

Can a City Be Progressive?

by **PETER DREIER**

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"I'm an unabashed progressive," Los Angeles Mayor-elect Antonio Villaraigosa told an enthusiastic standing-room-only crowd at the Take Back America conference in Washington, DC, in June, "but I'm not a knee-jerk."

Villaraigosa's landslide victory (59 percent to 41 percent) on May 17 over incumbent Mayor James Hahn, a moderate Democrat, has raised hopes among progressives about moving the city in a new direction. But what does it mean to be a progressive at the municipal level when so many powerful forces--a city whose financial needs far exceed its revenue-raising capacity, a President and governor hostile to the plight of cities and the poor, a business and development community dominated by shortsighted executives resistant to taxes, living wages and regulation, and the ever-present threat of capital mobility--are arrayed against reform?

Villaraigosa understands that to be an effective mayor of America's second-largest city, he needs not only to help progressive forces expand and mobilize their base but also to strengthen his support among a significant segment of the city's suburban moderates and the enlightened wing of the business community. He needs to be a new kind of probusiness mayor--by redefining a "healthy business climate" to mean prosperity that is shared by working people, one that lifts the working poor into the middle class.

Villaraigosa's wide victory margin was spread across all key electoral demographics. He won majorities among all income groups, from 54 percent among those earning more than \$100,000 to 67 percent among voters below \$20,000. He won 84 percent of the Latino vote, 60 percent of all union members and more than half of black and Jewish voters. He also expanded his support among white voters in the suburban middle-class San Fernando Valley, garnering 48 percent of their votes compared with 34 percent in 2001, when he lost to Hahn.

The election outcome was not only a personal victory for the 52-year-old Villaraigosa but also a triumph for LA's progressive movement. Nationwide, labor union membership is shrinking, but in Los Angeles it is growing, particularly in sectors dominated by immigrants who work as janitors, security guards, garment workers, healthcare aides, maids and cooks in the tourism industry, and laundry workers. Unions have forged alliances with community groups, faith-based organizations and immigrants' rights activists. As a result, the number of progressive and labor-friendly politicians in City Hall (as well as in the state legislature) has increased. Last week, Martin Ludlow, one of Villaraigosa's key allies and former political director of the LA County Federation of Labor, left his City Council seat after two years to head the powerful labor group, left vacant by the untimely death of Miguel Contreras in May.

Labor's clout has translated into progressive municipal policy. The city adopted a strong living wage law in 1997. In 2002 it enacted a \$100 million annual municipal housing trust fund (although Mayor Hahn failed to fully fund it), and last year, the city passed an anti-"big box" ordinance and an antisweatshop policy.

How can Villaraigosa, who takes office on July 1, possibly live up to such high expectations? He will be judged by his ability to take care of municipal housekeeping chores like fixing potholes and reducing traffic congestion. But he will also be judged on whether he can address the plight of the poor and the struggling lower-middle class--to promote what activists call a "growth with justice" agenda. The city's economy is booming, but the divide between the rich and everyone else is widening. LA has more millionaires than any other city, but it is also the nation's capital of the working poor. Almost 40 percent of Angelenos lack health insurance. Rents now average more than \$1,200 per month, and the median sales price exceeds \$350,000. Traffic congestion and inadequate public transit make LA the most polluted (and unhealthy) metro area in the country. Overcrowded and underfunded schools threaten the city's economic future. Despite a decline in crime, LA is still one of the nation's most dangerous cities.

Even before taking office, Villaraigosa, a former union organizer, demonstrated his political skills and pro-labor sympathies. Last week, Villaraigosa and Ludlow engaged in shuttle diplomacy to settle a threatened strike by hotel workers, resulting in important gains, including anew contract that expires at the same time next year as contracts in other major cities, giving the union key leverage with national hotel chains.

Tourism is a key part of LA's economy, which is dominated by industries that are not highly mobile, including the port, hospitals and universities, retail stores, commercial offices and hotels. This makes threats to pull up stakes less compelling and gives the city (and progressives) more negotiating power. But LA is also a major manufacturing center, now dominated by low-wage nonunion firms, including food processing and garments, which are perpetually threatening to flee.

To leverage the city's strong economy, Villaraigosa can promote a more enlightened view of business's responsibility to the broader community. He can encourage employers to support workers' rights to unionize. He can support ordinances that require developers to share in the city's strong housing market by setting aside, say, 15 percent of units for low-income and moderate-income families. He can champion a linked-deposit policy that uses the city's deposits to encourage banks to end redlining and predatory practices. Building on the living wage model, he can focus municipal subsidies on industries and firms that provide decent pay, benefits and upward mobility.

The new mayor will need to reach out to the suburbs within the region (LA County alone has eighty-eight separate municipalities) to forge a sense of common purpose--for example, to avoid bidding wars for jobs and investment--to improve the region's business climate. Villaraigosa has already announced that he intends to chair the regional Metropolitan Transit Authority and to use his influence on the board to improve bus and rail service, used primarily by the working poor.

