
Movement Mayor

Can Antonio Villaraigosa Change Los Angeles?

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ON A SATURDAY afternoon in March, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa stood with others leading a march of more than five hundred thousand people protesting anti-immigrant legislation making its way through Congress. It was the largest demonstration in LA history. Few people were surprised to see Villaraigosa on the front lines. But some progressive activists were upset when, a few days later, after almost forty thousand high school students staged an immigrant rights walkout and some blocked traffic on major freeways, Villaraigosa urged them to return to class. The mayor met privately with student leaders, then addressed a rally outside City Hall. His remarks angered many of the students, who chanted back at him, "Hell no, we won't go." He later explained, "Somebody's got to be a grown-up," an ironic comment given that Villaraigosa had himself participated in the historic Chicano high school student walkout in 1968.

For Villaraigosa, being a "grown-up" means effectively balancing his progressive views with his role as mayor governing a complex city full of economic and cultural crosscurrents. As he says, "I'm an unabashed progressive, but I'm not a knee-jerk."

Villaraigosa was elected mayor in May 2005, unseating the incumbent James Hahn, a moderate Democrat, by a 59 percent to 41 percent landslide. Instantly, the new mayor's face was everywhere, on the cover of *Newsweek*, on the network news stations. The "bold" and "charismatic" mayor was profiled on National Public Radio and in nearly every major newspaper in the country. The stories focused on his prominence as a Latino mayor in

the country's second largest city. They also highlighted his early years—as the son of an abusive father, a rebellious teenager, a high school dropout (before returning to get his diploma, then graduating from UCLA)—and described his growth as a progressive activist and elected official. They portrayed his ascent—as Villaraigosa often does himself—as an updated version of the American dream.

Villaraigosa speaks frequently of "hope" and "opportunity." He embraces patriotism in every speech and admonishes immigrant activists to carry the American flag at protest rallies. He emphasizes the positive role that government can play in improving people's lives, but he also promotes the importance of both personal responsibility and grassroots organizing.

His triumph was a victory for LA's progressive movement, which since the 1992 civil unrest has forged an increasingly powerful political coalition of unions, community organizations, environmental groups, religious institutions, and ethnic civic groups. For example, the city has adopted a living-wage law, an ordinance that effectively stops low-wage, big-box stores like Wal-Mart from setting up shop; an anti-sweatshop policy; and a municipal housing trust fund.

In 1973, Los Angeles was the first major U.S. city with a white majority to elect an African American mayor—Tom Bradley, who served for twenty years. This sprawling city of four million people is now 48 percent Latino, 31 percent white, 11 percent Asian, and 10 percent black. The demographic changes have triggered racial tensions, but the past decade's groundswell of grassroots labor and community organizing has helped refocus much of the frustration in positive directions. As a result, LA is a much more progressive city than it was three decades ago.

Now LA has elected a mayor with impec-

cable progressive credentials—a leader of MEChA (the Latino student group) at UCLA, an organizer with the teachers union, president of the Southern California American Civil Liberties Union, and a longtime ally of grassroots labor, community, and environmental groups. When he served as Speaker of the State Assembly, Villaraigosa surprised many skeptics with coalition-building skills that enabled him to pass progressive legislation to expand funding for urban parks, health insurance, and school construction.

After a year in office, Villaraigosa's mayoralty raises a critical question. What does it mean to be a progressive at the municipal level? Local government has some power to regulate industries, focus economic development dollars, encourage good development through land use policies, and push sticky industries to be good employers and good neighbors. But there are also many powerful obstacles to meaningful urban reform: a city whose financial needs far exceed its revenue-raising capacity; a president and governor hostile to the plight of cities and the poor; the threat of capital mobility; and a business community resistant to taxes, living wages, and regulations.

The new mayor inherited a \$295 million structural deficit—the difference between the cost of ongoing programs and the revenue the city receives. The reality is that LA cannot solve many of its problems without funding from the state and federal governments. Villaraigosa has spent considerable time lobbying in Sacramento and Washington to obtain funding for these needs. It was an important victory for his agenda when, after months of tense negotiations, Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Democrat-controlled legislature agreed in May to put a \$37 billion statewide bond measure before the voters in November to finance schools, roads, bridges, levee repairs, and affordable housing.

