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Madeline Janis: An Extraordinary Activist for the "Long Haul"

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At her Amherst College graduation in 1982, Madeline Janis wore an armband to protest the imprisonment of South Africa's anti-apartheid leader, Nelson Mandela. At the time, students at Amherst and other colleges were active in the movement against South Africa's apartheid government, urging their institutions to divest endowment funds from corporations that did business in that racist country that had put Mandela in jail since 1962. Janis, who at Amherst was also active in protests against U.S. support for right-wing Central American governments, was one of many students who wore a "Free Mandela" armband as they received their Amherst diplomas.



Madeline Janis

On Sunday, Janis will again be up on the stage at Amherst's commencement ceremony, but this time she'll be getting an honoring doctorate for her three decades of effective social activism. As the founder and long-time executive director of the Los Angeles Alliance for New Economy (LAANE), one of the country's most successful grassroots organizing groups, Janis is a national leader in the effort to combat working poverty and rebuild the country's middle class.

[Interviewing Janis](#) on his television show two weeks ago, Bill Moyers looked at the 53-year old activist and said: "I don't know anyone who has won more organizing victories than you."

Moyers was right. Janis has been an incredible political dynamo, building LAANE from a one-person operation with a typewriter and a fax machine in 1993 (the year after the city exploded in civil unrest), to an organization that now has a \$4.5 million budget and 50 staffpersons, including organizers, researchers, fundraisers, and communication specialists. LAANE brings together religious, community, and union leaders on behalf of working people to build a new economy based on good jobs, thriving communities and a healthy environment. Combining dynamic research, innovative public policy and the organizing of broad alliances, LAANE has helped lift tens of thousands of working people out of poverty and has won major health and environmental victories for communities throughout the sprawling Los Angeles County.

Janis' first big victory at LAANE was the successful campaign to pass one of the country's first living-wage laws in 1997, winning a unanimous vote in the Los Angeles City Council that overrode the veto of Republican Mayor Richard Riordan. Janis views all grassroots victories - in workplaces, communities, and at the ballot box - as stepping stones for further change. After winning the initial victory in 1997, for example, LAANE has successfully pushed city officials to increase the living wage and to expand it to incorporate more workers, including more than 3,000 workers at hotels near the LA airport.

Janis also pioneered a new approach to economic development, negotiating the nation's first community-benefits agreement, which has become a model for activists across the U.S. These agreements require private developers - as a quid pro quo for receiving city subsidies, tax breaks, and permits - to provide living wage jobs, affordable housing, neighborhood parks, and other much-needed benefits.

In 2004, Janis and LAANE made international news by stopping the world's largest corporation, Wal-Mart, from building a superstore in Inglewood, a working class suburb of Los Angeles. In the past several years, she has played a pivotal role in uniting labor, community and environmental leaders, initiating groundbreaking campaigns to create good green jobs and reduce pollution. Under her stewardship, LAANE helped enact an EPA-award-winning program to remove thousands of polluting diesel trucks that carry cargo from the LA port, the nation's dirtiest, and replace them with clean trucks. Earlier this year, that same coalition pushed the Los Angeles government to adopt a path-breaking recycling program that will improve air quality and upgrade working conditions for sanitation workers and those who work in recycling facilities.

Last November, after LAANE launched a two-year grassroots organizing campaign in adjacent Long Beach, 63% of voters supported an initiative to adopt a minimum wage of \$13 an hour, and five paid sick days, for employees of the city's many

hotels, most of them immigrant workers.

The *Los Angeles Times* described Janis' approach as "idealism backed by hard, practical politics." Indeed, she has been a masterful practitioner of being both an "outsider" and an "insider" simultaneously in Los Angeles' complex political culture. Although she's no stranger to protest, civil disobedience, and arrest, Janis has also played a key role in local politics. Working closely with LA's union and community leaders and rank-and-file activists, Janis has helped put pressure on elected officials (including progressive allies) in city government, the state legislature, and Congress to enact progressive legislation that improves living and working conditions for working people and their families.

As a sign of the LA labor movement's influence and the respect she's earned for her political savvy, former Mayor James Hahn appointed Janis to the powerful nine-member Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) in 2002. Four years later, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa re-appointed her, despite efforts by business lobby groups to thwart her reappointment.

For sure, Janis has made enemies among LA's business elite and conservative politicians. A writer for the libertarian Reason Foundation, which is based in Los Angeles, called Janis a "redevelopment thug" for holding up projects until developers made concessions to community groups around decent jobs, affordable housing, and other community benefits.

A few years ago the editor of the *Los Angeles Business Journal* criticized Janis for representing "special interests" in her capacity on the CRA board. The matter that triggered his column was the city's proposed investment of \$30 million in a new private museum in downtown LA. Janis refused to support the project unless the developer - a powerful figure in business and philanthropy - agreed to include community benefits, such as guaranteeing that at least 30% of good paying, career path construction jobs go to low income residents. The *Business Journal* called Janis' stand a "stick up."

