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The Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy: a new model for American liberalism?

Take a left as you exit the Long Beach Airport, and you’ll pass three acres of greenery named “Rosie the Riveter Park.” The park stands at the southeast corner of what had once been the mammoth Douglas Aircraft factory, where DC-3s, -4s, -5s, all the way up to -10s, were once manufactured, and where, during World War II, 43,000 workers, half of them women, built the B-17 bombers and C-47 transports that flew missions over Europe and the Pacific.

World War II and then the Cold War remade Long Beach. Federal dollars funded the Douglas factory, a new naval shipyard, and numerous defense firms. An entire city—the working-class community of Lakewood, which borders Long Beach on the north—was built to house the sudden influx of defense workers. Long Beach became and remains the second-largest city in Los Angeles County.

The new jobs paid well; powerful unions represented the workers in the factories and on the docks. Military spending, though, began to decline after the Vietnam War, and when the Cold War ended, Long Beach and the broader Los Angeles economy took a hit from which neither has recovered. The naval shipyard closed in 1997. Douglas, Lockheed, and North American Aviation—the aircraft manufacturers that had been the region’s largest private-sector employers—downsized and eventually shuttered almost all their Southern California plants.

 Long Beach and Los Angeles did not become Detroit and Cleveland—hollowed-out urban hulks. L.A. still had the entertainment and tourism industries. The rise of Asian imports created a boom at the ports. Millions of new immigrants, chiefly from Mexico, Central America, Asia, and the Pacific, came to Los Angeles and found work. But good blue-collar jobs—the factory jobs that had paid enough to make L.A. the epicenter of America’s post–World War II boom—were largely gone. By the mid-1990s, Los Angeles had become the nation’s capital of low-wage labor and remains so to this day: Twenty-eight percent of full-time workers in L.A. County make less than $25,000 a year. In Chicago, only 19 percent of workers earn so little.

Long Beach was especially hurt. A 2006 study found that the average wage of local manufacturing workers was $63,182—but few manufacturing workers remained. It also found that the average wage of hospitality employees—primarily hotel and restaurant workers—was $19,000. Like its defense establishments in earlier years, Long Beach’s downtown hotels had received considerable governmental assistance. The aid for the hotels came from the city, which, seeking to boost its economy by making Long Beach a tourist destination, discounted leases of municipally owned land to the hotels, subsidized their construction, and forgave the hotels’ debts. The funding added up to $114 million between 1981 and 2008. But unlike their Rosie the Riveter predecessors, the women who cleaned the rooms in Long Beach’s premier hotels brought home a pittance—roughly $9.50 an hour.

Long Beach is not famed for its liberalism. Until 15 years ago, its elected officials fell into two categories; they were either Chamber of Commerce Republicans or defense--oriented Democrats. But last November, Long Beach voters went to the polls and, by a margin of 64 percent to 36 percent, gave the 2,000 employees at the city’s largest hotels a raise to $13 an hour and five paid sick days. In any American city, such a measure would have been groundbreaking. In Long Beach, it would have been inexplicable but for one all-important particular: The campaign behind the measure was the handiwork of the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, commonly known by its acronym, LAANE.

Established in 1993, LAANE is the think tank, policy arm, and, on occasion, political organizer for the Los Angeles labor movement. Over the past 20 years, it has become the nation’s most innovative and effective force for raising the incomes of low-wage private-sector workers. No other think tank has come up with more ways to leverage the powers of municipal government to create higher pay for America’s working class. No other community-organizing group has built more effective labor-environmental-neighborhood alliances. No other lobbyist has a better record of persuading elected officials to enact not just progressive legislation but the kind of progressive legislation that no one has ever before enacted.

Former Los Angeles Deputy Mayor Larry Frank calls LAANE “the most sophisticated and intelligent organization I’ve ever worked with when it comes to moving a policy agenda.” Frank’s is not an isolated opinion. “They’re the leader of the groups around the country working for more equitable economic development,” says Shawn Escoffery, an official with the Surdna Foundation, which has funded LAANE in recent years.

Founded and led until last year by attorney Madeline Janis, the organization first came to public notice in 1997 when it spearheaded a living-wage ordinance for employees of companies with city contracts. The legislation became the model for ordinances in more than 100 other cities. Soon after, LAANE set the template for community benefit agreements. Local governments had often compelled developers to pay their construction workers a living wage, but these agreements conditioned government assistance on businesses within the completed projects paying a living wage to their employees as well. LAANE has won such benefits—including local-hiring, living-wage, and union-representation agreements—at many of L.A.’s mega-developments (most prominently Staples Center, where the Lakers and Kings play). It has crafted an inner-city hiring accord with the county’s transit agency, which will produce tens of thousands of jobs in the African American community. It has brought together the Teamsters, the Sierra Club, and the Natural Resources Defense Council and hammered out agreements that reduced the truck pollution around the Los Angeles and Long Beach harbors by nearly 90 percent. It has restructured the city’s private trash-collection industry in Los Angeles, which will lead to more recycling and a better-paid workforce.