Around the country, progressives have become more sophisticated at municipal policy as well as politics. This is a tribute to the alliances between unions, community organizations and faith-based groups that have emerged in the past decade. There is growing momentum at the local level for progressive urban policies, such as the rising number of cities (now more than 120) that have adopted living wage laws, and a handful (including Santa Fe and San Francisco) that have passed citywide minimum wage laws. The Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (www.laane.org), an organization initially created in the mid-1990s to fight for the living wage law, has become a powerful research, policy and organizing center, expanding its vision to promote "accountable development." LAANE's success has encouraged progressive activists and local labor councils in about fifteen other cities (including Atlanta, San Jose, Boston, New York, Denver, San Diego, Milwaukee and Miami) to create parallel organizations that--along with progressive policy think tanks like Good Jobs First (www.goodjobsfirst.org), ALICE (www.highroadnow.org) and PolicyLink (www.policylink.org)--now form the intellectual foundation for a "high road" economic strategy at

the municipal, regional and state levels.

Five years ago, grassroots activists, policy practitioners and academic allies created the Progressive Los Angeles Network (PLAN) (www.progressivela.org), which developed a twenty-one-point policy agenda before the 2001 municipal elections, a process that helped guide the progressive bloc on the City Council and contributed to Villaraigosa's mayoral campaigns. (The agenda is included in my new co-authored book, *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City*.)

Progressive municipal reform--to improve housing conditions, unionize low-wage workers in the service and light manufacturing sectors, resist bank redlining and predatory lending, improve public schools, fight against environmental hazards, expand public transit--can win real improvements in people's lives. But as President Bush has demonstrated, one stroke of the pen in Washington--such as deep cuts in Section 8 housing subsidies--can wipe out years of policy success at the local level.

Villaraigosa knows there are many problems that cannot be solved at the local level alone. Indeed, in some ways, this is a terrible time to be mayor of a major American city. As mayor of the nation's second-largest city, Villaraigosa will have a forum to challenge the misguided priorities of the Bush Administration and the GOP-controlled Congress, who have turned their backs on cities and inner-ring suburbs. Federal funds for affordable housing, schools, public transit, public safety and healthcare are woefully inadequate. City officials, reeling from the loss of federal and state aid, had no choice but to cut essential services, including public safety, libraries, road repair and public schools. Bush's priorities--cutting taxes for the rich, weakening regulations on business that protect consumers, workers and the environment, and reducing spending for domestic social programs--come at the expense of cities and inner-ring suburbs. Bush has imposed many new mandates on cities--such as increased homeland security and No Child Left Behind requirements for schools--without providing the funds necessary for the cities to comply. Let's call it fend-for-yourself federalism.

The result is that most big-city mayors are trapped in a fiscal straitjacket, and Congress, now dominated by suburban districts because of both changing demographics and gerrymandering, often overlooks this situation. We cannot significantly solve our nation's urban problems without federal reforms. As a result, progressives have increasingly recognized that an effective urban progressive movement must start in cities and move outward to working-class suburbs and some liberal middle-class suburbs, to create the political momentum for a renewed federal commitment to urban America.

To level the playing field for union organizing campaigns, we need to reform the nation's unfair labor laws. To improve conditions for the growing army of the working poor, we need to raise the federal minimum wage and expand participation in the Earned Income Tax Credit. To house our families and our workforce, we need to expand federal subsidies. To address the nation's healthcare crisis, we need some form of universal national health insurance. To improve our public schools, especially those that serve the nation's poorest children, we need to increase federal funding for smaller classrooms, adequate teacher training and sufficient books and equipment. To redirect private investment into cities and older suburbs, we need to provide sufficient funds to clean up toxic urban brownfields. To address the problems of growing traffic congestion, we need federal funds to improve public transit of all kinds as well as federal laws to limit tax breaks and other incentives that promote suburban sprawl and "leapfrog" development on the fringes of metropolitan areas.

In the early 1900s, New York City was a caldron of seething problems--poverty, slums, child labor, epidemics, sweatshops and ethnic conflict. Out of that turmoil, activists created a "progressive" movement, forging a coalition of immigrants, unionists, muckraking journalists, settlement house workers, middle-class suffragists and upper-class philanthropists. Tenement and public health reformers worked alongside radical socialists. While they spoke many languages, the movement found

its voice through organizers, clergy and sympathetic politicians. Their victories provided the intellectual and policy foundations of the New Deal three decades later.

The growing efforts of today's municipal progressive movements and activist officials like Antonio Villaraigosa are critical. If they can demonstrate that cities can be well managed as well as laboratories of progressive policy reform, they will lay the political groundwork for the next New Deal.

About Peter Dreier

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