



Even After the Breakup

L.A. union locals pulled together to defeat Schwarzenegger only months after a nationwide split. A m

By [Bobbi Murray](#)

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger doubtless has a few regrets in these first post-election weeks, and one of them has to be a bit of his own sound-bite braggadocio. Last December, public-sector nurses showed up to protest at a Schwarzenegger event, and the governor acknowledged them with a gibe: "They don't like me because I'm always kicking their butts!"

The nurses, of course, were the ones who unleashed the whup-ass, along with other public-sector employees among a coalition of unions that pounded the governor's initiatives in the November 8 special election.

Union activists were "euphoric" at the governor's defeat, says Kent Wong, director of the Center for Labor Research and Education at UCLA, and a labor-movement veteran. "Arnold Schwarzenegger set his sights on labor as the main impediment to his agenda." At a time of waning union power nationally, California has maintained a robust movement with impressive political muscle that has hedged against anti-employee policies. The recent ballot initiatives posed "a threat to union power in California, a threat nationally. It's no accident that the attack came here," Wong says.

And no accident that labor beat back the attack. The Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, as part of a statewide alliance led by the California Teachers Association, ran get-out-the-vote operations that helped bump voter turnout to over a million in L.A. County, where the initiatives got trounced. As the most populous area of the state, the "no" vote was critical to the ballot measures' defeat.

But labor's euphoria may also reflect a kind of giddy relief that unions could cooperate so well locally just months after an historic split in the national movement. In July, a new union coalition called Change to Win broke away from the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, or AFL-CIO, in an ugly split, taking nearly half the membership and a sizable chunk of the budget from what had been a 13-million-member federation. There was a long lead-up to the break, as leaders of Change to Win charged that the AFL-CIO spent too much on candidates and fighting anti-worker policy, rather than investing funds in rank-and-file organizing to build numbers and clout. Change to Win consolidated in September as a federation, separate from the AFL-CIO.

Labor in California was still sorting out the implications as the second punishing storm approached - the Schwarzenegger initiatives, one of which would have drastically limited the ability of public-sector unions to function in the political arena.

Maria Elena Durazo is president of the L.A. local of UNITE HERE, the hotel and garment industry union, a leader in the Change to Win federation, and speaks for many when she says that the union side wasn't happy to rally troops and expend millions in the special elections. But, Durazo says, "This [electoral] alliance created the best thing that could have happened since the split - it shows that the most effective work gets done on the local level when everyone is pulling together."

L.A. County unions came together through the efforts of the county Federation of Labor, made up of L.A.-area union locals now on both sides of the national schism. The County Fed is the local-level AFL-CIO body, but nearly one-third of the locals that, until recently, made up the Fed are part of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Change to Win union that took the most aggressive stance against the AFL-CIO. UNITE HERE, another lead Change to Win union, and local president Durazo have also been very influential. Rick Icaza, of the United Food and Commercial Workers grocery industry union, another Change to Win coalition member, is president of the County Fed.

During the acrimonious summer days following Change to Win's departure from the AFL-CIO, there was concern among union activists that AFL-CIO President John Sweeney might impose sanctions on local outfits like the County Fed rather than allow cooperation between Change to Win and AFL-affiliated unions.

"There was a moment," says Durazo, "when the AFL-CIO pretty much threatened the central labor councils and state federations with rules prohibiting the participation of non-affiliated unions. But the reality is, in many places like L.A., the strength of our success is that we all work together."

Sweeney has evidently taken note. He was there side-by-side with the County Fed's Martin Ludlow as the votes were counted in L.A. County. The County Federation and the Change to Win locals like SEIU and UNITE HERE are in the process of being officially re-knit together under an arrangement negotiated between the national AFL-CIO and local labor bodies.

"It's official," says Mike Garcia, president of SEIU Local 1877. "The solidarity charters are all worked out. All the hard issues have been resolved." Among those was a potential deal-breaker that would have required payments to local labor bodies that Change to Win regarded as onerous. That idea was dropped. "We're now full partners, equal-status partners," Garcia says.

That could boost a slowly growing trend around the country that many see as labor's only chance to revive - or survive. Increasingly, central labor councils have linked up with community organizations in support of

more equitable policy agendas, says John Goldstein, executive director of the Working Families Partnership, a newly minted national network of labor-community coalitions. Goldstein represents a current in the labor movement turning to local alliances and grassroots action to gain community traction.

"We've had some really terrific stuff happen," Goldstein says. In San Jose, the central labor council teamed up with environmental and social justice organizations to cut sprawl and promote development that brought affordable housing, businesses, and fair-wage jobs to San Jose's low-income downtown core. More recently, in Atlanta, a labor-community coalition attached environmental and job requirements to a multimillion-dollar rail deal.

The Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, a close County Fed ally, has long leveraged labor support for similar deals, such as during recent LAX negotiations, and created the model for such "community benefit agreements."

Goldstein is cautiously optimistic that the union movement will weather the historic break, and actually beef up the innovative organizing represented by Working Families Partnership.

Jim Hilfenhaus, political director of the L.A. local of Laborers International, a Change to Win union, is not a fan. He seems unimpressed by the power-building claims at the local level and says that laws and courts need to change to be more friendly to wage and labor standards. And he doesn't buy Change to Win's claims to the mantle of rank-and-file organizing. He ticks off the organizing record for the lead unions in the new federation.

"I can't think of where the Teamsters have had a big organizing hit," he says of the Change to Win union with the second-largest number of members. "The UFCW [grocery workers union] took the biggest whack in the world" during the Southern California strike two years ago, he says. The months-long strike yielded a two-tier system in which new hires are paid less and given more hours. UNITE HERE, an amalgam of the hotel and garment workers unions, got together after the garment industry was decimated by outsourcing; their strength doesn't derive from rank-and-file organizing.

He argues that employees will see their working conditions erode until there is policy change at the federal level. Change to Win proponent Durazo would cite that same goal as exactly why more support should be poured into the grass roots. The leadership has learned from the setbacks that Hilfenhaus enumerates, she says, that grassroots organizing and building numbers are a route to policy change.

At a meeting last week in Los Angeles, Change to Win reaffirmed an organizing focus, while the AFL-CIO took aim at changing federal labor law to make it more possible to organize new members into the rank-and-file.

"How do we do new things that we weren't doing before as individual unions?" asks Durazo. More organizing is a goal, she says, but "is not the point. What are you going to do above and beyond?"

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