



STATE OF THE UNIONS

With the election of Villaraigosa, the most powerful union city in America finds itself at a crossro

By [Bobbi Murray](#)

Los Angeles' Labor movement may have been rocked by the untimely death of local labor leader Miguel Contreras on May 6, but you couldn't see it 11 days later at one particular Election Day event. The mood was electric on May 17 as some 200 activists gathered in a muggy hall at the Central American Resource Center, just west of downtown. Members of the hotel workers union, almost all Latino immigrants and more than half of them women, prepared to go door-to-door to urge voters to the polls. The lively crowd encouraged speakers with bursts of applause and shouted wisecracks.

"If we don't do the work and get the people out to vote, we won't have people in positions of power that work for working people," United Farmworkers co-founder Dolores Huerta told the group. It was officially an unaffiliated event - the hotel workers union had endorsed neither incumbent Mayor James Hahn nor challenger Antonio Villaraigosa - but when Councilman Martin Ludlow mentioned Villaraigosa in his speech, the place erupted into rhythmic clapping and cheering. And this, in a town where both candidates were adamantly pro-union.

L.A. is the most important union city in America right now, with such far-reaching policies as living wage and anti-sweatshop ordinances. While union influence in the rest of the nation is in decline, the labor movement here has added members by dynamic organizing drives, like the one that unionized more than 10,000 janitors who clean L.A.'s office buildings. Its political influence is also considerable, with union veterans such as Assembly Speaker Fabian Nuñez in key positions.

The earthquake of Contreras's death by heart attack at age 53 was echoed by the second temblor of Villaraigosa's landslide election as mayor. A former union organizer and a friend of Contreras, Villaraigosa's victory will place an activist from L.A.'s labor and social justice movements in the top post at City Hall.

Labor activists are now figuring out the ways in which the two seismic events may have shifted the political terrain. As executive secretary-treasurer of the County Federation of Labor, Contreras left a big footprint, and his sudden departure raised the question of who could carry on in such a powerful fashion. Contreras revived a moribund labor movement after he was elected in 1996, and membership in the County Fed grew by at least 120,000 workers to 800,000. That's not an abstract matter: A 2003 study by the Economic Policy Institute estimates that even non-union workers in industries that are heavily organized enjoy a pay boost of between 5-7.5 percent because of the union presence.

Had Contreras lived to work with Villaraigosa, momentum for labor here would have received a powerful push. But many on the political scene see momentum even without the union leader. Assemblywoman Karen Bass (D-Los Angeles) observes, "I think it would be a huge powerhouse to have the rank-and-file of labor with the mayor," she says, noting that some 60 percent of union households voted for Villaraigosa.

The union movement must first clear its head after a mayoral election that split its ranks. The County Fed endorsed Hahn; a bloc of union locals affiliated with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), whose members make up some 30 percent of the County Fed's membership, created the momentum by giving Hahn the nod early on. Other locals supported Villaraigosa. In some ways, it was a no-lose situation, and all now ponder potential opportunities offered by a mayor who held three union posts throughout the 1980s and early '90s. The County Fed quickly selected Charles Lester, a Contreras protégé who was the federation's political director, as an interim successor.

Lester steps right into the fray: The County Fed was already mobilizing for a thousands-strong march on Wednesday, May 25, to protest what they call Governor Schwarzenegger's anti-working-family agenda. UNITE HERE, the hotel workers union, has been locked in a protracted struggle with a hotel industry increasingly run by multinational corporations. That makes it necessary, the union holds, to line up the expiration dates of contracts in three major cities, the better for the union to wield national negotiating clout. The union has exerted enough pressure to get six hotels to sign new contracts, with eight still holding out. The contracts at those hotels expired in April, 2004. Some 1,500 security guards in downtown L.A., Century City, and Glendale are also struggling for a union contract.

Labor in L.A. has been reaching beyond wage and benefits issues into matters of quality of life and politics for non-union members. The County Fed and individual union locals long ago teamed up with community groups to negotiate agreements that assure local hiring and include such amenities as parks, child-care, and affordable housing as part of new commercial and residential developments.

Contreras had also floated the idea of a ballot initiative that would have beefed up support for community colleges, and Bass offers it as an example of potential synergy between the union movement and incoming

Mayor Villaraigosa. "Here you have a mayor that's going to champion education," she says. It's not even about the typical labor issues wages and benefits, Bass says. "It's over improving the overall quality of life in our community."