LAANE’s victories have come when American liberals are generally sunk in pessimism about the prospects for reversing the growth in economic inequality and the decline in middle-income jobs. LAANE has cracked the code for the economy’s seemingly most intractable conundrum: how to raise the incomes of American workers. It has helped win living wages for 64,000 private-sector workers. As projects subject to LAANE–devised regulations expand over the next five years, that number should rise to 95,000.

“The left consensus is that the world is collapsing, that we have no more ideas on how to fix it,” Janis says. “But we do. We have a vision and a strategy and a practical way of realizing them. When our government invests our dollars in the private economy, we should get a return on that investment. We should get a return in the form of living wages and in the form of clean air and parks and local hiring. Getting a return on your investment is a core capitalist concept. This is that concept but with a progressive spin.”

 Although LAANE had not been active in Long Beach when it decided to mount a campaign on behalf of its hotel workers, the city wasn’t foreign terrain. Long Beach’s demographic transformations closely tracked those in the region. Between 1970 and 2010, the city grew from 359,000 residents to 462,000. Where those people came from, what they did for a living, and how they voted, however, were all radically different. In 1970, 86 percent of Long Beach residents were white. In 2010, 29 percent were white, while 41 percent were Latino, 14 percent were Asian, and 13 percent were black. Long Beach is home to more than 20,000 Filipino immigrants and their children and has more Cambodians—roughly 50,000—than any other city outside Southeast Asia.

The campaign to unionize the city’s hotel workers began in earnest in 2008, when UNITE HERE, the hotel workers’ union, persuaded the city council to mandate card-check recognition at hotels built on city-owned land. (Card check is a process in which management recognizes a union when 50 percent plus one of the workers sign affiliation cards, thereby forgoing an election in which management has the freedom to intimidate workers.) The hotels responded by placing an initiative on the ballot that repealed the council’s order. Fearing the initiative would pass, the council rescinded its card-check order.

In the wake of this defeat, LAANE believed it could persuade city voters to enact a living wage for hotel workers if it conducted the kind of community-organizing campaigns it had in Los Angeles. “It’s extremely difficult to organize an individual hotel,” says Vivian Rothstein, then LAANE’s deputy director, who oversaw its Long Beach campaign. “They’re owned by global corporations. They have no engagement with the local community. So we look to where the industry is concentrated, where it impacts the local economy. In Long Beach, our research showed that 83 percent of the employees of the downtown hotels lived in the city.”

LAANE began to build the Long Beach Coalition for Good Jobs and a Healthy Community. In 2009, LAANE’s researchers produced a 50-page paper that documented the city’s investment in tourism over the preceding 25 years, which, after factoring in the hotel-adjacent aquarium and convention center, came to three-quarters of a billion dollars. The report also revealed that Long Beach ranked eighth among the 26 largest U.S. hotel markets in revenues per hotel room and that 41 percent of the workers at one large downtown hotel, the Hilton, received some form of public assistance.

Nikole Cababa was one of the two full-time organizers on LAANE’s campaign. Twenty-five years old, the daughter of Filipino immigrants, Cababa had grown up in Long Beach and had recently graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles. She concentrated on staging forums about the workings of the city’s economy and on mobilizing voters in a series of elections. By the time the Long Beach Coalition put its $13-an-hour initiative on the November 2012 ballot, Cababa had assembled a mélange of organizations that worked to pass the measure. One such group, Khmer Girls in Action, turned out 60 high-school students to knock on doors in the city’s Little Cambodia neighborhood. Another group, the Filipino Migrant Center, sent out canvassers who spoke to Filipino immigrants in their native Tagalog. Three hundred volunteers came out to canvass, walking precincts that had never been targeted in previous elections.

“Our campaign wasn’t about helping hotel workers as such,” Rothstein says. “It was about boosting the economic health of the whole community.” To that end, the campaign enlisted 130 small businesses; some of the proprietors became campaign spokespeople. By raising hotel workers’ incomes, they argued, the workers would have more money to “buy local.” The campaign’s polling showed it winning not just Democratic but Republican support as well. “I saw homes with Romney lawn signs that also had our ‘Buy Local’ signs,” Janis says. On Election Day, the initiative carried every council district in the city. On July 1, the higher wage went into effect. The Hyatt, which had been embroiled in a decade-long battle with UNITE HERE, allowed its workers to join the union and is now negotiating a first contract.

