

latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-meyerson-labor-20110404,0,7209107.story

latimes.com

Op-Ed

L.A. labor -- getting the job done

In Wisconsin and other states, labor movements are on the defensive. Here, unions have gone on the offensive to help create jobs at decent pay.

By Harold Meyerson

April 4, 2011

American unions are waging epic battles today against the most serious assaults they've encountered in more than half a century, and they've had some major successes. No one could have predicted that union members and their supporters would flood state capitals in the way they have, or that polls would show Americans support collective bargaining rights for public employees by a 2-1 margin.

The Republican governors who've gone after the unions — Wisconsin's Scott Walker and Ohio's John Kasich most prominently — have seen their poll ratings tank. The political consequences of their ideological overreach

may cost the Republicans dearly in the Midwest, and after the next election cycle, the laws repealing collective bargaining rights for public employees may themselves be repealed.

Yet labor's mobilization, however impressive, is still a defensive one. Even if the status quo is restored in the public sector, where roughly 3 in 10 workers are unionized, that won't do much to help workers in the private sector, where the rate of unionization has fallen to just 6.9% and wages, not surprisingly, have not risen since the late 1990s. With the laws protecting labor organizing so weak that employers violate them with impunity, it's hard to find a place, even at the height of the Wisconsin pushback, where unions are on the offensive.

There is, however, one exception to this rule: Los Angeles.

The offensive doesn't chiefly consist of campaigns to organize nonunion companies. Los Angeles is still part of the United States, and in the United States, such campaigns remain all but impossible. Instead, the campaigns are aimed at providing L.A. with something the city needs even more: new jobs at decent wages. Largely, this means union jobs in construction, where unemployment in California still exceeds 30%, and many of the jobs will involve training, credentialing and employing the inner-city unemployed.

advertisement

MAIN STREET

TEST DRIVE OVER 70+ CARS. REALLY.

Main Street in Motion. It's your chance to test drive Chevy vs. the rest.

April 8-10 at Hollywood Park

> Learn More

In recent weeks, two governmental agencies — the L.A. Harbor Commission and the Exposition Metro Line Construction Authority — adopted a "construction careers policy" that creates local-hiring, union-wage and safety criteria for, respectively, the expansion of L.A.'s port and the construction of the light-rail line on Exposition Boulevard. Roughly 12,700 construction jobs will be created for these two projects, 30% of them set aside for residents of the communities where the projects will be built.

There are more such jobs in the pipeline, perhaps as many as 250,000. As the Metropolitan Transportation Authority gives the go-ahead to rail lines spanning the city that L.A. voters funded by approving a sales tax increase in 2008, it's expected to apply the construction careers policy to the building of those lines as well. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has been asking the federal government for loan guarantees to accelerate the construction of these lines, and in recent weeks, bipartisan support has been building on Capitol Hill for a bill establishing a federal infrastructure bank that could do just that.

The construction careers policy is the brainchild of L.A.'s labor movement — of the County Federation of Labor, which lobbied for it, and the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, or LAANE, which serves as a strategy center and think tank for L.A. labor and, more recently, as an economic development and green idea factory for the broader community. Working with unions and environmental and community organizations, LAANE has conceived or helped design projects to expand the city's recycling industry, increase the number of inner-city grocery stores and attract rail and bus manufacturing to the city, while ensuring good jobs in all these fields. It has identified the public policies and the governmental decisions that can help bring these projects to fruition. At that point, the unions, enviros and community activists can become a powerful lobby for the projects, as they were at the port and for the Expo Line.

Lobbying for good, union jobs on projects over which the government has some sway is nothing new in Los Angeles. But actually conceiving some of those projects, and identifying the funding sources, companies, governmental policies and political allies that can make them happen, is new. And never more necessary than it is now, at a time when American multinationals are disinclined to invest in America and another federal stimulus is politically impossible. The L.A. model is one that labor movements in other progressive cities and states should clearly emulate.

In Wisconsin and in most other places, labor is putting up one hell of a defensive fight. In Los Angeles, labor is not only on the offense but beginning to play a new and crucial role. Someone has got to get L.A. back to work, labor is saying, and it might as well be us.

Harold Meyerson is editor at large of the American Prospect and a columnist for the Washington Post.

Copyright © 2011, [Los Angeles Times](#)