



From Liberty Hill to the Living Wage

A brief history of Progressive Los Angeles

By Robert Gottlieb And Peter Dreier
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Twentieth-century Los Angeles has two distinct histories. There's the top-down tale: a story of the corporate and political elites seeking to mold the city around their agenda of unregulated development, mindless boosterism, cheap labor, exploited immigrants and endless sprawl. But there's a bottom-up history as well: a story of the reformers and radicals who offered an alternative vision of economic and social justice, and an agenda of reforming workplace conditions, ending racial and gender discrimination, creating a healthier environment and making communities more livable. What follows is a decade-by-decade look at that bottom-up history - a history that at different times has also shaped the social, economic and political dynamics of L.A., and improved the daily life of Angelenos.

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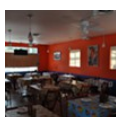
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On Aug. 29, 1970, 42-year-old Los Angeles Times reporter Ruben Salazar was struck in the head with a tear gas canister and killed instantly. He'd stepped into the Silver Dollar Cafe to escape the chaos and confusion of the Chicano Moratorium march, an anti-Vietnam protest that had turned violent. The...
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THE TEENS

1913: Iron-molder and union activist Dan Grayson, fresh from beating charges of violating an anti-picketing ordinance, runs successfully for governor on the Socialist Party ticket. Once in office he signs a law guaranteeing jobs for all wage earners . . .

Sound far-fetched? This fictional election takes place in *From Dusk to Dawn*, a silent film that drew large audiences when it first opened at a Socialist movie hall on Broadway in downtown L.A. With a cast of over 10,000, *From Dusk to Dawn* realistically depicted the era's poverty-stricken slums, the brutality of dangerous workplaces, and the violence used by companies and local police to destroy union organizing.

The nationwide popularity of *From Dusk to Dawn* was at least partly due to its close reflection of the time's political realities and popular aspirations. In fact, labor lawyer and Socialist leader Job Harriman, who makes a cameo appearance in the film, was nearly elected mayor of Los Angeles just two years earlier on a platform that included mandating union contracts in L.A. workplaces where a majority of workers desired them, a water- and land-use policy that advocated growth boundaries and livable cities, and a "good government" program that sought to rid Los Angeles of its corruption. At the time, these ideas were considered radical, but over the next 70 years many of them were incorporated into our political mainstream.

THE TWENTIES

1923: In defense of striking dockworkers, novelist and journalist Upton Sinclair joined a rally on San Pedro's Liberty Hill and tried to read from the Bill of Rights. He was promptly arrested, along with hundreds of others, and held incommunicado for 18 hours. The ensuing scandal led to the arrest of the chief of police and the founding of the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California.

In Los Angeles history, the '20s have been typically viewed as a time of reaction - overt racism against Asians and Mexicans, the triumph of the big studios in Hollywood, the oil boom and the environmental degradation that went with it, and the ongoing campaign to make Los Angeles a safe haven for cheap labor. But the decade also witnessed the emergence of a progressive urban environmentalism, a developing women's movement and a flourishing intellectual life. Political radicals and literary bohemians formed circles in places such as Pasadena, Venice, on the Eagle Rock campus of Occidental College, in Boyle Heights, in the back room at Musso & Frank in Hollywood, and in Jake Zeitlin's downtown bookstore, *At the Sign of the Grasshopper*. The late '20s also saw a major campaign for large-scale development of parks and limits on urban sprawl, an attempt to counter the successful drive by developers and other commercial interests to "penetrate the wild virgin areas" of the region, as the L.A. Times put it, and make Los Angeles into a permanently expanding - and fragmented - metropolis.

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THE THIRTIES

1934: In the depths of the Depression, Upton Sinclair launched a campaign for governor around a simple slogan: "End Poverty in California (EPIC)." Sinclair's genius was his ability to bring together a broad spectrum of radicals, progressives and moderates around a common vision and a concrete reform agenda - in particular, "production for use" cooperatives for jobless workers and farmers. He

won the Democratic gubernatorial nomination, shocking the political establishment and attracting more primary votes than any candidate in the party's history. More than two-thirds of those votes came from Southern California. Big business - L.A. big business in particular - then mobilized an extraordinary media campaign that ended in Sinclair's defeat in November. Still, such soon-to-be-notable local progressives as Jerry Voorhis and Augustus Hawkins cut their teeth on the EPIC campaign.