The coalition’s work continues. It is organizing the minority communities that helped pass the wage increase to elect their own representatives to the city council and other positions. “It’s not enough to build power in the workplace,” Rothstein says. “We have to build power for working families in their community. Working people should have a voice in how their taxes are used, in how their city is economically developed. This expands the notion of what labor organizing is. In this region, where immigrant communities are ascending at the same time they’re struggling in low-wage jobs, it’s an incredible strategy.”

It’s also a strategy—organizing workers in their communities—that unions had long rejected. When Samuel Gompers founded the American Federation of Labor in 1886, he took pains to distinguish it from its rival, the Knights of Labor, which welcomed everyone into its ranks regardless of whether they had a union in their workplace. Gompers, by contrast, insisted that it was union representation on the job that gave employees whatever power they wielded, and for the next 120 years, the workplace remained the focus of union-organizing campaigns.

Over the past 30 years, however, such campaigns have become increasingly difficult to wage, as more and more employers have fired the workers leading those campaigns—a violation of the National Labor Relations Act but not one that incurs any serious penalties. With private-sector unionism all but disappearing, labor is now rethinking the Gompers gospel. At its biennial convention this September, the AFL-CIO will consider opening its ranks to workers not covered by a collective-bargaining agreement. LAANE’s campaigns offer a master class in the art of collective bargaining by other means.

 LAANE was founded in 1993 by three activists who in the years following proved to be among the most creative and consequential figures in liberal America: Miguel Contreras, Maria Elena Durazo, and Madeline Janis. At the time, Contreras was a regional official of UNITE HERE; Durazo was the president of the union’s Los Angeles chapter, Local 11; and Janis was an attorney at the international law firm Latham & Watkins.

Contreras, more than anyone, transformed what had been a somnolent Los Angeles labor movement into a dynamo. A child of farmworkers, he was recruited while still in his teens by Cesar Chavez to work on the grape boycott. Forty-one years old when he, Durazo, and Janis first conceived of LAANE, Contreras combined a buoyant disposition, a sharp eye for talent, and perhaps the most farsighted strategic perspective of anyone in either California labor or politics. Three years after he helped found LAANE, he became the leader of the L.A. County Federation of Labor, the AFL-CIO umbrella group, to which more than 300 local unions, with 800,000 members, belonged. Turning the federation into the force that mobilized the region’s massive Latino and immigrant population, he also turned Los Angeles into one of America’s most progressive cities and California into a solidly Democratic state.

Maria Elena Durazo, Contreras’s wife, had wrested control of Local 11 in 1989, when she led an insurgency that ousted the chapter’s longtime and scandal-ridden president. If Contreras was the wheeler-dealer, Durazo was the crusader—firing up her members with speeches that stoked their anger and raised their hopes. With Durazo at its helm, Local 11 resumed organizing many of the city’s nonunion hotels, began conducting its meetings in Spanish as well as in English, and provided precinct walkers—in a city so vast, so car-centric, that nobody had walked precincts in years—for the candidates it backed. One year after Contreras died of a heart attack in 2005, Durazo was elected leader of the federation.

In the spring of 1993, Janis was spending time at Local 11, volunteering on the mayoral campaign of Councilman Michael Woo. Before coming to Latham & Watkins, she had been the director of CARECEN, a Los Angeles organization that advocated for refugees from the Salvadoran and Guatemalan civil wars. Durazo sat on CARECEN’s board; during the course of the Woo campaign, Contreras got to know Janis. The city had recently endured the Rodney King riots; it was hemorrhaging middle-class jobs; and Mexican and Central American migrants were flooding in and earning poverty wages working construction, busing tables, cleaning up offices and hotels, taking care of children, and manicuring lawns. Janis and Contreras, later joined by Durazo, had long discussions about how to reshape the city’s two-tier economy into something more vibrant and humane.

“Miguel and I were trying to figure out how to develop the ability to move beyond the day-to-day organizing and internal organizing that is the core of union work,” Durazo says. “We needed someone to look at other ways to grow unions and help workers. Madeline’s particular passion was helping immigrant workers. We said the focus couldn’t be just that. We challenged her to do something different. We didn’t know exactly what she should be doing. But she agreed to take it on.”

