

Organized labor locked in struggle for survival

By Kevin Herrera
Special to Sentinel-Voice
LOS ANGELES (NNPA)— With a declining blue-collar workforce, an increased reliance on government and low-wage service jobs, and more aggressive, socially conscious leadership, the face of unions here has changed — and just in time, according to those studying Los Angeles' labor movement.

"The face is definitely more confrontational," Jack Kyser, chief economist for the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp., said. "[Unions] are making an aggressive push in Los Angeles [because] they are under pressure to revitalize the movement... to see if they can regain some clout and increase membership after years of decline nationwide."

Among the problems facing L.A. unions is a sluggish economy, coupled with matters that have long been bugaboos for organized labor, such as the outsourcing of jobs and globalization, which is shrinking the ranks of the middle class: organized labor's traditional base.

Scores of immigrants who are unaware of their rights as workers also pose problems, as unions struggle to bring them into the fold or risk losing a significant portion of the workforce.

Many immigrants view exploitative jobs as better than the options they had in their native lands.

Today, the labor movement also faces an administration in Washington that many union leaders believe is hostile to their interests and to their members.

All of this has forced unions here and elsewhere to reassess their strategies for exerting political influence, attracting new members, uplifting the communities where their members live, forming alliances with community leaders and interacting with the media.

"People are realizing the only way to keep our heads above water is to try and earn a decent living and by having a voice at the work site; doing that through organizing and understanding the labor movement," Tyrone Freeman, president of the Service Employees International Union Local 434B, said.

"The divide between the haves and the have nots is growing."

Freeman heads one of the largest locals in the country with more than 120,000 members. Local 434B represents both homecare and nursing

home workers in Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties.

Miguel Contreras, Los Angeles County Federation of Labor's (AFL-CIO) executive secretary-treasurer, said it all comes down to greed.

With major corporations looking overseas for cheaper labor, jobs that were once bridges to the "American dream," have been lost simply because businesses want to "save a few bucks."

Contreras can remember when Los Angeles County was home to major auto-manufacturing plants, such

as GM and Ford in Van Nuys, the tire industry in Commerce or airline manufacturing in Burbank. All those jobs have disappeared, and with that unions had to react.

"The American dream is slipping away," Contreras said. "It is true that we are taking a stand, but it is only to protect what we already had: good-paying jobs that help families buy homes, send their children to college and have money left for retirement and good healthcare. Who said a dishwasher has to be paid minimum wage? We don't believe that. They have a right to the American Dream."

So do entrepreneurs who create businesses. If dishwashers were to make salaries enjoyed by the middle class, that would certainly raise costs, which may or may not be passed on to consumers, or force businesses to close.

Operating costs have increased steadily over the years as healthcare costs and workers compensation insurance have skyrocketed, leaving businesses with no choice but to pass on those costs to their consumers and employees, or look overseas for cheaper labor.

"A lot of companies are

hesitant to expand because they are looking at employment costs," Kyser, an economist, said. "People are looking at Los Angeles with a new eye because of the friendly business climate created by [Gov. Arnold] Schwarzenegger, but they are still concerned about the cost of doing business here. Unionization isn't the main factor, and not something people are talking about when deciding to come here, but it can't be ignored either."

Kent Wong, director of UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education, said corporations will often say

that they cannot sustain higher wages. However, if workers were to have higher wages they would bolster the economy, both locally and nationally, because they will spend more.

Wong said Los Angeles is at the forefront of the labor movement because the area has lost many middle-class jobs and has been home to some of the most intense labor battles in recent memory, including the lockout of longshoremen at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, the prolonged grocery workers strike, problems at the Screen

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Michigan tops nation in juvenile life sentences

By Diane Bukowski
Special to Sentinel-Voice
DETROIT (NNPA) — Michigan imposes natural life sentences on juveniles at a much higher rate than other states, according to a report released by American Civil Liberties Union.

At least 307 individuals who were 14 to 17 years old at the time of their offenses are currently serving life without parole, and now range in age from 17 to 73, says the report, called "Second Chances." Sixty-nine percent of these children sentenced to die inside Michigan prison walls are African-American.

"If you haven't reached 18, you have none of the adult privileges," said Rosie Lewis, whose son, Charles Lewis, was incarcerated in 1976 at the age of 17, accused of killing a police officer. "Youngsters haven't got the full realization of what their responsibilities or rights are, such as having the right to a juvenile hearing before being waived over."