Villaraigosa won't be judged *solely* by his ability to take care of the municipal housekeeping chores (such as fixing potholes and reducing traffic congestion). The stakes are much higher: Can he address the plight of the poor and the struggling lower middle class? Can he promote what activists call a "growth-with-justice" agenda? The economy is booming, as the

class divide is widening. LA has more millionaires than any other city, but it is also the nation's capital of the "working poor"—about 1.4 million of its residents are in that category. It confronts a shortage of jobs that pay a living wage and provide access to health care. Housing prices are skyrocketing. Traffic congestion, inadequate public transit, and emissions from ships and trucks idling at the region's two major ports make LA the nation's most polluted area. Its schools are overcrowded and underfunded. Despite a declining crime rate, it remains one of America's most dangerous cities.

Every progressive group in the city has projected its hopes onto the fifty-three-year-old Villaraigosa. His allies understand that, to be an effective mayor, he needs to build a diverse governing coalition. He has to reassure the business community that he believes in strengthening the city's economy. But Villaraigosa wants to redefine a "healthy business climate" to mean a version of prosperity that is widely shared by working people, one that lifts the working poor into the middle class, provides good schools and affordable housing, and protects the environment.

Most local public officials are reluctant to accuse business lobbies of bluffing—or lying—when they claim that progressive government policy will undermine "business confidence" and push companies to relocate or curb expansion plans. In 1996, for example, the LA Chamber of Commerce released a report warning that a proposed living-wage ordinance (requiring firms with city contracts to pay decent wages and provide health benefits) would cost taxpayers more than \$130 million in tax increases and program cuts, force city contractors to downsize, eliminate about three thousand low-skill jobs, and cripple local job-creation programs. But the next year, over Mayor Richard Riordan's veto, the City Council adopted the ordinance, improving wages and benefits for about ten thousand workers. A recent report by two University of California economists for the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy showed that, after almost ten years, the law had none of those negative impacts.

Much of LA's economy—the tourism sec-

tor, the port and airport, HMOs and hospitals, universities, the film and entertainment industry, and firms with government contracts, among others—is tied to the region. This gives Villaraigosa significant leverage to promote a more enlightened view of business's responsibility to the broader community.

"What good is having power," he frequently says, "if you can't use it to help lift up the poor? What's the point of being elected to office if you can't help make life better for people without advantages?"

During LA's postwar boom, the city was run by a shadowy handful of white businessmen—the Committee of 25—who spoke with one voice, typically through the then-right-wing *Los Angeles Times*. They pushed for suburban development, downtown redevelopment, highway construction, aerospace contracts, and a weak labor movement. Today, there is no such coherent power structure whose members sit on each others' boards, control the charities and cultural institutions, and lunch at exclusive downtown social clubs. LA has become a city of absentee-owned firms that have little long-term stake in local affairs. The most conspicuous symbol of this trend is the sale in 2000 of Times Mirror, owner of the *Los Angeles Times*, to the Tribune Company of Chicago. The city's largest private employers are now the University of Southern California and Kaiser Permanente, a Health Management Organization. Major banks, aerospace firms, and oil companies have left. There are no Fortune 500 corporations headquartered in the nation's second largest city.

During the past few decades, four major groups have contended for political power to fill this vacuum of corporate leadership. The first are major commercial and residential developers (and their law firms), who seek zoning approvals and tax breaks and who, more than any other constituency, fill campaign coffers with contributions. The second are a wide variety of firms that do business with government agencies—including the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the port, the airport, the municipal utility, and the school district—and also litter the lists of major campaign donors. A third group, a loose coalition of homeowner associations and locally based business

groups in the suburban San Fernando Valley, has challenged what it considers City Hall's focus on the central business district and on low-income (predominantly black and Latino) neighborhoods. In 2002, they waged a feisty, though ultimately unsuccessful effort, to form a separate San Fernando Valley city.

Can Progressives Fill the Political Vacuum?