Amid the social and economic chaos of the Depression, the political sparks ignited by the EPIC soon spread across the entire L.A. political landscape. Thirties L.A. was home to a flourishing cooperative movement, a revived labor movement led by the new Congress of Industrial Organizations and its Labor Non-Partisan League, and a cultural renaissance of writers, artists, photographers and independent filmmakers exploring a range of social themes. Los Angeles workers joined unions in unprecedented numbers, engaging in civil disobedience and even general strikes. Community groups blocked landlords and police from evicting unemployed renters. Seniors mobilized around the Townsend Plan, initiated by a charismatic and eccentric dentist in Long Beach in 1933, which helped push Congress and the Roosevelt administration to pass the Social Security Act. The city's labor, progressive and radical organizations formed the United Organization for Progressive Political Action, and three of its candidates won election to the City Council. Though LAPD "anti-subversive" Captain "Red" Hynes sent his police to close the borders against the "immigrant" Okies and Arkies, and local right-wing politicians used racial fears to divide the voters, a progressive coalition nevertheless continued to grow in strength. In 1938, it played a key role in the successful mayoral campaign of Fletcher Bowron, a Superior Court judge whom the Times labeled an "honest reformer who has become the unwitting dupe of the CIO, the Communists and certain crackpot reformers."

THE FORTIES

1945: An African-American couple, Anna and Henry Laws, was fined and imprisoned for violating a restrictive covenant on their small home on East 92nd Street. (Restrictive covenants were legally binding clauses in land deeds that forbade the transfer of property to non-whites, and sometimes to Jews as well.) During the '40s, African-Americans accounted for only 7 percent of Los Angeles' population, but filed 46 percent of all applications for the city's tiny inventory of government-subsidized public housing. Growing awareness of these racist restrictive covenants coincided with a severe postwar housing shortage. The Laws case triggered a grassroots crusade for civil rights and better housing. This movement ultimately prevailed in the courts (the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the covenants in 1948) and in the neighborhoods, where a vibrant movement sought to promote affordable public housing for African-Americans, Latinos and other working-class residents of the city.

A racist politics was revived during the war years when reactionary forces launched fear campaigns against Japanese- and Mexican-Americans, and anti-communist crusades were used to undermine the political organizations and progressive reforms that had emerged during the '30s. But groups like Nisei Progressives and the Civil Rights Congress, as well as Charlotta Bass' newspaper *The Eagle*, promoted racial liberalism and mobilized communities for progressive change. A new wave of organizing in Mexican-American communities led to the election in 1949 of Edward Roybal, the City Council's first Latino member since the 19th century. In May 1948, 31,000 people jammed into Gilmore Stadium to hear a speech by Progressive Party presidential candidate Henry Wallace. As part of this campaign, Los Angeles radical Harry Hay, a union organizer and Communist, developed the idea for a gay campaign organization, "Bachelors for Wallace." Though this group never got off the ground, Hay subsequently formed the Los Angeles--based Mattachine society, the nation's first modern gay-rights organization.

There was perhaps no more compelling figure of Progressive L.A. during the '40s than Carey McWilliams. A journalist, author, housing commissioner and political activist, McWilliams effectively chronicled and captured the moods and contradictions of prewar and postwar Los Angeles. He became the leading interpreter of the region as an incubator of progressive movements and ideas, while also chronicling economic injustice and sprawling development.

THE FIFTIES

1958: As the McCarthyite wave subsided, L.A. liberals formulated a new agenda, including a commitment to higher education for all Californians, fair housing opportunities, a renewal of civil rights and civil liberties, and new forays into land-use and environmental planning.

In 1958, Democrats won control of the governor's office and the legislature, and for the first time since the '30s, progressive reforms were enacted.

Even in the midst of the McCarthyite attack on progressives, the changing face of Los Angeles continued to inspire new collaborations, new constituencies and new movements. The independently produced film *Salt of the Earth*, which chronicled the real-life strike of Latino and Anglo mine workers in New Mexico, represented one of several alternatives to the increasingly saccharine cultural fare that dominated Hollywood and other forms of mass culture. In '50s L.A., these alternatives also included Will Geer's theatrical productions at his playhouse in Topanga Canyon, the cultural scene along Central Avenue, the mix of jazz recitals and poetry readings that began to occur in places like Venice and Echo Park, and a vibrant mural movement, especially in Latino neighborhoods.

Throughout the '50s, portions of the Latino community waged protracted battles against the redevelopment of Bunker Hill and Chavez Ravine. Both of these working-class Latino communities were bulldozed to make way for new downtown cultural centers and corporate offices, as well as Dodger Stadium. Despite such defeats, these struggles helped forge a new Latino activism.

Activist Dorothy Healey's career spanned two generations of local progressive involvement. As a teenager and Communist Party member in 1933, Healey had helped organize Mexican and Japanese berry pickers in El Monte. As head of the L.A. branch of the Communist Party after 1946, she helped build bridges between unions, civil rights movements, and progressive coalitions. Her subsequent disenchantment with Soviet actions such as the invasion of Prague in 1968 led to her to quit the party. However, she continued her political activism and became one of the key '30s Old Left activists who helped mentor the '60s generation of New Leftists. Like Upton Sinclair and Carey McWilliams before her, she provided a link across political generations.

