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A Multiracial and Multilingual Progressivism Is Born in Los Angeles

by Peter Dreier and Robert Gottlieb

If a progressive revival takes place in this country, historians will look back at the political breakthroughs that occurred in Los Angeles in the first years of the 21st century as harbingers of that change. For it is in Los Angeles, with its economic disparities, its ethnically diverse population and its sprawling geography, that progressive politics are making more headway than in any other U.S. city.

In many ways, L.A. resembles New York City at the turn of the previous century. New York was plagued by poverty, slums, child labor, epidemics, sweatshops and ethnic conflict. Out of this turmoil, activists forged a coalition of immigrants, unionists, middle-class suffragists and upper-class philanthropists. While speaking many languages, this "progressive" movement found its voice through organizers, clergy and sympathetic politicians. Its victories helped provide the intellectual and policy foundations of such landmark New Deal reforms as Social Security and the Wagner Act.

Comparable political forces are converging in L.A. today. By June 6, following the first citywide election affected by term limits, we will have a new mayor, a new city attorney and a half-dozen new members of the City Council. Although the dialogue among the candidates so far may not reflect a major political sea change, change is coming.

Consider the housing issue. In recent months, leaders of the Sierra Club, several major labor unions, churches, immigrant-services groups, community organizations, senior-citizen groups, nonprofit developers and tenant groups have been meeting regularly to devise a strategy to make Los Angeles' severe housing shortage a central political issue.

Or take jobs and the environment. A series of meetings organized by the Progressive Los Angeles Network (PLAN) has brought labor unions, environmentalists and neighborhood organizations together to craft a common agenda for creating decent paying jobs that reduce or eliminate hazards to workers, the community and the environment. Some of the tensions among these groups are still palpable and have created conflict over specific projects. But the PLAN meetings are laying the groundwork for what may constitute a new vision of a livable city and a politics that can overcome years of mistrust.

This political shift results from painstaking organizing by a new generation of grass-roots leaders. They recognize that coalitions are necessary to address the city's problems and that a new politics--and vision--for the city are not only possible but essential.

The different advocacy groups have begun to recognize that they need to identify a clear alternative agenda, backed up with a winning political strategy. It has happened before. Several years ago, a coalition of labor, clergy and community groups scored an impressive victory over most of the business community with the "living wage" law. Now, almost every elected official in the city supports the idea. During the janitors' strike last spring, even Mayor Richard Riordan, who had opposed the living-wage ordinance, told the city's building owners they should pay their workers a living wage.

Since then, leaders of a wide spectrum of organizations and constituencies have been building bridges. For example, a number of local unions have become a solid institutional base for organizing, research and coalition-building, allying with community and advocacy groups to wage innovative organizing campaigns among health-care workers, janitors, public employers and others.

In addition, new networks of community organizations have established a presence in Los Angeles, mobilizing a broad constituency of poor and middle-class people across the racial divide, focusing on housing, parks, schools, health care and food. A number of environmental groups have linked up with parent and community organizations to challenge the widespread presence of polluters in low-income neighborhoods, such as school buses that run on diesel fuel, which affects the health of schoolchildren as well as surrounding communities.

Single-issue go-it-alone politics can win occasional victories. But addressing Los Angeles' widening economic divide requires more than short-term coalitions of convenience. It demands a broader vision: a common view of Los Angeles' future and a

common policy agenda. It also requires constituencies that rarely joined forces in the past to find ways to work together politically.

L.A.'s progressive mosaic is starting to find its voice. It is learning to say living wage, social justice and a livable city in English, Korean, Spanish, Vietnamese and other languages. Its leaders are developing trust and finding common ground. Whether it can translate its voice into a powerful movement with political staying power is still to be seen. But for the first time in years, progressives are optimistic.

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