The fourth political force has been a network of progressive labor unions, community organizations, and environmental groups. If the 1992 civil unrest had any positive outcome at all, it was the growing recognition by the city's progressive activists that they had to do a better job at mobilizing grassroots groups to insist on political change, to work across racial lines, and to build bridges between unions and community groups. In fact, since the unrest, LA has become ground zero of effective union and community organizing. And the organizing has been bearing fruit—opening the possibility that progressives can forge an electoral and governing coalition to fill the city's leadership vacuum.

Clear evidence of this burgeoning movement came in 1997, when the revitalized unions, along with their allies among community groups and clergy, pushed the City Council to pass the living-wage law. In 1999, more than seventy five thousand home health care aides won an organizing effort led by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). This was the largest union victory in the country in more than thirty years. In 2000, a strike by the mostly immigrant janitors won widespread public support and led to a convincing contract victory.

Key to these successes has been the transformation of the LA County Federation of Labor into a solid institutional base for organizing, research, coalition-building, and political muscle. Under the leadership of the late Miguel Contreras, an organizer with the United Farm Workers and the hotel workers unions, the federation reached out beyond its membership to forge coalitions with community-based organizations, the clergy, and housing and immigrants' rights activists. LA's unions and their community allies have played a key role in changing the political and racial/ethnic complexion of LA's City Council, state legisla-

tive, and congressional delegations, now perhaps the most progressive in the country.

In the 2001 mayoral race, Jim Hahn, the longtime city attorney, beat Villaraigosa by a 54 percent to 46 percent margin. Hahn's electoral coalition included strong support among white homeowners (especially in the San Fernando Valley) and among African Americans, a legacy of the popularity among black voters of his father, Kenneth Hahn, who represented South LA in the City Council and County Board of Supervisors.

Despite Villaraigosa's loss, the broad progressive coalition that came together during the campaign helped accelerate the city's reform agenda. After Hahn won, Contreras and his union colleagues pushed the new mayor to support pro-labor and liberal policies. For example, Hahn walked the picket lines when grocery workers were engaged in a bitter four-month strike with three national supermarket chains. He supported (albeit reluctantly) an unprecedented city-funded \$100 million annual housing trust fund proposed by Housing LA, a coalition of union, church, and community activists. The labor movement also joined Hahn in opposing a 2002 ballot initiative to allow the San Fernando Valley to secede and form a separate city.

In 2003, Martin Ludlow, who had served as the County Fed's political director and had been Villaraigosa's aide in the state legislature, was elected to the LA City Council. That year, Villaraigosa also won a City Council seat, defeating an incumbent from the heavily Latino Fourteenth District. The Villaraigosa-Ludlow team on the City Council symbolized the potential for a Latino-African American coalition. Fabian Nuñez, who had also served as the County Fed's political director and was a veteran activist for immigrant rights, was elected to the State Assembly in 2002 and catapulted to the powerful position of Speaker two years later. In November 2004, Karen Bass, an African American and a longtime community organizer, was elected to the State Assembly to represent the 47th Assembly district, a polyglot area with significant black, Latino, and Jewish populations.

When Villaraigosa decided to run again for mayor in 2005, most of the city's progressive

social movements and constituent groups coalesced around his candidacy. During the campaign, Villaraigosa focused on declining public schools, transportation gridlock, neighborhood crime, the shortage of affordable housing and parks, and the need to make the busy port and the airport better neighbors.

LA's labor movement confronted a dilemma. Contreras hoped to orchestrate a dual endorsement of both candidates, but most LA union leaders believed that rewarding incumbents for good behavior was a cardinal principle, and on those grounds Hahn got the County Fed's support. Villaraigosa gained the endorsement of several unions, including United Teachers of Los Angeles, but Hahn got the lion's share of labor's money and mobilization. Still, fewer rank-and-file union members, and even staffers, participated in the County Fed's voter registration and turnout campaign for Hahn than four years before.