THE SIXTIES

Amid rising affluence, persistent poverty and a war that threatened to tear the country apart, the 1960s were a period of tumultuous change. Ruben Salazar, an ad salesman turned L.A. Times reporter and columnist and TV news director, personified that change. Initially skeptical of people who identified themselves politically as Mexican-American, Salazar began to adopt a more anti-establishment perspective. He became the point of connection between a new generation of "brown power" activists and the older generation of civil rights groups and Roybalistas. All these activists finally came together on August 29, 1970, when 25,000 people participated in the Chicano Moratorium for civil rights and against the Vietnam War - but the demonstration ended in tragedy when Salazar was struck and killed by a tear-gas projectile fired by a sheriff's deputy into the cafe to which Salazar had repaired. Salazar's odyssey came to symbolize, like so much else during the '60s, the magnified hopes and deferred dreams of Progressive L.A.

The early 1960s witnessed a revival of political activism, the civil rights movement and Cesar Chavez's efforts to organize farmworkers, while conservative forces sought to reverse any gains these movements had made. In November 1964, more than two-thirds of state voters supported the repeal of the Rumford Fair Housing Act, which outlawed discrimination in the sale of homes. Less than a year later, the Watts Riots effectively changed the dynamics of politics and social action in Los Angeles and elsewhere, heightening the notion of a divided and unequal society while also highlighting the urgent need for change. Black-power and brown-power groups, demonstrations against the Vietnam War, the new student movement and an emerging women's movement all shaped the temper and activities of Progressive LA.

In the late '60s and early '70s, activists reflected the diversity - and sometimes the confusion - of the period's progressive movements. These now also included such new formations as an action-oriented environmentalism, the women's movement, militant gay and lesbian groupings, a burst of activism within the Latino and Asian communities, reform stirrings within labor, and a wave of "community development" efforts by neighborhood activists.

United Auto Worker leader Paul Schrade symbolized the effort to link these disparate strands of progressive politics. Schrade and a handful of other local union activists sought to have unions become part of the broader anti-Vietnam War movement, while Schrade himself devoted UAW resources to funding early United Farm Worker organizing and forming such autonomous organizations as the Watts Labor Community Action Council in black L.A. and TELACU in the Latino community. Schrade was also a key figure in Robert Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign, which drew on the energies and frustrations of the civil rights, anti-war and community-organizing crusades. At a celebration at L.A.'s Ambassador Hotel of his victory in that June's California primary, Kennedy was assassinated, and Schrade, standing at his side, was seriously wounded.

THE SEVENTIES

1976: A motley collection of former anti-war activists, consumer organizers and urban environmentalists launched a campaign for a Department of Water and Power "lifeline" rate for low-income utility consumers. Using guerrilla-theater tactics, community and constituency organizing, and considerable media savvy, CAUSE (the Campaign Against Utility Service Exploitation) forced the mighty DWP to accept the lifeline rate.

Its reputation as a Mediterranean-type paradise already undermined by riots and other social strife, L.A. during the '70s confronted a wave of economic and environmental dislocations. Yet the 1970s also witnessed Progressive L.A. at its most prolific, generating new ideas and new movements. Environmentalism became an influential force. The women's movement extended into new areas, such as reproductive rights and women's health, while also inspiring a cultural and academic renaissance. Tenant rights became an explosive new concern, engendering rent-control laws in L.A. and Santa Monica. Groups like the ACLU extended their agendas to include immigrant rights and police abuse.

While these issues and movements often operated outside the electoral domain, the reach of Progressive L.A. helped lay the groundwork for the 1974 election of Jerry Brown as governor and the 1973 election of Tom Bradley as mayor, as well as Tom Hayden's unsuccessful but galvanizing campaign for the U.S. Senate in 1976. The Bradley campaigns of 1969 and 1973 demonstrated Progressive L.A.'s electoral influence most vividly. Three overlapping circles of activists - the Democratic clubs associated with the California Democratic Council, Jewish liberals and black community activists, many of whom had forged connections in the civil rights and anti-war movements - enlisted to form the backbone of those campaigns; 15,000 volunteers hit the pavements on Bradley's behalf. With the victory of '73, Bradley became the first African-American to be elected mayor in a large, predominantly white city.

