



A GUIDE TO INSURGENCIES
FROM COAST TO COAST

By Peter Dreier

MOVING IN THE LABOR LAANE

THE FRONTAL ATTACKS WAGED AGAINST UNIONS IN WISCONSIN AND MANY other states in early 2011 have put the labor movement front and center in the national debate. While some see these battles as the beginning of the end for organized labor in the U.S., others believe that conservatives have given unions the spark they need to stage a comeback.

There's no doubt that Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's assault on the collective bargaining rights of public employees has energized the rank and file far beyond Madison. But anger and outrage aren't enough. For all its passion, labor's fight in Wisconsin and other states dominated by anti-union politics is mostly defensive. Indeed, it is hard to find a place anywhere in the country where the labor movement is playing offense.

For labor to make a comeback, it needs a broad strategy that combines workplace organizing, community alliances, and political mobilization. One place where unions are making headway is Los Angeles. Due in large measure to these successes in Los Angeles, California is the largest state to have increased labor density in the past decade. Since 2000, while union membership has declined nationwide from 13.5 percent to 11.9 percent (in

2010), in California it has increased from 16 percent to 17.5 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Moreover, the state's labor movement—anchored by over eight hundred thousand members in Los Angeles County (about 18 percent of the workforce)—waged effective electoral campaigns last November so that every statewide office is now held by a Democrat, including the governorship (now held by Jerry Brown). The L.A. County Federation of Labor has an impressive political mobilization apparatus that puts thousands of working people into the streets during election cycles to support pro-labor candidates.

L.A.'s success story, while impressive, is no miracle. It is the product of two decades of painstaking coalition building, electoral work, community organizing, and policy innovation. And while Los Angeles differs

significantly from other metropolitan regions in its demography, politics, and culture, much can be learned from what has been achieved there.

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The story of L.A.'s transformation into a hotbed of labor activism has many strands. The commitment—of the County Fed and several key unions—to organizing unorganized workers has been a key element. So, too, has been its commitment to forge alliances with community, ethnic, and religious groups. One of the groups primarily responsible for knitting together the workplace-and-community strategy has been the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), an advocacy organization whose mission is to rebuild L.A.'s dwindling middle class, clean up the region's environmental pollution, and change the definition of a "healthy business climate" to include prosperity that is widely shared.

Founded a year after the city's devastating 1992 civil unrest, LAANE was the brainchild of reformist labor leaders who knew that a new model was needed to advance a pro-worker agenda. Maria Elena Durazo, then the head of the local hotel workers union, and Miguel Contreras, the political director of the L.A. County Federation of Labor, understood that

the city's labor movement was too narrow and parochial. They tapped Madeline Janis, an attorney and activist who had led a key Central American refugee rights organization, to establish a nonprofit group that would bridge the gap between labor and L.A.'s liberal community and environmental leaders, elected officials, clergy, and academics.

Working closely with Local 11 of the hotel workers union, LAANE had its first major success in 1995 with a pioneering worker retention law that saved the jobs of hundreds of Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) workers whose jobs were threatened by privatization. Two years later, LAANE shot to national prominence with a landmark living wage campaign. The L.A. law covered thousands of low-wage workers at LAX—including janitors, airline service workers, retail clerks, and food service workers—as well as several thousand workers at other locations around the city whose employers had municipal subsidies.

In the years that followed, LAANE has led several other high-profile living wage efforts, including a successful drive to raise wages for 3,500 workers at thirteen hotels near LAX. A prelude to that victory was a massive protest march past the airport hotels and a well-planned civil disobedience action at which more than three hundred people—including several City Council members and state legislators—got arrested to express their solidarity with the workers.

LAANE expanded its work in other directions as well. It built on the living wage approach of demanding quid pro quos from businesses with city subsidies. The next targets were major development projects, including a huge hotel/office complex (the new home to the Academy Awards ceremony) in Hollywood as well as the massive Staples Center (which hosts the Lakers, among other sports franchises). LAANE zeroed in on publicly-backed economic development

as a critical place to use its political clout to win progressive policy change.

Arguing persuasively that taxpayer money should not be used to help wealthy developers without iron-clad guarantees of good jobs and affordable housing, LAANE invented the concept of Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs). These legally binding contracts with the city and the developer ensure that large development projects bring tangible benefits to nearby communities. Since LAANE led the effort to secure the first CBA in 1998, dozens of similar agreements have been enacted in cities across the country.

With the help of the County Fed and the United Food and Commercial Workers, LAANE made national headlines again in 2004 when it took on Wal-Mart and, improbably, sent the retail giant to a humiliating defeat at the ballot box. The notoriously anti-union Wal-Mart was attempting to build a supercenter in Inglewood, a largely African-American city near Los Angeles, with no public input or oversight. LAANE and its partners coordinated the campaign against Wal-Mart's \$1 million ballot initiative, mobilizing church leaders, small business owners, workers, and elected officials.

Politically, LAANE works with the labor movement, faith leaders, and environmental and community organizing groups to build support for its campaigns. In the aftermath of its original living wage victory, LAANE helped to found Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE), which has become one of the most respected interfaith economic justice groups in the country. L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and most members of the City Council have been allies, and a few have even been champions of LAANE's campaigns. Madeline Janis, LAANE's executive director, was appointed to the board of the powerful Community Redevelopment Agency in 2002 to be an advocate for the city's working class.