In the March 2005 preliminary election, Villaraigosa garnered the most votes among the five major candidates. He won 33 percent of the total vote compared with Hahn's 24 percent. Villaraigosa received 35 percent of the votes of union members compared with Hahn's 27 percent. Then, just weeks before the runoff, the fifty-two-year-old Contreras died unexpectedly of a heart attack. Because of his close friendship with both Contreras and his widow, Maria Elena Durazo, the head of the hotel workers union in Los Angeles, Villaraigosa was one of the pallbearers at the funeral. Less than a week later, 60 percent of union members voted for Villaraigosa in the runoff.

When the votes were counted, Villaraigosa had won majorities of Latino, black, and white voters, as well as all income groups, from 54 percent among those earning over \$100,000 to 67 percent among voters earning below \$20,000. He carried 77 percent of voters between eighteen and twenty-nine years old and 70 percent of those between thirty and forty-four. Compared with 2001, Villaraigosa strengthened his base of support among Latinos (he won 84 percent of their vote), union members (60 percent), and Jews (55 percent). In 2001, Villaraigosa won only 20 percent of the African American vote. One poll indicated that in 2005 he received as much as

58 percent, a huge swing. Young African Americans, in particular, turned out for him. Among whites, his share of the vote grew from 41 percent to 50 percent. Among white voters in the suburban middle-class San Fernando Valley, he garnered 48 percent of the vote compared with 34 percent four years earlier.

Villaraigosa Takes Office

Despite his overwhelming victory and his broad popularity, Villaraigosa's electoral coalition, like Hahn's before him, is fragile. He has to prove to business leaders and high turnout, white, middle-class homeowners that he can carry out the day-to-day civic housekeeping chores. Even more important, he needs to make sure that racial tensions don't explode into civil unrest. As Villaraigosa assembled his transition team, he requested, as a kind of cautionary exercise, that each person on the team see *Crash*, a new film (and eventual Academy Award winner) that dramatized day-to-day ethnic and racial clashes in Los Angeles. Almost as soon as the inaugural party had dispersed, violence flared at a local high school that pitted Latino against African American students. Villaraigosa immediately arrived on the scene. Ever since, he has been a constant presence at the city's schools, encouraging students to stay in school, resolve conflicts without violence, and get involved in community initiatives, including this year's expanded summer jobs program.

Villaraigosa signaled his political loyalties by appointing some of LA's most effective activists to key positions in the mayor's office: as department heads and as members of powerful boards and commissions. He named Larry Frank, a longtime labor and community organizer, as one of several deputy mayors. He appointed Thomas Saenz, a former attorney for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, as his top legal adviser. He recruited Torie Osborn, director of the leftist Liberty Hill Foundation and a veteran activist for gay and lesbian rights, as a special adviser with a broad portfolio. He asked Denise Fairchild, a well-respected planner, to coordinate development in South Los Angeles. He hired Gail Goldberg, the head of San Diego's planning department, to take charge of LA's moribund planning agency and help him real-

ize his vision of a denser, pedestrian-friendly Los Angeles that relies more on mass transit. He installed Cecilia Estolano, an activist attorney involved in environmental and affordable housing efforts, to run the powerful Community Redevelopment Agency.

Whereas Hahn had appointed a handful of progressives to various boards, Villaraigosa stacked these posts with enough people to change the priorities of key agencies, including the Department of Water and Power, the Harbor Commission, the Airport Commission, the Planning Commission, and the Community Redevelopment Agency. Despite the opposition of the Central City Association, the powerful lobby group for downtown developers and businesses, he named three leaders of the ACLU to the Homeless Services Authority—the ACLU only a short time before had won a legal settlement from the city over the Police Department's treatment of the homeless.

Activists now have a friend and ally in the mayor's office, but will access bring major policy change? They have to figure out how to position themselves. Are they insiders, outsiders, or both? Larry Frank, an important field organizer in both Villaraigosa mayoral campaigns and now deputy mayor, spoke candidly of the challenge. He told the *Los Angeles Times* that the central dilemma was "competing demands." "How do you move an agenda forward, and how do you hold a coalition together?" But, he warned, "If all you're concerned about is holding your coalition together, you can't push on issues."

