


E-mail address [HOME](#)[ABOUT](#)[CONTACT](#)[ADVERTISE](#)[DONATE](#)SEARCH: 

ECONOMY

[AlterNet](#) / *By Peter Dreier, Kelly Candaele* [COMMENT NOW!](#)

Labor Warrior

Under the leadership of Miguel Contreras, the Los Angeles labor movement grew while membership across the nation continues to shrink.

May 12, 2005 | Last Wednesday night, hundreds of janitors and security officers who work in downtown L.A. office buildings gathered outside one of those office towers for a candlelight vigil for Miguel Contreras, the 52-year-old labor leader who championed their cause and who died unexpectedly on May 6. The workers used their 10:15 p.m. "lunch" break to organize the memorial, one of several that took place that evening throughout the L.A. area.



Contreras, the secretary-treasurer of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, had orchestrated widespread support for the janitors from unions as well as politicians and clergy during a bitter three-week strike in 2000. The strike -- which helped put a human face on the plight

of L.A.'s immigrant low-wage workforce -- produced victory for the janitors, who won family health care, decent pay, and paid vacations.

Around the country, membership in labor unions is shrinking, but in Los Angeles it has been increasing for almost a decade, as has labor's political clout. This is due in large measure to Contreras' organizing savvy.

The son of farm workers who began working in the fields of central California at age 5, Contreras became an organizer for the United Farm Workers, and then with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union, before joining the L.A. County Fed as its political director. He moved into the top job in 1996.

Under Contreras' leadership, the L.A. area labor movement made enormous progress in three areas. First, union membership has grown, particularly in

sectors dominated by immigrants who work as janitors, garment workers, health care aides, maids and cooks in the tourism industry, and laundry workers. Second, the number of labor-friendly politicians in City Hall, the state legislature, and California's congressional delegation has dramatically increased. Third, the municipal and county governments have adopted more municipal public policies that improve the lives of working families than any other area.

In the labor movement, Central Labor Councils (umbrella organizations of unions structured on city or county jurisdictions) are generally not powerful bodies. But Contreras, through force of personality and political acumen, built the Los Angeles Federation into a model for the country. While most labor councils are content to provide campaign donations and a few volunteers to candidates running for office, Contreras went from courting politicians to picking them. Mayoral candidate and City Council member Antonio Villaraigosa, State Sen. Gil Cedillo, Speaker of the California Assembly Fabian Nunez and Los Angeles City Council member Martin Ludlow were all labor officials before building political careers with Contreras' backing. Contreras looked into labor's own ranks for "warriors" who, when a political argument turned into a fight, wouldn't immediately start talking about a "middle road compromise."

Perhaps the most dramatic example of organized labor's new political self-confidence occurred in 2000, when Contreras helped orchestrate the defeat of long-time incumbent Democratic Congressman Martin Martinez by Hilda Solis, a progressive Democratic state legislator who had made a name for herself as a vocal and effective feminist, environmental advocate and labor ally. Martinez, who represented a mostly Latino and Asian district in the working-class suburbs outside L.A., had angered union leaders and progressives when he offered to vote for the Clinton administration's fast-track trade-negotiating authority in return for White House support for a freeway extension in his district. He also alienated pro-choice voters by voting for a ban on late-term abortions. Solis won the support of EMILY's list and the Sierra Club but it was the all-out effort of the L.A. County Fed in the Democratic primary that had the biggest impact. Solis's 62-to-29 percent victory was one of a precious few instances in modern political history in which a progressive Democrat ousted a centrist incumbent.

Contreras' crucial insight was realizing that while previous labor leaders had mastered the "inside game" of politics, the future of the labor movement in Los Angeles would depend upon rebuilding local unions from the ground up. That meant he had to lead a declining labor movement "backwards," towards an organizing culture that had been all but lost or forgotten. It entailed reaching out to the new immigrant labor force and sending the message loud and clear that they were welcome in L.A.'s unions. It also meant that the windows of democracy had to be rattled a bit; that in order for working people to regain the ground they had lost they had to be in the streets, on voter's doorsteps, and inside churches and synagogues.

Like his mentor Cesar Chavez, and like Martin Luther King, Jr., Contreras knew that the church was a place where labor's message of an earthly redemption might resonate. In that sense, his political and spiritual centers were in the same place. He built a strong relationship with progressive clergy of all faiths, who were frequently found at rallies and on picket lines with striking janitors and grocery workers.

He strengthened labor's ties with L.A.'s African-American community, many of whom felt that surging Latino influence was at their expense. Last year, the L.A. County Fed helped Karen Bass, a veteran community organizer in South Los Angeles, win a seat in the state Assembly. Contreras was also working closely with SEIU to unionize security guards, a mostly black workforce employed in many of the same buildings with the newly-unionized Latino janitors.

Contreras also rebuilt labor's relationship with community organizations throughout Los Angeles. He supported affordable housing advocates in their successful fight to establish a municipal housing trust fund in the city. Immigrant rights advocates were welcome in the federation's offices. Along with Maria Elena Durazo, president of the local hotel workers union (and Contreras' wife), he played a key role in persuading the national AFL-CIO to reverse its stance on immigrants by endorsing amnesty for undocumented workers. He even reached out to the environmental community which labor had historically seen as hostile rather than a potential ally.

One of the most lasting legacies is the creation and support of the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LANNE), an organization set up to fight for living wage laws (which L.A. enacted in 1997), an anti-sweatshop law (adopted last year), and a "community benefits" criteria for business development in Los Angeles. Working with LANNE and other community organizations, Contreras shepherded so called "big box" legislation through the Los Angeles City Council. Now, if corporations like Wal-Mart want to do business in Los Angeles, they will be obligated to prove that they will not damage the community economically, socially and environmentally. Last year, union and community activists kept low-wage Wal-Mart out of adjacent Inglewood, a predominantly African-American and Latino city, and are working to do the same in suburban Rosemead.

