



THE FED GETS A SURPRISE

Martin Ludlow's bid to replace the late Miguel Contreras at L.A. County Federation of Labor hits a s

By [Bobbi Murray](#)

The confirmation of L.A. City Councilman Martin Ludlow as executive secretary-treasurer of the powerful Los Angeles County Federation of Labor was unexpectedly delayed on June 20. Ludlow had been expected to step into the position opened by the death of Miguel Contreras. And a coalition of influential union leaders had worked hard to line up the votes for a June 20 confirmation meeting of some 500 delegates from L.A. unions on June 20.

Instead, two challengers emerged from the ranks of AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees). The challenge broke up what was expected to be a unanimous vote. Ludlow, who holds the position on an interim basis through Friday, July 1, now faces a vote on July 18.

Although most people close to the labor movement expect Ludlow to be confirmed, the challengers are fueled by concerns over special accommodations in the existing by-laws that were made to ease a Ludlow transition. "I'm not faulting them for running and using it to raise their issues," says Kent Wong, director of the UCLA Labor Center, who attended the delegates' meeting. "It's a relatively small group of disgruntled

unionists who feel the move to change the constitution and by-laws was over-reaching."

The impact of the surprise challenges has reached straight to the top of the union hierarchy. To facilitate Ludlow's candidacy, John Sweeney, president of the national AFL-CIO, had to give permission to change a union by-law stating that a candidate had to be an official federation delegate for three months immediately prior to taking office. Though Ludlow has years of experience, and has served as a city councilmember since July 2003, without a rules change he would have been ineligible. Still, Sweeney comes out of the Service Employees International Union and Ludlow was the Western Regional political director of the union. The AFL-CIO president is familiar with Ludlow's political acumen and would doubtless welcome a savvy ally when faced with a potential split looming at the national level (led by SEIU International President Andrew Stern). Ludlow also enjoys a good relationship with Stern.

It's a high-stakes game and Ludlow's challengers are miffed that the bigger players have the advantage. "The reason we decided to run candidates was to open up space for discussion of what the real issues are," says Ivan Corpeno-Chavez, who says that Ludlow should have reached out more to the rank-and-file.

Wong points out that the County Fed is made up of hundreds of unions and that it was not practical to launch a grassroots campaign to reach every member. "Ninety-nine percent of the people in that room," he says, "were enthusiastic about [Ludlow] stepping down from a council seat that he worked so hard to win to take over this position at a very difficult and challenging time for labor."

The combination generated a feeling of urgency at the County Fed Executive Board level that Contreras's position be permanently filled, quickly and by a skilled political player. While his challengers raised eyebrows at the process, it's unlikely that they would have had the political chops that Ludlow does.

A July 18 election means that Ludlow would step in as County Fed leader just days before the national AFL-CIO convention in Chicago, where the question of a union split is expected to come to a head. The national movement has been roiled as five unions - SEIU, the Teamsters, the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, the Laborers International Union, and UNITE HERE (the garment and hotel workers union) - have formed the Change To Win coalition and threatened to break away from the AFL-CIO.

The dissident unions want Sweeney to step down to make way for a new AFL-CIO president who believes in a more aggressive organizing approach. Union membership has dropped steadily over the decades from a high of 35 percent of the workforce to its present level of 13 percent, and the unions threatening a schism want to see a near-tripling of the AFL-CIO's organizing budget, plus a consolidation of 65 unions into eight.

The departure of the SEIU from the national labor federation could make labor matters messier here in LA. About one-third of the locals that make up the County Fed are with SEIU. Among the split-related issues still up in the air: If SEIU leaves the national federation, how would the local SEIU-County Fed relationship work? "Local repercussions could be quite daunting for Martin," says Peter Dreier, author and professor at Occidental College. But if Ludlow can figure out a way to keep the SEIU locals in the County Fed, he says, "a split won't be as disastrous here."

Aside from the national challenges, California unions are looking toward a Judgment Day face-off with Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in November, when they will have to defeat four ballot measures championed by him. The governor's propositions, unions say, are hostile to working families. One of them would make it much more difficult for unions to spend dues on political campaigns and initiatives. Los

Angeles unions are expected to gear up for high-powered and costly voter education and get-out-the-vote campaigns.

At UCLA Labor Center, Wong says that the confluence of potential crises made it essential for the County Fed to act quickly to effect a smooth transition to new leadership. "To their credit," Wong says, in spite of the last-minute challenges, "they really came together at a very difficult time and built a consensus among the vast majority of unions."

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