Like Jerry Brown, Tom Bradley was no capital "P" progressive, but he gave progressive forces - in such areas as social services, women's rights, environmental protection, housing and political reform - some room to maneuver. Bradley was caught between his electoral constituency and the city's business elite, and sought to please both. He became increasingly linked to his downtown redevelopment agenda, hoping to turn Los Angeles into a "world city" of trade, finance and entertainment. Bradley did little to address the loss of inner-city supermarkets, banks and other commercial and retail services, the spiraling cost of housing, the proliferation of strip malls and other manifestations of urban sprawl, or the decay of low-income neighborhoods.

THE EIGHTIES

1988: In October, 100 gay and AIDS activists were arrested at the Federal Building in Westwood as they protested government inaction on AIDS treatments - one of the largest mass arrests in L.A. history. The Los Angeles ACT UP group, the most active chapter in the country, not only served as an effective and militant advocate on AIDS issues, but also participated in the defense of abortion clinics and Central American solidarity work. By the late '80s, the city's gay and lesbian movement increasingly reflected the city's racial and cultural diversity.

Swelled by an influx of immigrants from Mexico, Central America and other parts of the world, Los Angeles emerged in the 1980s as the nation's most multicultural city. L.A. progressive activists turned to such causes as immigrant rights, environmental organizing in working-class neighborhoods, and solidarity work with left-wing Central American movements. The '80s also saw the rise of an anti-plant-closing movement in response to the rapid dismantling of the region's manufacturing base.

The destruction of hundreds of thousands of decent-paying jobs in the early and mid-'80s, and the Reaganite war on social spending, led to growing homelessness, malnutrition and hunger, and pressures to lower wages in such areas as janitorial work. Groups such as the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank and the Los Angeles Coalition to End Homelessness and Hunger became major de facto service providers. With the collapse of the public sector and government solutions, progressive L.A. organizations and advocates became the only significant Reagan Age forces to develop programs and strategies addressing protracted social problems that were greater than at any time since the '30s. These initiatives included a successful drive to raise the state minimum wage, the efforts of dozens of community groups engaged in the creation of low-cost housing, and campaigns to reverse decades of environmental degradation.

THE NINETIES

1997: With the city transformed by an explosion of low-wage jobs, and with the rebirth of the city's union movement, a new coalition of labor, religious and community groups convinced the City Council to enact a Living Wage Ordinance. The new law, passed over Mayor Richard Riordan's veto, required firms with municipal contracts to pay employees wages above the poverty line and provide them with health benefits.

The riots of April 1992 signaled that life in the city's poorest neighborhoods had become intolerable. The city's business and political establishments were shocked by the civil unrest and unprepared to respond in any coherent way. But progressive leaders of black, Asian, Hispanic, Jewish and other constituencies and movements forged new coalitions to address racial tensions. The uprising, and the backlash that followed, also helped energize a new set of progressive initiatives. In the wake of federal welfare "reform," community groups began mobilizing to reshape riot-torn communities. They demanded that the "welfare-to-work" program provide opportunities for jobs at decent wages, that food programs be developed for those who were continually dropping in and out of hunger, that liquor stores in poor communities be replaced by genuine initiatives for community economic development, that bus service be expanded for the city's mostly low-wage bus-dependent riders, and that affordable child care be made available to all who needed it. Immigrant-rights advocates also continued their efforts to mobilize their constituency, in part through dramatic campaigns to force the federal Immigration and Naturalization Service to speed up the process of granting citizenship.

During the past decade, local unions undertook ambitious campaigns to organize workers in the tourism, garment and building-service sectors; the Service Employees' Justice for Janitors campaign and the Hotel and Restaurant Employees organizing drives became models for labor activists across the nation. Drawing on a greatly expanded pool of union activists, the L.A. County Federation of Labor transformed itself into an election-day powerhouse for pro-labor candidates and causes.

AND BEYOND...

If a new EPIC-type campaign sprang forth today, on what issues would it focus? What constituencies and social movements would be mobilized? A modern-day EPIC could certainly build on the extraordinary level of activism that exists today around workplace, economic-development, environmental, neighborhood-improvement, education, ethnic and other issues. But these organizations and advocates tend to be dispersed across the metropolitan area and isolated from one another - a patchwork of progressivism with no unifying theme, agenda or movement.

How can the forces of Progressive L.A. recapture charisma of an Upton Sinclair to unite these presumably disparate constituencies around a common agenda and strategy? A revitalized labor movement, based in low-wage manufacturing and service industries and increasingly reflecting the region's multicultural reality, may well provide one such anchor for this new politics. The emergence of a new type of community activism - of groups dealing with basic issues such as housing, transportation and food - deepens the potential agenda for a progressive renewal. The social activism of women, gays and lesbians, and immigrants can make significant gains if they join forces with these workplace and community movements.

Can the city's fragmented progressive movement seize the opportunity and become a potent force reshaping the future of Los Angeles? Stay tuned!

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