As the report says is typical in such juvenile cases, Lewis' son depended on a court-appointed attorney due to the family's poverty. Lewis said that the attorney stipulated in court that the gun used in the drive-by kill-

ing was in evidence, but that in fact no gun was ever recovered.

She also said that her son was tried twice, with Wayne County Circuit Court Judge Richard Maher failing to poll the allegedly hung jury after the first trial, resulting in a double jeopardy situation. Her son has repeatedly submitted appeals in his case, which is currently before Judge Deborah Thomas, but has not yet been granted a hearing.

"Life without parole sentences ignore the differences between children and adults, abandoning the concepts of redemption and second chances on which this country was built," said Ann Arbor attorney Deborah LaBelle, who directed the Juvenile Life Without Parole Initiative for the ACLU.

"Their crimes were committed at an age when they were not considered responsible enough to live away from their parents, drive, make decisions related to their education or medical treatment, vote, leave school, or sign a contract. Children under the age of 18 cannot use alcohol, serve on juries, or be drafted, because they are presumed not to have the capacity to handle adult responsibilities."

LaBelle said that such differences between children and

adults are recognized throughout the world, and incorporated in human rights documents such as that produced by the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, which bans life without parole sentences for those under 18.

U.S. jurisprudence required that children be tried in juvenile courts for most of the twentieth century, with only a few exceptions, says the report. But in the 1990's, at a time when crimes in all categories including those committed by juveniles were actually decreasing, many states began instituting harsh measures including automatic waivers to adult courts for certain offenses, direct filing of charges in adult court without juvenile hearings, and statutory exclusion of certain juveniles from juvenile courts.

These measures resulted in a 70 percent increase in juvenile incarceration in adult prisons across the country, from 1985 to 1999, according to the report.

Michigan is one of only 14 states where a child of any age may be tried in adult court. In contrast, even the notoriously punitive state of Texas bans life without parole for juveniles. Of the seven largest states allowing

life without parole for juveniles, Michigan doled out the highest number of such sentences, 182, between 1990 and 2001.

Although three of those states had higher rates of homicide per 100,000 youth, Michigan still had the highest average rate of life without parole sentences per 100,000 youth.

Leo LaLonde, spokesman for Michigan Department of Corrections Director Patricia Caruso, who was appointed by Governor Jennifer Granholm, scoffed at the idea of special consideration for juveniles.

"There's only one life without parole, murder one," he said. "Murder one is murder one. It doesn't matter if the shooter was 13, 14 or 35. If they get convicted of murder one, it's life without parole period. That's what the law says."

Despite LaLonde's characterization, the ACLU report notes that a large number of Michigan juveniles serving life without parole were not the "shooters" in their cases. They were sentenced for aiding and abetting murder one, or for felony murder, a crime in which an individual is killed in the processing of committing an-

other crime such as robbery.

Such was the situation for two individuals whose cases were recently covered in the *Michigan Citizen*, Edward Sanders, sentenced to life without parole at the age of 17, and Michael Calvin, sentenced at 16. Each has served nearly 30 years although neither was the "shooter" in their cases.

The ACLU report recommends that major changes be instituted in Michigan's laws governing crimes committed by juveniles. They include:

- setting a maximum sentence of 25 years for homicides committed by juveniles retroactive for all cases;
- eliminating automatic transfers of juveniles to adult courts;
- allowing blended sentences where children serve time first in the juvenile system and go to adult prison only if they show no evidence of rehabilitation;
- moving prisoners who are currently still under the age of 18 to juvenile institutions and re-sentencing them;
- increasing funding and support for appointed counsel systems, especially those handling criminal cases in the juvenile court.

Diane Bukowski writes for the *Michigan Citizen*.

In Loving Remembrance of **WILLIE LYONS**

Mr. Willie Lyons was born in Chester, South Carolina on December 14, 1934. He departed this life on October 14, 2004, in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Willie married at age 20 and joined the Airforce shortly thereafter. He retired after 23 years of service. He was an active member of the Retired Military Association. He loved sports, animals, being with his friends and his family.

He is survived by his sisters, Mrs. Gloria Lyon Moore, Dorothy Carolyn Apple, Pamela Burris and by his brothers, James Burris and Samuel Burris; his children, Dr. Lisa Lyons Maloney, Michael Lyons and James Willie Lee; three grandsons, one granddaughter, several nieces and nephews, his companion Cherrie Crumby and many, many friends....

The Las Vegas Military Retirees Association wishes to express their sincere gratitude to the family and friends who attended the service of one of our beloved and original members.



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