Janis’s familiarity with a two-tiered economy predated her stints at Latham & Watkins and CARACEN. Born in 1960, she grew up in the San Fernando Valley’s upper-middle-class neighborhoods of Granada Hills and Woodland Hills. Her father was a psychiatrist; her mother an artist and teacher. They divorced when she was ten. Three years later, she moved to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, with her mother, who was pursuing a master’s degree in art there. The experience shook her. “There were a lot of really poor people,” she says.

Janis attended Amherst and spent her junior year abroad in Spain. Longtime dictator Francisco Franco had died, and the country was transitioning to democracy. While she was there, military leaders mounted a failed coup against the newly elected government. For Janis, it was a turning point. “When I went back to Amherst,” she says, “I became an activist. I’d been political before but not an activist.” In her senior year, she protested U.S. aid to the Contras in Nicaragua and apartheid in South Africa, wearing a “Free Nelson Mandela” armband at her graduation.

Janis earned a law degree at UCLA and for a brief spell represented tenants in slum housing and the denizens of skid row. She then joined Latham & Watkins. “I wanted to pay off my loans and go to Central America,” she says. In 1990, she became CARACEN’s director, but in 1993, she returned to Latham, where she worked under George Mihlsten, a legendary attorney and lobbyist who represented the city’s leading developers. She wanted to understand how powerful interests got the policies and deals they wanted out of city government. “What I saw,” she says, “was that developers owned city hall. They’d meet council members, money would change hands in legal ways, and the stuff they wanted to happen would happen. That led to an epiphany: We needed to bring normal people to city hall. We needed to act like city hall is the hall of democracy, where every person is welcome. We have to back that up with research, organizing, communications, but that should be our attitude.”

 In its first few years, LAANE’s goals were modest. Initially called the Tourism Industry Development Council (TIDC) and funded entirely by Local 11, the group set out to expose the widespread poverty among nonunion hotel workers. Janis served as its executive director and, for a time, its sole staffer; Durazo was chair of the board. The group’s first major battle was defensive. In 1995, at the behest of Mayor Richard Riordan, the city’s airport commission awarded new franchises to restaurants and stores at LAX that sought to discharge their unionized employees and hire new workers at lower wages.

Remembering what she had learned at Latham & Watkins, Janis brought the fired workers to city hall. “Suddenly, 200 people were coming into chambers, telling us they were losing their jobs,” says Jackie Goldberg, then a city council member, who would become a key ally of LAANE’s. Janis persuaded the council to pass an ordinance forbidding the new franchises from firing the workers already there. Riordan vetoed the bill, but the council overrode him.

Even before it was done, the airport battle spawned a new campaign. “When we held the hearings,” Durazo says, “we found that the new hires at LAX didn’t have union wages or any benefits. We realized we couldn’t just win worker retention. We had to create a living wage.”

The idea of a living wage has periodically surfaced throughout American labor history. In the early 20th century, it was a battle cry of the Wobblies, the radical labor organization better known for its slogans than its contracts. In 1994, at the behest of a community organization and a municipal workers’ union, the City of Baltimore passed the first modern living-wage ordinance, which guaranteed employees of city contractors a wage substantially higher than the state’s minimum wage. The Baltimore ordinance drew little attention, but Janis and Goldberg noticed it and began discussing how to bring a version to Los Angeles. Most of the city contract workers lacked the health-insurance benefits that city employees enjoyed. Janis and Goldberg decided an L.A. ordinance should not only give contract workers a living wage but also require employers to provide them with health insurance or pay them more so they could purchase it on their own.

For the next two years, the TIDC—which by then had changed its name to the Living Wage Coalition—battled Riordan for the public’s and the council’s support. It commissioned studies, which concluded that the wage would neither damage the contractors nor put the city at any financial risk. It embarked on a campaign in every council member’s district. “It held countless meetings in churches and synagogues all across town,” Goldberg says.

The campaign began with the support of council members from black and Latino communities and the liberal, largely Jewish Westside. On the 15-member council, however, it took 10 votes to override a mayoral veto, which required winning over members from more conservative districts in the San Fernando Valley. Laura Chick, from the affluent western part of the Valley, was on the fence. “Then clergy from every denomination began faxing in their support to their council members every day,” Durazo says. “People expected that from Watts but not from the West Valley. Laura told us, ‘Oh, my God, you’ve got the Valley rabbis.’” When the ordinance came before the council at a tumultuous session in 1997, Chick supported it, as did 11 of her colleagues. The remaining three members having abstained, the ordinance passed without opposition; the mayor’s veto was overridden shortly thereafter.