During his first year in office, Villaraigosa has taken steps that reflect the careful balancing act that defines the job of big-city mayor. He has generally supported William Bratton, LA's popular police chief. Hahn hired Bratton after he was fired by New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Los Angeles has far fewer police officers per resident than New York, Chicago, and other major cities, and Bratton has been pushing for more. In March, Villaraigosa proposed raising monthly trash pickup fees on homeowners from \$11 to \$28 over four years to allow Bratton to hire 1,053 more police officers by 2010.

But Villaraigosa has challenged Bratton

over the issue of police abuse. The Los Angeles Police Department is still subject to a federal Justice Department consent decree to overhaul its operations to monitor and discipline rogue cops. When Villaraigosa appointed John Mack, former head of the Urban League and longtime LAPD critic, to head the Police Commission, a showdown with Bratton (and the police union) was almost inevitable. The clash came in the case of Devon Brown. LAPD officer Steven Garcia shot and killed the thirteen-year-old Brown around 4 a.m. on February 6, 2005, in South Los Angeles, as the African American teenager backed a stolen car toward a police car after a brief chase. Police said that Brown was driving erratically and that they suspected him of drunk driving. Garcia fired ten shots, hitting Brown seven times.

The incident led Bratton to impose restrictions on officers' shooting at moving cars, but Bratton defended Garcia, saying that Brown's car threatened Garcia's life. Critics of the LAPD wanted to see if Villaraigosa would defy Bratton and the powerful police union. They got their answer in February, when the Police Commission—under previous mayors a rubber stamp for the police chief—ruled by a four-to-one margin that Garcia had violated departmental rules and should face discipline for the shooting. The city also reached a tentative financial settlement with Brown's family, said to be about \$1.5 million.

VILLARAIGOSA IS at his best when he uses his personal charm and diplomatic skills to bring contending forces together and resolve a logjam, forging a compromise that results in victories for unions, environmentalists and community groups but allows the other side to save face. As one veteran organizer explained, "Our job is to make enough noise, mobilize enough support for our issues, and put enough pressure on the City Council and the business community, to give Antonio the room to broker a solution. If we do our job, he can do his."

Even before taking office, mayor-elect Villaraigosa demonstrated his political skills and pro-labor sympathies. He and Ludlow, who left his Council seat to become head of the LA County Federation of Labor after

Contreras's death, engaged in shuttle diplomacy to settle a threatened strike by hotel workers, brokering a deal that averted a union lockout at seven major Los Angeles hotels. It resulted in important gains, including a new contract that expires at the same time this year as contracts in other major cities, giving the union key leverage with national hotel chains. Over the Chamber of Commerce's objections, Villaraigosa supported (and the City Council passed) an ordinance that made it harder for a company that buys a grocery store to fire employees for at least three months. The law, drafted by the United Food and Commercial Workers, was designed to thwart the possibility that the Idaho-based Albertsons grocery chain (which has about twenty stores in Los Angeles and whose workers are covered by a union contract) would be sold to a nonunion company.

In October, Villaraigosa settled a dispute that threatened to derail plans for a new hotel next to the city's Convention Center. The city agreed to provide the new hotel with up to \$290 million in subsidies and loans to help rejuvenate the money-losing convention center, while guaranteeing that the city-subsidized hotel will be unionized. In April, Villaraigosa helped SEIU resolve a longstanding dispute with developer Robert Maguire, one of the city's largest property owners. A stalwart ally of SEIU's Justice for Janitors campaign, Villaraigosa was asked to intervene in the union's effort to win bargaining rights for security guards who work in the same buildings with the predominantly Latino, and unionized, janitors. The union calculated that a victory over Maguire—whose buildings' janitors are already SEIU members, and whose development projects require city approvals—would be the opening salvo in a campaign to organize an estimated ten thousand security guards, most of them African Americans. Maguire wanted to keep the janitors' and security guards' unions separate. Villaraigosa brokered a compromise: The guards could join the SEIU but they would do so in their own local. At the City Hall press conference, Villaraigosa stood with Latino union leaders, African American clergy, and Maguire to announce the agreement.

