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# LA's Progressive Mosaic: Beginning to Find Its Voice

When members of the LA janitors' union decided to go on strike this past April, their success was far from guaranteed.

**Peter Dreier and Kelly Candaele** August 10, 2000 | This article appeared in the August 21, 2000 edition of *The Nation*.

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When members of the LA janitors' union decided to go on strike this past April, their success was far from guaranteed. The union, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1877, was up against some of the city's wealthiest and most politically powerful businessmen. Any strike is a gamble, and this one was particularly risky in that the building owners were threatening to replace the largely immigrant workforce.

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But when the strike came, the public response was overwhelmingly supportive. Not a day went by without an article or column in the *Los Angeles Times* about how the struggle of the primarily Latino janitors reflected LA's class and ethnic divisions. Republican Mayor Richard Riordan, who refused to sign a living-wage ordinance three years ago, told the building owners they should pay up. LA's Cardinal Roger Mahony held a mass for the strikers, while Rabbi Steven Jacobs conducted a labor-oriented Passover Seder. During the janitors' numerous marches through the city's wealthy areas, office workers emerged from highrise buildings to raise a fist in support or flash a sign of victory.

As SEIU official Eliseo Medina remarked, "In the past we were used to getting only one finger, so this [victory sign] was a welcome change."

For union organizers and community activists, the janitors' triumph after three weeks on strike signaled that Los Angeles--a sprawling city of almost 4 million people, at least one-third of them immigrants, with the widest economic divide in the nation--might become a test case for whether progressives can forge coalitions strong enough to transform the daily lives of millions who have not benefited from the stock market frenzy or the rosy promises of the global economy. The potential for an urban progressive renaissance is the result of painstaking organizing, small victories that have been consolidated and built upon, and the recognition by activists that dramatic economic and population shifts required a dynamic response.

"Community groups and unions have always talked about economic justice, but now these issues are resonating with the mainstream, the media, United Way and even some business folks," explains Torie Osborn, director of the Liberty Hill Foundation, which funds grassroots organizing projects. "It's a whole different atmosphere than it was just

—progressives must create the political space for the president to represent the majority of Americans.

three or four years ago."

**Peter Dreier and Donald Cohen**

The Los Angeles County Federation of Labor has become a solid institutional base for organizing, research, coalition-building and political muscle. Under the leadership of Miguel Contreras, formerly of the United Farm Workers, the labor federation has reached out beyond its membership to forge coalitions with community-based organizations, the clergy and housing and immigrants' rights activists. "Community allies are essential for obtaining workplace goals, and issues important to union members are not exclusive to the workplace," says Contreras.

One sign of progress is the city's successful living-wage movement, which pushed through a law in 1997 despite Riordan's opposition. Although the law reaches only a small proportion of the working poor--fewer than 15,000 employees--organizers view it as a building block for organizing low-wage workers and changing public consciousness about the market's inability to provide a fair wage. Activists have also worked to expand the scope of the law. With strong labor, clergy and community support, Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) has won provisions requiring that all businesses with city contracts over \$25,000 and of three months or longer pay their employees at least \$7.72 per hour with health benefits (\$8.97 without). And on major development projects, LAANE--with the strategic support of progressive City Councilwoman Jackie Goldberg--has helped secure local and minority hiring guarantees and "card check" union organizing neutrality agreements. In seaside Santa Monica, activists have proposed a living-wage law that would cover employees in prosperous local hotel, restaurant and shopping districts, which have benefited from large-scale public investment.

Unions are also taking on social issues once considered beyond the purview of organized labor. "Housing is the biggest financial problem our members face," says John Grant, vice president of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 770. "We can't just focus on problems in the workplace." Indeed, LA spends less on housing than any major city, has one of the lowest homeownership rates in the country (39 percent) as well as a serious slum problem, and almost three-quarters of low-income families spend more than half their income on housing. The UFCW has been working with housing activists on a campaign to subsidize new units through a local Housing Trust Fund, to be endowed in part by a new "linkage" fee on the city's booming commercial development projects.

Meanwhile, new alliances among environmentalists and community and labor groups are attempting to link clean air and economic concerns through issues like community development, housing, mass transit, job creation and workplace health. At a recent state AFL-CIO convention, a panel focused on increasing cooperation between labor and enviros on such issues as low-emission vehicles and promoting pro-union "smart growth." "When you add labor to the mix" of environmental and community groups, says Tim Carmichael of the Coalition for Clean Air, "that can be a powerful force."

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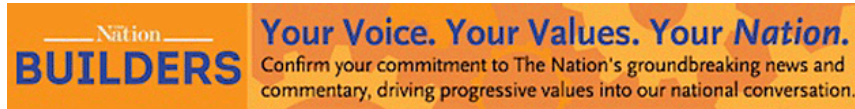
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