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USA

Racist Remarks by Los Angeles' Democratic City Council Shock Nation, Reveal Rifts in Democratic Party

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Racist remarks by three member of the Los Angeles City Council and the head of the Los Angeles Federation of Labor—all Democrats—sent shock waves across the country and led to demands that the council members resign. Even President Biden, then about to make a campaign trip to California to support local Democrats, condemned the council members and called for them to step down. These events, revealing deep racial rifts, are a crisis both for the Democrats and the labor unions.

A secretly-made recording published by The Los Angeles Times revealed that the four people involved, all Latinos, made derogatory remarks about Blacks and indigenous Mexicans from Oaxaca during a secret caucus to discuss redistricting. Redistricting takes place throughout the country after each national ten-year census and is conducted by state governments and in some places, such as Los Angeles, by city governments that redraw congressional and local electoral districts. Districts are sometimes redrawn to give more weight to one or another political party or ethnic group. These districts may also contain political plums: jobs public institutions such as universities, public hospitals or airports.

In this secret meeting, the goal of the four was to reduce the weight of the black vote, and increase the weight of the Latino vote and thereby the Latino politicians' political power. In the meeting Council President Nury Martinez, says, referring to the Latino District Attorney George Gascón, "Fuck that guy...he's with the Blacks." She referred to the Black child of one of the council members as a "changuito," that is, a little monkey, and said the child needed to be beaten. She also referred to Oaxacans as short, dark, and "feo," ugly. Others at the meeting either joined in the racist remarks or failed to challenge them. As outrage spread, two council members resigned their posts and the labor leader stepped down from his position.

What lies behind this racist language and rising tensions between Latinos and Blacks? Working together in the labor unions and in political coalition within the Democratic Party from the 1980s into the 2000s, both Blacks and Latinos made gains in labor and political power. But throughout this period, the Los Angeles Latino population has kept growing, while the Black population has been shrinking as gentrification and competition with Latinos for housing drove many Black people to move to Riverside and San Bernardino to the east and led some to leave the state.

Changing demographics thus led to political tensions. Los Angeles, the country's second largest city after New York, had four million inhabitants; 13 of its 15-member city council are Democrats. Half of all Angelinos are Latinos but they hold only four of 15 council seats, while whites who make up 28 percent of the population hold six seats, and Blacks, who represent almost 9 percent, are overrepresented with three seats. Asians, 12 percent of the population have 2 seats, proportional to their population.

In L.A., as in many American cities, there is a struggle among social classes and ethnic groups for scarce resources that takes place through municipal politics and principally within the framework of the Democratic Party. Labor union officials work with politicians to try to make gains for their particular constituencies within the system, often at the expense of other working-class groups. While Blacks and Latinos often form political coalitions, they tend to live in separate neighborhoods and to compete for jobs, housing, and public services. Political alliances often fail to reduce social tensions. Meanwhile the capitalist class retains a powerful hold on finance, industry, and services, even when forced to make concessions to workers.

If workers in Los Angeles are to make significant economic and political gains, they will need to overcome their differences and establish genuine working-class unity.

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