Villaraigosa has been working with envi-

ronmentalists, unions, shipping lines, and nearby communities to “green” the Port of LA, the nation’s busiest. It is both a major employer and a leading source of air pollution, but largely immune from U.S. environmental laws. Ships in the LA port contribute 55 percent of all diesel emissions and 36 percent of all emissions of nitrous oxides, a key component of smog. To cut down on these emissions, the mayor’s port commissioners adopted new lease requirements in February that mandate shipping lines to use clean Alternative Maritime Power, which plugs ships into shore-side electric power so the huge container ships do not have to run their diesel engines while docked. The new lease conditions also require that ships use low sulfur fuel while near shore, mandates use of alternative fuel in new yard tractors, and requires lower emission trucks and locomotives to be used in the port terminal.

Like the port, the huge Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) is a major economic engine and source of jobs, but also a terrible neighbor, the source of mind-numbing noise, traffic, and pollution for adjacent communities. Moreover, it is too small to accommodate the increasing number of flights. Mayors Riordan and Hahn had proposed major airport expansion that outraged residents of nearby neighborhoods and led to lawsuits that put expansion on hold. In September, Villaraigosa called airport officials, politicians, and residents to a meeting in an airport boardroom and asked them to work out a compromise. Nine weeks later, they signed a preliminary pact. At Villaraigosa’s urging, the LAX board settled four lawsuits that will allow the airport to implement some modernization, while funding noise and traffic mitigation, and job training, in surrounding communities. Villaraigosa favors a more regional approach that would assign a greater share of anticipated growth in passenger and cargo flights to the region’s other, smaller airports.

In April, he launched a Million Trees Initiative, designed to plant one million new trees over a four-year period in order to beautify and shade city streets, parks, and open spaces. To address the worst-in-the-nation traffic gridlock that many Angelenos rank as among the most frustrating aspects of life in LA, Villaraigosa

issued an executive order barring street construction and repair work during rush hour. He secured federal and state funds to build a new carpool lane on the congested 405 freeway. And he revived plans for extending a subway line under Wilshire Boulevard toward the coast, while expanding rapid bus service.

Good government activists were pleased when Villaraigosa tightened ethics standards by banning lobbyists from serving on city commissions. The new rules also banned city commissioners from evaluating and recommending contracts that their commissions will eventually vote on. But reformers would like the new mayor to support a ban on donations to city candidates from individuals and firms bidding on contracts from city government. And they’d like to see him endorse a proposal, put forward by City Councilmember Eric Garcetti, for public financing of all municipal election campaigns.

Dilemmas and Opportunities

As of early May, Villaraigosa had yet to address a number of thorny issues on progressives’ agenda. Skyrocketing rents (typically over \$1,200/month) and home prices (over \$350,000) are pushing poor and working-class residents out of the city or forcing them to live in substandard and overcrowded housing. More than forty thousand people are homeless. Developers have ambitious plans for gentrifying the downtown area. More than fifty high-rise residential buildings are on the drawing board, all of them slated for high-income residents. Although the city recently passed a moratorium on razing residential hotels in the downtown Skid Row area, advocates for the homeless fear that the development boom will squeeze out the most vulnerable victims of the housing crisis.

Soon after taking office, Villaraigosa made good on his pledge to allocate \$100 million for the city’s housing trust fund. Prodded by a series of columns about Skid Row by *Los Angeles Times* writer Steve Lopez, the mayor targeted half of the funds for housing and social services for the homeless. Yet housing activists would like the city to identify a permanent source of funding for the trust fund, so that it does not require a political battle each year. “I understand why the mayor decided to raise

garbage fees to add more cops,” said one housing activist. “But crime is going down, and rents are going up. We need a similar commitment to fund affordable housing.”

During the campaign, Villaraigosa had pledged his support for inclusionary zoning, a policy (already adopted by more than a hundred California cities) to require new residential developments to include at least 15 percent affordable units. The Housing LA coalition—which had successfully pushed for a municipal housing trust fund four years earlier—had been lobbying for two years to get the City Council to adopt inclusionary zoning, triggering strong opposition from the developer-dominated Central City Association. Once Villaraigosa took office, however, the housing activists backed off, wanting to give the new mayor breathing room and an opportunity to forge a broader coalition for housing reform. He told housing activists that he would push for inclusionary zoning as part of a comprehensive housing agenda. The activists intend to wage a grassroots campaign that could include protests and civil disobedience, targeting slum landlords and big developers, anticipating that if they create a climate of crisis and tension, it will give Villaraigosa an opportunity to forge a compromise settlement that would give the activists a victory.