The living-wage campaign established LAANE’s “inside outside” strategy. On the inside, Janis met nearly every day with Goldberg and her staff, tweaking the ordinance language to eliminate the objections of swing council members. On the outside, the Living Wage Coalition brought poverty-wage city contract workers before the council and groups throughout the city. A separate clergy-support organization, Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE), grew out of the campaign and has become a potent ally in LAANE’s endeavors. Along with prominent religious leaders like the Reverend James Lawson and Rabbi Leonard Beerman, Janis conceived the organization as an ongoing moral voice for economic equity. “No one had created a citywide coalition of clergy for social justice before,” Durazo says.

The living-wage campaign was the first in which Janis argued that a local government could mandate higher wages and health insurance for workers. By law and tradition, federal and state governments had set minimum wages and claimed the power to extend health coverage. What Janis realized was that local government’s contracts with and assistance to private companies gave cities and counties the legal authority to raise wages and create benefits selectively in the private sector. Indeed, as major cities tend to be more liberal than the states and the nation as a whole, the odds of winning such gains at the local level were higher than they were in state legislatures and in Congress. The spread of living-wage ordinances to more than 100 other cities in the wake of the Los Angeles victory confirmed Janis’s insight. She had, in essence, created a new strategy, in a new arena, for American liberalism.

LAANE’s success in the living-wage campaign, and its continued successes, also reflected a shift in power in Los Angeles from business to labor. It was a remarkable development in a city where labor had never been a major force. For most of the 20th century, business had dominated politics in Los Angeles—indeed, throughout the first half of the century, the Los Angeles Times and the city’s business associations touted L.A. as the nonunion alternative to San Francisco. After World War II, the Committee of 25, a group of corporate grandees, controlled city government; with few exceptions, mayors and council members did their bidding. By the 1990s, however, most of L.A.’s largest companies—aerospace titans like McDonnell Douglas, oil firms like ARCO, all of the city’s major banks, all but one of its movie and television studios—had merged into national or international corporations headquartered elsewhere. Developers retained their clout, but what remained of the city’s business elite, to Riordan’s frustration, wasn’t the all-powerful force it had been in earlier decades.

Nobody took more advantage of this vacuum than Contreras and the L.A. County Federation of Labor. In 1994, California voters had passed the Republican-sponsored Proposition 187, which denied virtually all governmental services, including the right to attend public school, to undocumented immigrants. Although courts struck down the measure soon after it passed, the initiative galvanized the state’s, and more particularly the city’s, Latino population, whose rates of electoral participation had always been low. Contreras saw and seized the opportunity to build a labor-Latino electoral alliance, much as the clothing and garment unions of New York City had activated the immigrant communities of the Lower East Side in the early 20th century.

The federation began routinely turning out thousands of union activists at election time, drawn disproportionately from such immigrant-heavy locals as the hotel workers and the janitors, to walk precincts in Latino and African American neighborhoods. It developed and backed candidates in those neighborhoods who had a strong commitment to causes like a living wage. By 2000, the labor-Latino alliance was the most potent electoral force in more than half the city’s council districts and had enough strength to help Democrats win long-standing Republican legislative and congressional districts on the fringes of L.A. County as well.

Beyond building a powerful political army, Contreras, Durazo, and Janis also transformed the image of labor in Los Angeles. In most American cities, as private-sector unions continued to shrink, the face of labor became that of taxpayer-supported public-employee unions. In L.A., by contrast, labor was increasingly identified with the city’s largely Latino working class—an identification bolstered by the marches of striking janitors and hotel workers down the city’s boulevards and by the huge immigration-reform rallies that the unions coordinated. In other cities, upper-middle-class liberals often disdain labor as a Neanderthal, a defender of overpaid assembly-line workers and bureaucrats. In Los Angeles, labor is the tribune of a largely young, rising, and visibly hard-working immigrant community, which has won it a more favorable reputation among the same Democratic groups who elsewhere have dismissed it as yesterday’s news.

With the passage of the living-wage ordinance, foundations took notice of the coalition’s success, and with a bigger budget, the organization began to grow beyond its initial half-dozen employees. The ordinance, though, only affected roughly 20,000 workers when first enacted. For Janis, the question became how to win wage increases for other categories of workers. She arrived at a new name for the group—the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy—and a new strategy: the community benefits agreement.

As the living wage was moving toward enactment in 1997, one of the country’s biggest developers, TrizecHahn, was seeking city approval for a project in the middle of Goldberg’s council district. The Hollywood-Highland project, as it came to be known, would house retail outlets and the theater that would become home to the Academy Awards. It would also upgrade a Holiday Inn into a Renaissance Hotel. The city’s Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) had agreed to give the development roughly $100 million in property-tax abatements, but—in a particular wrinkle of L.A. city government—the project could not proceed without the approval of the council member in whose district it was located. Janis and Goldberg realized that since the city was providing the project with financial assistance, it could insist that the developer meet many of the same criteria that had gone into the living-wage ordinance.

