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LRR Voices: Local 11 takes on L.A.

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Abstract

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For hotel and restaurant workers in Los Angeles in the mid-1980s, there was nowhere to turn. Wages, benefits, and working conditions were eroding. Minimum wage jobs were on the rise.

The union that represented housekeepers, porters, dishwashers and food servers in Los Angeles, HERE Local 11, was overwhelmed by the changes in its industry. Union officials seemed to have no idea of how to stop the loss of leverage and power as control of the industry was turned over to “market driven” interests. Dissatisfaction with the local’s deteriorating performance grew. In particular, the ever-expanding majority of immigrant Latino workers felt unrepresented by their union: Nothing greater symbolized this disenfranchisement than the refusal of Local 11’s white male leaders to translate meetings and materials into Spanish.

Working as a staff organizer for Local 11 at this crucial time was Maria Elena Durazo. The daughter of Mexican immigrants, Durazo was first schooled in organizing by the Chicano civil rights group CASA (Center for Autonomous Social Action); she then earned a law degree and did a brief stint at a union law firm before joining the Local’s staff. Although hired to represent Latino workers, Durazo soon realized that the culture of Local 11 would prevent any real gains by Latino members.

Maria Elena Durazo and Local 11 members face down the L.A.P.D.
"My goal was to work with the leadership but they were actually afraid of the members," says Durazo. "They would close the office at 4:00 p.m., just as most hotel workers got off work. Organizing in that situation was virtually useless."

Durazo became a leader of an increasingly vocal and militant opposition within the local. A challenge to the incumbent officers took shape. Durazo's training and her close ties with Latino groups and the progressive elements in the Los Angeles labor movement made her a formidable candidate. Many of the activists who had energized the Farmworkers struggle of the previous decade came together again for her campaign. "We had learned how to organize immigrant workers around issues of class and justice," says Durazo. "We were doing that again."

The campaign for control of Local 11 was brutal. Election rules were ignored by the incumbents. They refused to turn over the membership list. Ballot collection procedures were chaotic. The International Union which was monitoring the election intervened, declared a trusteeship, and after persuading the old leadership to leave office, appointed Durazo staff director. Two years later, the trusteeship was lifted and Durazo was elected president of Local 11.

In the beginning, Durazo faced several crises at once. The day to day operation was in shambles and needed immediate attention. Employers were taking advantage of the union's troubles by engineering decerts. At the same time, Durazo had to start the process of internal reform and the rebuilding of an activist rank and file. A productive partnership developed between the Local and International Union with several staffers assigned to Local 11 to provide extensive research, community outreach and additional support when needed.

Local 11 has emerged as one of the most militant, high-profile unions in Los Angeles. Its success is due to the strategic work of the International and to Durazo's ability to inspire and move the members. She is on the frontlines everyday, challenging powerful political and business interests.

"Our members need to know that the union will defend them," says Durazo. "They have to realize that improving their lives and their kids' lives is a constant struggle—and it's their struggle."

The union uses a variety of street and media tactics to dramatize conflict. As part of Local 11's community pressure strategy, members will take on militant actions such as hotel lobby sit-ins and civil disobedience in the street. The union also produced a
highly controversial video about the social instability and volatility of Los Angeles in order to defeat the powerful Hotel Employers Council. Arguing that low-wage jobs were contributing to the decay of communities and that the tourist industry had a responsibility to reverse this trend, the video and other elements of the campaign forced the Council to retract its health and pension takeaway proposals. The settlement that covers 5,000 Local 11 members is the union's greatest achievement to date.

With its major contracts settled, Durazo believes that the next phase—organizing—will require more creative strategies and greater involvement than ever by current members. "This is a difficult time because we have to challenge the attitude that after contracts are settled, there's nothing to worry about," says Durazo. "More than ever," she says, "we have to find and train new leaders inside our properties. If we don't keep our internal organizing active and strong, we'll never be able to organize outside."

In a city that is redefining its political relationships after the uprisings in April 1992, Local 11's message is gaining momentum. "As the union representing the low-wage worker in Los Angeles, we understand the stakes," says Durazo. "Los Angeles will not recover on minimum wage jobs. That's why the role of Local 11 and other unions is so important."

"If our organizing succeeds," she adds, "the whole city will benefit."

—Lou Siegel

Lou Siegel is a labor communications specialist based in Los Angeles.