
Miguel Contreras: Legacy of a Labor Leader. By Kent Wong and Michael Viola. Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education, 2009. 140 pp. \$15 paper.

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The future of organized labor looked bleak in the early 1990s. The national AFL-CIO had atrophied, and it seemed unable to renew itself in the face of steady membership declines that accompanied deindustrialization. Economic despair was overlaid with rapidly changing demographics as many white Angelinos left the unions and their communities after their factories closed. Politicians like former California Governor Pete Wilson and members of the Republican Party successfully exploited recession-induced anxiety to pass Proposition 187, forbidding the undocumented from using education or health services. Moreover, long-time labor allies in the legislature would rotate out under voter-approved term limits.

The premature death of the head of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor allowed Miguel Contreras to assume the reins of power some two decades before they would otherwise have been available. The opportunity was fortuitous for both labor and Latinos. Both groups sought to change the existing political paradigm and to establish themselves as a force to be reckoned with.

Contreras began to align organized labor with the developing immigrant rights movement and to partner with the then-new AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and a new state federation leadership to demonstrate new organizational life.

He focused on political action, running candidates in Latino areas. Instead of donating to the candidates, labor placed volunteers in the precincts and used labor's

financial largesse to fund an aggressive mailing campaign that focused on kitchen-table economics and tapped into racial resentments at being scapegoated by nativist politicians. One stunning success led to another, and Contreras began to help elect African American, Asian, and Jewish candidates from multicultural districts.

Politicians were asked to support worker organizing, to adopt living-wage ordinances, and to use redevelopment funds to build facilities to provide good jobs with union contracts. Scholars such as Ruth Milkman have labeled this the “L.A. Model.”

The Contreras legacy is expansive. In the political arena, it is personified by the recent elevation of Hilda Solis as U.S. Secretary of Labor and by the election of Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. Neither could have risen to such prominence without labor’s assistance, and more importantly, without the fundamental changes that Contreras brought to Los Angeles.

Miguel Contreras: Legacy of a Labor Leader is a beautifully designed and accessible volume. It introduces the reader to this larger-than-life figure as a young UFW activist in California’s Central Valley and a boycott organizer in Toronto and associates him with Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and Robert F. Kennedy.

The book is heavily illustrated with images of people, artifacts, and ephemera. These images and the relatively light text (which comprise less than seventy pages in English and roughly the same number in the Spanish back half of the book) effectively place Contreras in historical context and raise questions for discussion.

This book provides a wonderful first cut at history. Hopefully the authors, or another scholar, will follow up with a full-length biography. A longer manuscript would allow for an exploration of a host of issues central to Contreras’ life and times. Furthermore, it would likely be less celebratory; it is easy to get the sense that this book is part of a larger effort to canonize a gifted, but very human, man.

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