Janis recalls thinking about “all the ways that a major development project can benefit a local community—through jobs, through affordable housing, through parks and open space and other environmental benefits.” She and Goldberg developed a plan that hinged Goldberg’s approval on TrizecHahn’s guaranteeing local hiring and living wages for the hotel, theater, and store employees. Goldberg’s staff convened meetings of Hollywood residents and businesses to mobilize support for the deal, while LAANE coordinated the activities of four unions whose members stood to benefit from the agreement. In the end, LAANE didn’t get everything it wanted, but it got a lot. Sixty-five percent of the workers at the completed project lived in Hollywood. The hotel and theater workers and the project’s parking-lot attendants and janitors all received living wages, though the employees of the retail outlets did not. The hotel workers, janitors, and car parkers won union representation.

The Hollywood-Highland campaign inaugurated LAANE’s second phase. For the next seven years, the group would use the leverage of government assistance to win hiring, wage, and environmental benefits for the communities in which the developments were situated. The most prominent project on which LAANE negotiated a community benefits agreement was Staples Center, built on land adjacent to the city’s downtown convention center. While Staples was still on the drawing boards, a LAANE ally, Strategic Actions for a Just Economy, helped build a community organization in the impoverished neighborhood nearby.  LAANE was “able to lift up that community’s voice in a way that was effective but not adversarial,” says the Surdna Foundation’s Escoffery. “Their participation in Staples is now looked at as a model approach to securing better outcomes for projects that get large public subsidies.”

Rather than proceed project by project, Janis soon wanted to take the idea of community benefit agreements citywide, and the place to make that happen was the city’s redevelopment agency. In 2002, Mayor James Hahn, fighting a ballot measure that would have permitted the San Fernando Valley to secede from the city, turned to the labor movement for the foot soldiers and funding he needed to defeat the measure. Contreras had one condition for granting Hahn’s request: that the mayor appoint Janis to the CRA board.

Janis’s goal as a board member was to require every project that received at least $1 million in CRA assistance to enter into a community benefit agreement. Within a year, the CRA adopted her proposal. Janis was never a favorite of the city’s business organizations, and it was during her tenure at the agency that she became their bête noire. According to Ruben Gonzalez, vice president of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, Janis’s sole objective is “to find a better way to get union jobs—period. The more regulations and prescriptions we put on businesses, it makes L.A. a less and less appealing place to do business, and LAANE has been at the forefront of creating those regulations.”

A more nuanced view of Janis comes from businessman David Abel, who publishes an influential newsletter that covers the L.A. economy. He believes that Janis has championed the poor but slighted the city’s struggling middle class. “If you wanted an intelligent advocate for the bottom 20 percent of the job force, she’d probably be at the top of the list,” Abel says. “If you go up the scale to 40 percent, she may not be that advocate.”

Some of Janis’s sharpest critics have been among the region’s most powerful black elected officials. City Councilman Bernard Parks tried repeatedly to get Janis removed from the CRA board. He argues that the imposition of wage and benefit standards or card-check unionization on businesses can lead some to scrap their development plans. This argument was voiced vehemently in 2004, when LAANE fought to keep Wal-Mart from opening a store in the preponderantly black and Latino city of Inglewood, adjacent to South Central Los Angeles. Fearing that Wal-Mart’s low wages would depress the pay of the region’s 70,000 unionized grocery workers, the L.A. County Federation of Labor had persuaded local governments to keep the company out of the region—until the Inglewood City Council gave the chain entry. LAANE authored and campaigned for an initiative to reverse the council’s decision; it prevailed with just over 60 percent of the vote.

 In the wake of the new CRA policy, LAANE entered its third and current phase, moving beyond community benefits to concentrate on specific industries. “The left tends to focus on the economy from 60,000 feet high,” Janis says. “It leaves progressives with no sense of what they can do to change it. If you focus on hotels or manufacturing or retail, you can figure out an agenda.” By organizing around particular development projects, LAANE had raised wages for many workers but had not enabled many of them to join a union and enjoy the security and benefits that membership brings. “We wanted to link our policy work to the industries that unions could organize and that are the core of the L.A. economy,” says Roxana Tynan, at the time LAANE’s deputy director.