All of the articles about his life written during the past week have emphasized his keen understanding of political power. But despite his skills in that arena, Contreras distrusted the cozy cloying dynamics of the inside political game -- the deals struck over lunch and the nod and wink of the pay-to-play political culture. He understood that the inside game was relatively easy but that rebuilding strong unions was the real historical challenge.

The unions in the County Federation of Labor are about 800,000 strong, a union density that is significantly higher than the national figure of 12 percent. Leaders who can see the future and act to create it are rare, particularly in the labor movement. The ongoing debates that threaten to split the AFL-CIO are taking place because unions in the rest of the country have so far failed to duplicate what Contreras helped accomplish in Los Angeles. History offers no guarantees, only opportunities. And there is no guarantee that the labor movement will survive. If it doesn't, it won't be because Contreras didn't warn the country's labor leaders -- and more importantly, went about doing something to change the situation.

*Kelly Candaele worked for the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor from 1990 to 1996. He is currently President of the Board of the Los Angeles Community College District. Peter Dreier is professor of politics at Occidental College and coauthor of *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City* (University of California Press, 2005).*

0

Like

0

Tweet

•

•

•

COMMENT NOW!

A A A

LIKED THIS

ARTICLE? [JOIN OUR EMAIL LIST](#)*Stay up to date with the latest headlines via email*

E-mail address

From the Web

by Taboola



Do These 7 Things and You'll Get Alzheimer's



New Rule in California: July 2013 - If You Pay For



11 Intelligence Killing Foods You Need To Avoid |



The O'Bannon Case against the NCAA: Real



Worst College Majors for Your Career



14 Best Pixie Cuts and Bobs for Your Face Shape

Recommended

by Taboola

- Do These 7 Things and You'll Get Alzheimer's [Newsmax Health](#)
- New Rule in California: July 2013 - If You Pay For Car Insurance Read This! [The Finance Guardian](#)
- 8 College Degrees That Aren't Worth the Money [Salary.com](#)
- 11 Intelligence Killing Foods You Need To Avoid | Fitnea – Stay Fit [Fitnea](#)
- The O'Bannon Case against the NCAA: Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel (HBO Sports) [Daily Motion - HBO](#)
- Worst College Majors for Your Career [Kiplinger](#)
- Top 10 Things Men Want From You [MyDailyMoment](#)
- 16 Female Celebs Who Are Aging Gracefully [Shape Magazine](#)

You might like:

- [The 6 Weirdest Things Women Do to Their Vaginas](#)
- [What Happened at My First Porn Shoot](#)
- [Women As Likely As Men to Want Casual Sex](#)
- [10 Common Ideas About Sex -- That May Be Totally Wrong](#)

Recommended by



EDUCATION

[Why Have Student Loans At All? Let's Get the Burdens of Debt off College Students' Backs -- And Make Wall St. Pick Up the Tab](#)

CIVIL LIBERTIES

[Toilet Bowl Phone Sex -- The Amazing Method That Prisoners Use to Stay Human and Communicate in America's Harsh Jails](#)



CIVIL LIBERTIES

[Professor from Right-Wing Evangelical University Touts Benefits of Domestic Drones to National Sheriff's Conference](#)

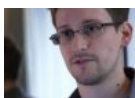


LABOR

[7 Key Things You Need to Know About the BART Strike in California](#)



[The Most Unhealthy Meal in America, Revealed](#)



[Edward Snowden: Obama Secretly Pressuring Countries to Refuse His Requests for Asylum](#)



NEWS & POLITICS

[Acquitted! Activist Who Faced 13 Years in Prison for Chalking Anti-Bank Slogans Gets Off Free](#)



[Even After One of Worst Worker Atrocities in Human History, Gap & Walmart Won't Get Serious About Preventing Another](#)



NEWS & POLITICS

[The High Cost of Giving Birth in the U.S.](#)



ENVIRONMENT

[Connecting the Dots Between Autism and Your Health](#)



MEDIA

[Are Shows Like Dexter to Blame for Inspiring Murder and Other Violent Crime?](#)



DRUGS

[How the Drug War Can Turn Environmental Activism Into a Deadly Undertaking](#)



WORLD

[Egypt's Revolution Continues: Millions Pour Into Streets to Call for President's Ouster](#)

IMMIGRATION



[Arizona Sues Community College System For Offering In-State Tuition to Undocumented Students](#)

△ △ △

0
Tweet

0
Like

submit
to
reddit

0



[How Portland's
Grassroots Activists Did
the 'Impossible' and
Pushed Back the
Politicians' Austerity
Agenda](#)

[How You \(and President
Obama\) Can Close
Guantanamo Prison](#)



[Why Have Student
Loans At All? Let's Get
the Burdens of Debt off
College Students' Backs
-- And Make Wall St.
Pick Up the Tab](#)

[See your ad here!](#)

[blog advertising](#) is good for

you.

<u>THE CASE FOR ALTERNET</u>	<u>PRESS INFORMATION</u>	<u>DONATE</u>
<u>OUR MISSION</u>	<u>WRITER GUIDELINES</u>	<u>MOBILE</u>
<u>WHO WE ARE</u>	<u>PRIVACY POLICY</u>	<u>LOGIN</u>
<u>ABOUT IMI</u>	<u>ADVERTISE ON ALTERNET</u>	
<u>OUR FOUNDATIONS</u>	<u>CONTACT US</u>	