Labor may first have to pull itself together. Many of those close to labor were surprised and unhappy that the County Fed would throw its resources behind Hahn instead of one of its own. And as the 60 percent union household support for Villaraigosa suggests, the Fed endorsement roiled the rank-and-file.

The elected leaders of the janitors union, SEIU Local 1877, may have voted to endorse Hahn, but during the campaign, members attended Villaraigosa events sporting T-shirts emblazoned with the sentiment: "Antonio Villaraigosa, los janitores de Los Angeles te apoyamos" ("the janitors of Los Angeles support you").

Local 1877 president Mike Garcia says it made sense to endorse Hahn because he delivered for labor. "I underline the word incumbency. When a politician does what's asked, they've earned our endorsement," he says. But labor will now present a united front. "We have a lot of work to do in coming together as a labor movement," admits Garcia, an architect of the groundbreaking campaigns to organize L.A. janitors. "Miguel taught us to come together and we will hold together."

Councilman Ludlow, political director of the County Fed before winning his council seat, points to the unanimous vote by the County Fed executive board to elect Charles Lester as interim head of the federation. That, Ludlow says, "speaks to the capacity of each of the strong labor leaders that recognized that this is a time for a sense of purpose."

Those who know Villaraigosa dismiss the idea that he might punish those who endorsed his opponent. "He's so familiar with labor and has worked with labor for so long, I can't imagine that there'd be an issue," says Michael Bustamante, spokesman for the Southwest Voter Registration, Education and Research Institute. He was a policy deputy for Governor Gray Davis and saw Villaraigosa in action when he was speaker of the California Assembly.

After "getting on the same page," as SEIU 1877's Garcia puts it, the Fed's 345 union locals will vote for a permanent leader in July, and labor insiders say that they have only now begun to focus on the candidates.

Under Contreras, organizing shifted to target the workers in industries with the lowest standards and that use mostly immigrant labor: janitors, restaurant and hotel workers, security guards - who also include many African-Americans in their ranks - and homecare workers who care for house-bound patients. At stake now is the continuation of that strategy, which integrated significant numbers of Latino, Asian, and African-American workers into what used to be a white-dominated structure.

All kinds of names come up. Lester has a good shot at being selected to make the transition from interim to permanent executive secretary-treasurer. He is, after all, a respected union veteran who was close to Contreras.

Other candidates include Janice Wood, the widow of James Wood, the well-regarded secretary-treasurer that Contreras succeeded after Wood died in 1996 of cancer.

Mike Garcia, Ludlow, and state Senator Gilbert Cedillo have also been mentioned. But the "all-star pick," in the words of one insider, would be Maria Elena Durazo, president of UNITE HERE Local 11. Durazo transformed the local, comprised of hotel and garment workers, into a militant one that launched an

aggressive organizing campaign in a city with relatively few unionized hotels. Durazo is personable, savvy, and is greatly respected in local and national labor movements and community organizations. Her relationships with elected officials are extensive; her friendship with Villaraigosa began three decades ago when both were young activists.

All that would make her a prime candidate even if she hadn't married Miguel Contreras in 1988. She is not discussing the matter publicly, and those close to her respect her grieving process, says councilmember Ludlow.

Speaking in Spanish just days after Contreras was laid to rest in his hometown at Dinuba, California, Durazo thanked activists for giving her strength. "In those moments when I want to - when I feel weak," she said, "I remember him and what he fought for."

Underpinning the already-fraught local labor issues is a potential crisis at the national level. The AFL-CIO, the venerable labor organization with 13.5 million members that encompasses every union local in the U.S., threatens to split. Five unions, including UNITE HERE, have called for the current national AFL-CIO president, John Sweeney, to step down. They have endorsed a near-tripling of spending to \$60 million for organizing more workers. Union membership in the U.S. has slipped from a high of 35 percent at its peak in the late 1940s to its current level at 13 percent of private sector employees. The reform proposals also call for a consolidation of some 65 unions into something like eight, divided by industry.

Four of the five unions that have signed onto the reform platform have been somewhat circumspect about splitting from the AFL-CIO. But SEIU International President Andrew Stern, the most outspoken of the reformers, has said he would withdraw his 1.7 million members unless Sweeney steps aside for a possible candidacy by John Wilhelm, president of UNITE HERE's hospitality division. The AFL-CIO national convention, where it is expected to come to a head, is in July.

And what does that mean for L.A., where SEIU makes up nearly a third of the County Federation of Labor? The thinking really hasn't gone that far yet, says Garcia, adding that he would like to remain affiliated. "You're going to have to stay tuned on that."

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