The campaigns that LAANE has led during the past six years—which include a groundbreaking effort to provide more than 20,000 African Americans with jobs constructing the city’s massive rail project—have a scale and complexity far beyond the alliance’s earlier endeavors. As recently as 2003, LAANE had a staff of 12. Today, it employs 45 organizers, researchers, strategists, publicists, and fundraisers on eight separate campaigns and has an annual budget of $4.6 million. Following a model pioneered by UNITE HERE, LAANE has hired a largely young and racially diverse cohort of economic researchers to master the complexities of the industries it has sought to transform. A disproportionate share are graduates of UCLA’s urban-planning department, where many of the faculty specialize in the L.A. economy and labor force.

Unusual among progressive organizations, LAANE has paid particular attention to the development of its staff. “The organizing theorist Marshall Ganz has said the three key components of a progressive victory are story, structure, and strategy,” Janis says. “I think progressive groups don’t consider structure nearly enough. Occupy Wall Street had a great story but no structure.” For the past six years, LAANE has employed a leadership-development specialist, Nancy Smyth, who has helped turn organizers and researchers into directors of LAANE’s campaigns. “Madeline and Roxana saw LAANE was growing really fast,” Smyth says. “It had a bunch of talented activists, but many lacked the skills to manage campaigns or staff.” Training included everything from speaking before governmental bodies to forging effective alliances among groups that viewed each other as enemies.

In early 2012, after 19 years on the job, Janis stepped down as executive director and was succeeded by Tynan. Forty-five years old, Tynan has spent her life in diverse precincts of the left. “I grew up with champagne socialists for parents, in England and L.A.,” she says. “I took their politics more seriously than they did. I have an early memory of reading about Chile after the coup, reading about students being tortured. I must have been about six.” Tynan’s father was Kenneth Tynan, the noted New Yorker critic and author of Oh, Calcutta, the Broadway succès de scandale. She attended Yale, where she joined a long line of students so impressed by the campus’s UNITE HERE locals that she went to work for the union upon graduation. Tynan was part of the campaign that organized nearly every hotel on the Las Vegas Strip. In her mid-twenties, she moved back to Los Angeles as an economic-development aide in Jackie Goldberg’s office, where she worked closely with Janis. When Goldberg was termed out in 2001, Tynan moved to LAANE, where she headed up the community-benefit campaigns before becoming deputy director.

It was under Tynan’s leadership that LAANE waged its campaign to raise hotel workers’ wages in Long Beach. She has also played a central role in LAANE’s efforts to cement a strong labor and environmental alliance. Many observers consider her almost as accomplished a strategist as Janis but with a lighter touch. “Madeline alienated some people, especially when she was on the CRA board,” one city official says. “Roxana’s not so in-your-face.”

LAANE’s most improbably victorious campaign is its most recent: restructuring the city’s waste-disposal industry. In Los Angeles, unionized city employees, in trucks powered by natural gas, pick up the trash of homeowners, much of which is recycled. But a multiplicity of private companies pick up the trash for businesses and apartment buildings, employing low-wage workers in trucks, 75 percent of which are diesel-powered, with a lower share of their trash destined for recycling. “It’s the Wild West out there,” says LAANE’s Greg Good, who continues to direct the campaign. “You buy a truck that’s 7 days old or 70 years old, fill out an application, pledge 10 percent of your proceeds to the city’s recycling fund, and you’re in business. There are zero recycling standards.”

For years, Ron Herrera, the leader of Teamsters Local 396, had wanted to organize the city’s private trash-collection drivers, though with roughly 125 companies in the market, it was a daunting prospect. A recent LAANE campaign to raise the wages of the truckers who hauled cargo to and from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach and to reduce the air pollution in adjacent neighborhoods showed Herrera that the Teamsters didn’t have to take on this fight by themselves. In the ports campaign, the Teamsters worked with Change to Win, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Sierra Club, neighborhood groups, and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa’s office. “LAANE was the facilitator of the coalition,” says Adrian Martinez, a staff attorney at the Defense Council. “They were the glue that held the blues and the greens together.” The coalition authored a plan to address both air quality and the drivers’ low incomes. Only half the plan succeeded. The harbor commissions mandated stricter pollution controls on trucks, but courts struck down the rules setting higher wage standards for drivers.

Nonetheless, the ports campaign convinced Herrera that organizing trash collectors could be part of a broader effort that could yield environmental gains. At the helm of a coalition of 40 groups, LAANE proposed to divide the city into 11 zones and let companies bid for an exclusive 10-year franchise within each zone. The franchises would be required to maintain rigorous truck and recycling standards, worker health and safety standards, and the payment of living wages to the drivers. Whether drivers will join the Teamsters is uncertain, but the rationalization of the industry makes the possibility more likely.