Janis defended her actions in an article in which she wrote, "I plead guilty. I represent special interests," identifying the city's working people as her constituency. "The people whose interests I work to protect are L.A. County's 3.7 million low-income taxpayers and residents, who don't have lobbyists and who mostly can't take time off from work to attend public meetings," Janis explained. "That's my special interest and I'm proud of it."

Janis understood that her ability to be an effective CRA board member depended on the existence of a powerful base of union and community activists. Without pressure from well-organized grassroots groups, Janis told the *Los Angeles Times*, "no one is going to be thinking about poor people or middle-income people or even the right kind of planning we need to build the right quality of life."

At the same time, Janis has learned how to work with enlightened business leaders who understand that a healthy business climate requires an economy that shares prosperity with working families. Some of them even show up at LAANE's annual "City of Justice" awards dinner, which attracts about a thousand people, including many of the area's elected officials, community and labor activists, Hollywood celebrities, and philanthropic leaders. At this yearly gathering - always held at a unionized hotel -- Janis made sure to ask the audience to stand and give thanks to the waiters and waitresses who are serving them dinner.

Janis grew up in Los Angeles and Mexico. After graduating from Amherst with degrees in political science and Spanish, she attended UCLA law school. While still in law school, she assisted the Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN) in establishing its first full-time legal clinic for disenfranchised refugees. After getting her law degree in 1986, she worked at the Inner City Law Center, representing tenants and homeless people in slum housing litigation, and advocated for homeless disabled people who had been denied government benefits.

To be a more effective advocate, Janis wanted to learn how the system works from the inside. So she spent two years at a powerful downtown LA law firm, Latham & Watkins, on commercial litigation and land use matters. Today she says that her law degree, and her experience at the law firm, has been immensely helpful in her organizing work to shape progressive public policy and change the practices of major corporations and developers.

In 1989 she returned to CARECEN, serving for four years as executive director. There, she helped lead a successful campaign to legalize and regulate the activities of the mostly Latino immigrant sidewalk vendors. During this time, she also headed efforts to combat civil rights abuses of Central American immigrants by the L.A. Police Department and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and helped tens of thousands of Central American immigrants achieve legal immigrant status. Her work with immigrants impressed LA labor leaders Miguel Contreras and Maria Elena Durazo, who persuaded her to start a new organization dedicated to building bridges between unions, community groups, immigrant activists, faith groups, and others.

Last year, after 20 years at LAANE, Janis stepped down from her job as its executive director, handing the reigns to another organizing dynamo, Roxana Tynan. But Janis didn't leave LAANE. Instead, she assumed her current role as its national policy director, and she is now leading an ambitious campaign to help revive American manufacturing through the creation of middle-class jobs in clean transportation. She has met with White House and Department of Transportation officials, the heads of regional and local transportation agencies, executives of companies that manufacture subway cars, trains, and buses, and local community and labor groups to forge a national effort to invest public funds in companies that pay workers decent wages to produce transit vehicles that don't pollute the environment.

Janis, who has three children and two step-children in their 20s and 30s, is married to Donald Cohen, a veteran progressive activist who now runs In the Public Interest, a national resource center on privatization and responsible contracting.

Building a progressive movement that can win victories to challenge the nation's inequities, she told Bill Moyers, "is a long haul." That's why she devotes much of her time to identifying, recruiting, and training younger generations of students and workers to become effective organizers, researchers, and grassroots leaders. Over the years, LAANE has been a remarkable training ground for young activists.

Amherst College is honoring Janis as a role model for this generation of students, who have much to learn from her practical political skills, her persistence, and her optimism that a better society is possible.

Thanks to student activism, Amherst eventually did (in 1985) divest its endowment from South Africa. Under international

pressure, the South African government eventually did free Nelson Mandela, who later became the country's first black president. And today, Amherst students are involved in campaigns to get the college to divest from the fossil fuel industry and to change the college's way of dealing with sexual assaults on campus.

No matter what issue she's working on, Janis is always mindful of making sure that working people get to speak on their own behalf when it comes to influencing their employers, their unions, or their elected officials. As she told Bill Moyers:

"You have a struggling housekeeper in a hotel who cleans 25 rooms in a day and barely puts food on the table. The idea of her being able to fight for better working conditions -- a union in her hotel, a living wage -- that's going to move her a lot more than just the theory of being able to have a voice in her democracy."

Madeline Janis has used her remarkable talents to making democracy work for working people.

Peter Dreier teaches politics and chairs the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College. His most recent book is [The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame](#) (Nation Books, 2012).

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