LAANE's annual budget is \$4.1 million, raised primarily from foundations and private donors, with a small percentage from unions. It has forty-five staffers, most of them organizers, policy analysts, and researchers, as well as a few savvy media specialists. Being in Los Angeles, LAANE has also cultivated support from some of Hollywood's celebrity class—including actors, producers, and directors—which not only helps raise money but also draws attention to its organizing work.

LAANE has grown significantly over the past five years and now works simultaneously on five or six separate organizing and policy campaigns. Each one targets an industry that LAANE has identified as "sticky"—as tied to the L.A. region—which means: the employers can't pick up and leave; and the jobs, by and large, cannot be outsourced if LAANE wins policy victories that require the firms to act with greater social responsibility.

For example, under the leadership of several building trades unions, LAANE has helped advance a program called Construction Careers that will create tens of thousands of middle-class jobs in the construction industry. Construction Careers policies do two fundamental things: they set wage standards through the adoption of Project Labor Agreements, and they direct a percentage of jobs to individuals from disadvantaged communities through "local hire" provisions. The end result is good—career-path jobs for the people who need them the most, including significant numbers of African-American men. Though deeply affected by the economic downturn, the unions have made a long-term commitment to local-hire policies, ensuring that disadvantaged workers can enter into union training programs and lay the foundation for a middle-class life.

Recognizing that economic recovery and saving the planet go hand in hand, LAANE has increasingly focused on the green economy, playing a vital role in bringing together unions

and environmental groups. Its signature campaign is the Clean Truck Program, an unprecedented effort to stem pollution and poverty in the port trucking industry.

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Los Angeles—along with adjacent Long Beach—has the largest port in the country, handling about 40 percent of all goods that enter the United States. It is also the largest fixed source of pollution in the region, with pollution from the port trucking industry responsible for more premature deaths, as well as severe childhood asthma, than any other source category in the port complex. The drivers are mostly immigrants who own their own trucks but earn too little to provide themselves and their families with health insurance.

Working with the Teamsters, Change to Win, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), the Sierra Club, and dozens of other organizations, LAANE developed a grassroots organizing campaign that won major policy victories. The Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports, with the support of Mayor Villaraigosa, successfully moved the L.A. Harbor Commission to pass a precedent-setting Clean Truck Program in 2008. The new policy requires the replacement of diesel-spewing trucks with clean-burning vehicles, while at the same time changing the status of the drivers from exploited independent contractors to employees of trucking companies, thus opening the way for a union organizing drive by the

Teamsters. Thousands of dirty trucks have been removed from the road, but aggressive litigation from the trucking industry has prevented the truck drivers from realizing the benefits of the Clean Truck Program.

Last year, LAANE, the NRDC, and the Teamsters launched another blue-green campaign, Don't Waste L.A., which seeks to overhaul the waste and recycling industry in Los Angeles. More than five thousand people are employed in the industry, including sorters and drivers. Los Angeles has granted permits to nearly 150 private waste and recycling haulers, but the majority of that workforce is nonunion. The campaign's goal is to push the city government to change the system so that firms that get municipal permits comply with tough labor and environmental standards. If the campaign succeeds, Don't Waste L.A. will increase the amount of waste that is recycled, reduce pollution, and raise standards for low-wage workers who toil amid horrific conditions in sorting and recycling plants. Working with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, LAANE is also leading a new campaign to get the city's Department of Water and Power to embark on a major home and business retrofitting program that will reduce energy use and create a pipeline of good jobs.

Nearly two decades after its founding, LAANE has evolved into a highly sophisticated advocacy group with an ambitious vision for social change. It has active projects in more than half a dozen of the region's largest industries. All of these projects are anchored by a comprehensive strategy that has proven to be one of the most effective in the country.

Many activist groups have a core competency. For some it's litigation, for others it's community organizing, and for others it may be policy or communications. LAANE's model is predicated on the idea that, in order to win far-reaching victories, all of these components—and several others—must be

wielded with a level of mastery equal to the challenge. The result is an unrivaled infrastructure that brings together, under one roof, highly skilled research, policy development and advocacy, community organizing, coalition building, communications, legal advocacy, and fundraising.

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Combined with the political power of unions—which itself is the product of innovative immigrant mobilization strategies mastered by the late Miguel Contreras—LAANE’s model has proved to be a formidable force. Wal-Mart was not alone in learning firsthand that LAANE can’t be dismissed lightly. Policies requiring living wages, worker retention, big-box restrictions, and environmental standards have been enacted despite the vociferous objection of well-heeled business interests.

In the last decade, many of these policies have been replicated by groups in cities across the country. Much of this work is being done through the Partnership for Working Families (PWF), an umbrella group with chapters in twenty metropolitan areas. Using the LAANE model of policy advocacy, coalition building, community organizing, and research, PWF affiliates intervene in the economic development process, with the goal of making sure that publicly-backed projects generate good jobs and other community benefits. While many of its member groups operate in regions where the political landscape is less receptive to progressive legislation and organizing, PWF is steadily building momentum, and to date is responsible for the passage of dozens of policies and agreements.

LAANE, for its part, has made a profound impact on the economy of Los Angeles. According to its own analysis, LAANE brought economic and environmental benefits of nearly a trillion dollars to approximately 150,000 people from 2004 to 2009. LAANE projects that its work in the coming decade will produce over four trillion dollars more in benefits.

As unions and their allies scan the landscape for examples of how the labor movement can rebuild in the twenty-first century, they would do well to study the achievements of this feisty David that has challenged, and beaten, the Goliath of big business in the nation’s second-largest city.