Similar systems are in place in other cities, but proposing to dismantle an already-existing industry was something that no major metropolis had ever done, and for good reason. It upset existing business arrangements of powerful companies. “We touched 15 sacred cows, and every one kicked,” Good says. “The Chamber of Commerce, the landlords, the studios, the hospitals, the hotels, the groceries, the realtors—all their associations fought us.” But LAANE documented the improvements that cleaner trucks and more recycling would make to the environment. As in the Long Beach hotel campaign, the group enlisted the support of small businesses, which tend to be charged higher trash-collection rates than larger establishments that could cut separate deals with the waste companies. Last November, the city council voted to set in motion LAANE’s proposal.

The key to the waste campaign’s success was that it was as enviro-green as it was union-blue. The coalition’s position paper, for instance, contained an introduction by the Sierra Club’s national president. For the Teamsters, this was a new approach to organizing. “We now know that we can’t do it alone,” Herrera says. One sign of the Teamsters’ commitment to its environmental partners is the decision by James P. Hoffa, president of the international, to reverse the union’s support for drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. If the Sierra Club can help the Teamsters organize truckers, the Teamsters can help the Sierra Club preserve the Alaskan wilderness.

At the core of LAANE’s strategic vision is the conviction that cities—not states or the national government—are the arenas where progressive initiatives have the best prospects for enduring success. This is partly because the forces for liberal change—immigrants, young people, African Americans, environmentalists—are clustered in cities, but there’s more to LAANE’s calculus than that. The group believes that campaigns take time—time to educate residents, time to find leaders in a neighborhood, time to mold coalitions that meet the needs of their varied participants. These are tasks best done locally. In part, this proclivity for “deep organizing” and “deep coalitions”—“deep” is an inescapable word when talking with a LAANE-ite—also reflects the organizing style of UNITE HERE, for which unionizing a hotel is a painstaking process of building workers’ confidence and capacities.

“I have caution about getting ahead of ourselves, tempting though it may be,” Tynan says. “Without deep power and real results at the municipal level, you won’t be able to move serious legislation at the state level. I want us to hit a tipping point in Los Angeles, where our policies have impacted more people, where we have more electoral strength, before we move more to the statewide level.”

Some local problems, however, can’t be solved locally, which is how Janis has come to take on her new position as LAANE’s national policy director. When she stepped down from LAANE’s top job, she anticipated devoting herself to bringing well-paying manufacturing jobs back to Los Angeles. In 2008, L.A. County voters had passed a ballot measure that raised sales taxes to fund, in conjunction with the federal Department of Transportation, a massive commuter-rail construction project. Janis saw an opportunity to use the transit agency’s purchasing of railcars and buses to boost local industry.

She discovered, however, that federal law prohibited the use of Department of Transportation funds for any rail or bus purchases by agencies committed to local hiring. She spent most of 2012 working with department officials to develop language in the transit-agency proposal that would permit inner-city hiring yet not run afoul of federal regulations. Janis has now embarked on a campaign with the AFL-CIO to show unions, community organizations, and environmental groups across the nation how they can lobby their transit agencies to put criteria similar to L.A.’s in their own purchase orders. With Chicago soon to spend $2 billion on new railcars and other cities planning similar purchases, Janis hopes that this new emphasis on targeted hiring can help revive a sector of American manufacturing.

LAANE began by helping employees of companies doing city work, then employees of companies that benefited from redevelopment or other public investment, then the urban poor whom the government required public-works contractors to hire, and now, manufacturing workers who will owe their jobs to policies that will help create factories in their own backyard. If LAANE was initially the tribune for the bottom 20 percent of the workforce, it is now becoming the advocate of the bottom 50 percent. No matter the intended beneficiary, LAANE has prevailed with the same underlying argument: that the investment of public funds should yield public benefits. It’s a powerful idea, and one, LAANE believes, that can travel. It has spawned similar organizations in 15 other municipalities, including Oakland, San Diego, Denver, Atlanta, and New York.

How replicable is the LAANE model? To be sure, Los Angeles has been exceptionally propitious terrain. The radical demographic transformation of the city over the past quarter-century created a political base for progressive change. But then, most major American cities have undergone demographic changes similar to, if not on the scale of, L.A.’s, and those transformations continue. What sets Los Angeles apart is its labor movement, which has been willing to invest in and nurture a group like LAANE and been willing to engage in deep political organizing of its own.

The Los Angeles labor movement that did all this, however, is a recent creation. “People forget that in the late ’80s, we were nowhere,” Tynan says. “We had weak and antiquated unions. We had no progressive infrastructure. People now dismiss what we’ve done since then by saying L.A. is different, but L.A. wasn’t different 25 years ago.”