

Former Los Angeles mayor dies

A reporter
2 October 1998

Former Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley died September 29. He was among the last of the black Democratic mayors who took office in major US cities following the urban riots of the 1960s. Bradley was the longest-serving mayor in the history of Los Angeles, ending his final term only a few months after the 1992 LA riot, which claimed more lives than any previous urban upheaval.

Taking early retirement after 20 years with the Los Angeles Police Department, Bradley was elected to the City Council in 1963 to the first of several terms. Two years later came the rioting in Watts, the largest urban disturbance in US history up to that time, in which a large portion of the district which Bradley represented was destroyed and more than 40 people shot to death by police and National Guard troops.

In 1969 Bradley challenged Mayor Sam Yorty for reelection and lost narrowly, after a vicious campaign of race-baiting by the incumbent. Four years later, with the backing of most of the city's political and business establishment, Bradley defeated Yorty by a sizeable margin, beginning 20 years in office.

Of all the black mayors who won election in the 1970s and 1980s--Kenneth Gibson in Newark, Coleman Young in Detroit, Carl Stokes in Cleveland, Harold Washington in Chicago, David Dinkins in New York City--Bradley was perhaps the most conservative and conventional.

His role as a figurehead was in part institutional, since in Los Angeles the most important powers of municipal government are vested in the county, not the city. The former cop could not even appoint his own police chief, and Bradley was unable to convince the city's Police Commission to oust the notorious Darryl Gates until after the 1992 riot.

Like his counterparts in other cities, Bradley came to office as part of the political response of the American ruling class to the ghetto explosions. In the face of open

warfare in the streets of major US cities, it became necessary to make cosmetic changes in local government and promise measures to alleviate poverty and social misery.

Nowhere were the concessions more limited and the anti-poverty measures more ephemeral than in Los Angeles. Five years after Bradley took office the city went into a steep industrial depression. Between 1978 and 1982 nearly all of its automobile, rubber and other big nonmilitary industrial plants shut down. Seventy-five thousand jobs were wiped out. All the progress made by black workers between 1965 and 1975 was reversed. Unemployment in south central Los Angeles increased by 50 percent. Purchasing power in the area fell by a third.

Bradley remained a fixture in office, however, with a political base in the substantial black middle class which developed in those years. His main legacy is more black policemen, more black administrators and more black contractors doing business with the city, while conditions for the majority of black people in Los Angeles are worse than at the time of the Watts riot. Despite all the rhetoric of progress, the social reality was demonstrated in 1992, when rioting broke out in south central Los Angeles, leading to bloodshed and destruction even worse than 27 years earlier.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact