



How to Play Hardball

L.A.'s powerful union movement unites to defeat the governor's ballot initiatives, even as the natio

By [Bobbi Murray](#)

The polished hallways of the County Federation of Labor downtown are completely still, as a computer blinks silently and unattended beneath a photo of the late labor leader Miguel Contreras. Then, the doors at the far end of the hall abruptly fling wide, and several people emerge. Among them is Martin Ludlow, immaculately dressed and radiating energy.

The executive secretary-treasurer of the L.A. County Fed is engaged in an animated discussion with a colleague. He reaches for a cell phone, then shakes a visitor's hand and points the way to his office. On his desk there, amid neatly stacked piles of paper, sits a replica of a baseball with a base inscribed with the words: Sometimes You Have to Play Hardball.

For Ludlow, that time is now. In the coming months, he must balance two Herculean tasks. California unions are in the fight of their lives against three November 8 special election ballot initiatives backed by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. The central battle will be over Proposition 75, designed to hamstring labor fundraising for political organizing and campaigns. But labor also opposes Proposition 74, which would subject teachers to a five-year probation period and short-circuit a right to a hearing before being fired; and Proposition 76, which would change the state constitution to give the governor unprecedented power over the budget and change funding levels for education.

Voter-rich L.A. will be critical to defeating the initiatives, and Ludlow is charged with rallying troops. Meanwhile, he's got to keep his eye on another front. As the county's top labor leader, and a national figure, Ludlow is pivotal in the historic fight to prevent the national union movement from imploding. In an event

analogous to California seceding from the U.S., seven big unions (and millions of members) have now split from the 50-year-old AFL-CIO. The labor movement is at a crossroads: to either re-emerge with new vigor, or wither away.

Of balancing the two fights, Ludlow says bluntly, "It's difficult. I don't think the two work hand-in-hand necessarily easily. You just have to do it."

The November elections are most immediate, but the split that rocked the national AFL-CIO has reverberations - "and dangers" - for Los Angeles. The dissident Change To Win coalition - formed earlier this year by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) with hotel and garment workers, grocery workers, and the Teamsters - had grown impatient at the pace of reform under AFL-CIO President John Sweeney. They wanted union funds focused on union recruitment, and opposed the AFL-CIO's emphasis on funding political campaigns for candidates that often were only lukewarm allies.

The coalition broke away from the AFL-CIO in July. And last week, at a national meeting in St. Louis, the divorce became final. Change To Win, an alliance of unions that now numbers seven, formally became a labor federation separate from the AFL-CIO.

And L.A. was in the house in a big way.

Maria Elena Durazo, president of the Los Angeles local of UNITE HERE - the hotel and garment union - and an advocate of aggressive local organizing, addressed some 500 delegates. "She was very well received," enthuses Kent Wong, director of the UCLA Labor Center. Also out in force were reps from L.A. locals of the SEIU, the lead breakaway union. And that's where it gets sticky for L.A.

Close to one-third of the member locals in the County Fed are SEIU. UNITE HERE is also influential. But the national AFL-CIO sets the rules for the local labor councils like the L.A. County Fed. It remains to be seen whether the AFL-CIO will permit the breakaway unions to work with those that stayed.

If the AFL doesn't allow it, that means here in L.A. the County Fed would be unable to work with SEIU locals that make up a large chunk of its membership. Even now, SEIU 1877 is ratcheting up an organizing drive that would unionize some 10,000 security guards. A ban would also preclude work with UNITE HERE, which just won a yearlong strike with support from Ludlow, and is engaged in a battle to unionize the Glendale Hilton.

The County Fed's budget would also take a serious hit, cut by perhaps as much as 40 percent. To date, relationships in Los Angeles between Change To Win locals and those still AFL-CIO-affiliated remain cordial. All have committed to working together to defeat antiunion ballot measures.

There is enough at stake for the entire union movement that the AFL-CIO is unlikely to crack down on local relationships. Representatives from state and local labor organizations and the AFL-CIO have met to discuss how to advance a labor agenda and hold the national movement together through local organizing campaigns.

Labor councils and community affiliates in some 15 cities are so convinced that local organizing is the way forward that they have formed a new national network, the Partnership for Working Families. "From the central labor council and state federations' perspective, they want to keep it intact, so there are negotiations going on at different levels," explains UCLA's Wong.

Ludlow was part of a delegation of local representatives that met with the AFL-CIO's Sweeney. "We made it very clear that we believe that the national labor movement can stay robust at the local level. But we have to be allowed to do it."

The AFL-CIO has taken the positive step of issuing "solidarity charters" that will allow unaffiliated unions to work with AFL unions. But there are some poison pills to be negotiated away before Change To Win unions consider participating. One provision would require non-AFL-CIO to pay 10 percent more in dues to the local councils or state federations they work with; the other provision would preclude officials from breakaway unions to hold office in the local body.

"We're adamantly opposed to the solidarity charters," says Tyrone Freeman, president of the SEIU home care workers union and a Change To Win enthusiast. He doesn't believe the AFL-CIO has much leverage in enforcing such agreements. "The finances of all the labor councils are generated by the locals. Resources from the national federation are limited to nonexistent."

Ludlow is less defiant, or at least more low-key. The AFL-CIO will either support their affiliates working locally with Change To Win affiliates - or not. He sees the Change To Win federation as having opened up the potential for that national labor movement to grow and flourish. He wants to bring another delegation of local labor leaders to meet with the AFL-CIO executive board to persuade them to allow AFL-CIO unions to work with Change To Win unions on the local level without penalty.

"If [they] don't do it, then clearly central labor council leaders and state federation leaders are pushed to be creative around how they restructure and refinance," he says. "That's a lot of unnecessary energy in my opinion. I'd rather focus those hours and those creative brainstorming sessions on how we organize the unorganized."

Published: [10/06/2005](#)

[DIGG](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [REDDIT](#)

[Other Stories by Bobbi Murray](#)

Related Articles

- [Frontlines](#)

Post A Comment

Requires free [registration](#).

Username:

Password: ([Forgotten your password?](#))

Comment:

Post comment