Some political difficulties have been thrust upon the new mayor. But others he walked into with his eyes wide open. During the campaign, he called for mayoral takeover of the Los Angeles Unified School District—with 727,000 students, the nation’s second largest. About half the students fail to graduate. Most of his key advisers warned him that school reform was political quicksand, but he insisted that it was a battle he wanted to fight, despite strong opposition from his allies in the teachers union and the seven-member elected school board, and despite the fact that LAUSD serves students from twenty six separate cities, twenty five of which had no voice in electing Villaraigosa to office. Villaraigosa’s staff is working on state legislation to allow the mayor to appoint the superintendent and has delegated a task force to make recommendations for improving student achievement in the vast district. Villaraigosa insists that as a former teach-

ers union organizer, he is in a good position to tackle school reform.

HE IS PROBABLY the most pro-labor mayor in the country. But the city’s unions were shaken in February by a scandal that brought down the mayor’s close friend Martin Ludlow, head of the County Fed. A months-long investigation by the U.S. attorney, the district attorney, and city’s Ethics Commission found that Ludlow’s successful City Council campaign in 2003 received at least \$53,000 in secret help from SEIU Local 99 (which represents 38,000 school employees, including classroom aides, bus drivers, and mechanics, but not teachers) in the form of campaign workers, cellphones, computers and phone-banking equipment. To avoid a jail term, Ludlow agreed to step down from his County Fed position, which he had held for only eight months, and to stay out of union and electoral politics for ten years. Many labor activists said the penalties were vastly excessive. Similar city campaign finance violations have resulted in fines, not the threat of criminal prosecution.

News reporters wondered whether LA’s labor movement—with more than eight hundred thousand members—could come back from the double whammy of Contreras’s death and Ludlow’s downfall. But by March the labor movement’s leaders elected Maria Elena Durazo, the dynamic head of the hotel workers’ union and Contreras’s widow, to head the County Fed. A feisty organizer who rebuilt the once-lethargic hotel workers’ local into a political powerhouse and pushed both the local and national labor movement to embrace immigrant rights, she will be a powerful ally of the new mayor.

Villaraigosa seems well positioned to become a national leader, in no small measure because two issues he has long embraced—the plight of the working poor and immigrant rights—are now moving to the top of that nation’s political agenda. Soon after his election, political observers were already predicting the Villaraigosa would someday run for governor or for U.S. Senate. As the Latino mayor of America’s second largest city, he already has a national profile and a bully pulpit. In January, the Democratic National Committee

picked Villaraigosa to respond to George W. Bush's State of the Union address. He appears frequently on the Sunday talk shows. The U.S. Conference of Mayors asked him to head a task force on poverty. And the recent upsurge of mass protests around immigrant rights has lifted Villaraigosa's visibility and natural constituency. The Republicans' recent efforts to criminalize undocumented immigrants can only help the Democrats—and especially a politician with crossover appeal like Villaraigosa. Like one of his heroes, the late New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, Villaraigosa is staking his political future on tackling tough urban issues that build on an immigrant base but resonate with broader constituencies.

In the early 1900s, New York City was a cauldron of seething problems—poverty, slums, child labor, epidemics, sweatshops and ethnic conflict. Out of that turmoil, activists created a progressive movement, forging a coalition of immigrants, unionists, muckraking journalists, settlement house workers, middle-class suffragists, socialists, and upper-

class philanthropists. They fought successfully for workplace, tenement and public health reforms. Although they spoke many languages, the movement found its voice through organizers, clergy, and sympathetic politicians. Their victories provided the intellectual and policy foundations of the New Deal three decades later.

At the start of the twenty-first century, Los Angeles faces many similar challenges and opportunities. Villaraigosa and his allies hope to demonstrate that a polyglot city like LA can be well managed and serve as a laboratory of progressive policy reform. If they succeed, they may be laying the groundwork for the next New Deal. ●

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