDO's "bad apples" need to be pruned. He talks openly about his organization one day being a part of a larger, reformed Chicago Latino leadership.

Given UNO's closeness to City Hall, many critics of the group have long believed it is secretly connected to HDO. "It's an assumption," said Cruz, of Columbia. "But it's a valid assumption."

But Rangel denies it. "I know a lot of people like to believe we're tied at the hip," he said.

There are a few overlaps. HDO was a principal co-sponsor of UNO's December banquet honoring Mayor Daley. And Victor Reyes, one of HDO's leaders, was in attendance.

On the other hand, through its Metropolitan Leadership Institute, UNO has also played a hand in training candidates from other political camps. For instance, Eduardo Garza, an MLI alum, is running for state senator with the backing of Munoz, a veteran of battles with both UNO and the HDO. Rangel pointed out that 1st Ward Alderman Manuel "Manny" Flores ran against an HDO-backed incumbent in 2003 even as he completed the MLI training.

Yet, in January, Rangel penned an op-ed for the Chicago Tribune titled "On Power: In Defense of Patronage and HDO." The editorial defended HDO and gave a brief history of Chicago ethnic and racial groups using City Hall clout to build power.

"Barring any illegal activity, which has only been rumored and alleged, and which I am not condoning, HDO has excelled by the only reasonable measure of politics: power," Rangel wrote. He said the HDO and its "power through patronage" were nothing new from the Chicago patronage organizations, which pushed Irish, African Americans and Polish to political power. And he portrayed the group's detractors as either failed politicians unable to build their own Latino political muscle, or news media, "which often misunderstand the nature of immigrant success."

So, regardless of whether UNO is a foe or an ally, its scope of influence may be complementary to HDO, pulling in middle-class and professional Latinos from outside the trenches of city government. "It's there to complement the HDO guys," said Perez, who as a Southeast Side native knows many rank-and-file HDO members. "I don't want to work on a garbage truck. That guy busting his ass on the streets. He wants his [child] to go to college, to be part of something like MLI."

But there's the larger question of whether the leaders UNO is now turning out are in touch with the Latino grassroots.

Graciela Silva-Schuch, who headed UNO's Back of the Yards chapter in the 1980s, feels the organization cut off its grassroots leadership development in going citywide. "I feel, if we could have just stayed in the neighborhoods a couple more years, we'd have a lot more community leaders by now," she said.

"They certainly have a harder time going from downtown to the neighborhoods," added Marilu Gonzalez, a former UNO board president.

Some might question whether UNO is the same place where someone like Rangel, a 24-year-old illustrator when he first joined the organization, as he said, "could be plucked from obscurity and encouraged to take on a leadership role."

Rangel disputes that notion. "There is a whole generation of people in our community that have grown up in our neighborhoods, have gone to school, have successfully completed school, gone on to become attorneys, bankers, people that work in academia--you name it," Rangel said. "Yet they are not allowed to play a public role as leaders, because they don't fit the paradigm of what a leader is.

"Somehow a leader has to be grassroots, activist, you know. We don't believe that," he added.

What UNO is developing is a Latino leadership engine that moves in close tandem, if never in complete unison, with the leadership of City Hall and the Chicago Public Schools. "UNO is looking to build the master Latino list. If you're looking for qualified Latinos, this is where you go," said Tristan, an MLI graduate.

Any community group worth its salt wants a say in policy or hiring. But UNO may be unusual in having rode the rails of community activism and a surging Latino population to become a powerbroker in the city.

Rangel might say there's nothing wrong with that. "Power is defined as the ability to act. It's not negative or positive. It's neutral; it's simply the ability to act," he said.

Jeff Kelly Lowenstein, Frank Life and Sean Redmond helped research this article.

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