

Democratic convention highlights social divide in Los Angeles and America

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The Democratic convention began Monday night with speakers, including President Bill Clinton, enthusing on the theme of “Prosperity and Progress.” For the well-heeled delegates who filed into the Staples Center in Los Angeles the Clinton-Gore White House has indeed produced unprecedented prosperity. Nearly 60 percent of the delegates reported family incomes of over \$75,000—the same percentage as those attending the Republican convention—and 12 percent called themselves millionaires.

The fences, barricades and thousands of police that separated the convention from the working class and impoverished neighborhoods just blocks away were an apt symbol of the social and class chasm that separates the Democratic Party from the broad masses of working people.

On Saturday, even before the convention opened, limousines were winding their way to the Hollywood Gala Salute in Mandeville Canyon where the rich and famous paid up to \$25,000 a dinner to say farewell to Bill Clinton. Thanks were in order, because the Wall Street boom fueled by Clinton's policies has created unheard of wealth, particularly for the entertainment moguls, millionaire investors and owners of hi-tech companies. In the last few months alone, sales of \$1 million homes in the Los Angeles area have gone up more than 50 percent.

On the other side, more than 4 million—out of 14 million—people in LA County are considered poor, with millions more falling within the category of the working poor. Of the working poor, 73 percent are Latino. Fifty-nine percent of the working poor have no health insurance; millions have no access to affordable housing, child care, a decent education for their children or a living wage. Although tens of thousands of jobs have been created during the boom of the last

eight years, there are 800,000 more people living in poverty than there were in 1984.

In many ways parts of Los Angeles resemble an impoverished Third World country, with tens of thousands laboring in garment sweatshops, off-the-books factories, nonunion construction sites and the underground economy. Hundreds of unemployed workers and day laborers still line up on the streets early in the morning hoping that they will be selected for work. Nowhere else in the country are there more housekeepers, gardeners, car washers and nannies than in the City of Angels.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, aerospace, defense and related industries carried out a wave of plant closings and downsizings, wiping out hundreds of thousands of unionized jobs and forcing many skilled workers, engineers and professionals to move out of the region, mainly to the Pacific Northwest. Major factories, like GM's Southgate plant, were shuttered. The much vaunted boom didn't reach southern California until years after the rest of the US, and the unemployment rate continues to be higher than the national average.

Between 1984 and 2000, the county's population exploded by about two million to close to 10 million residents. Part of this demographic shift was due to the arrival of large numbers of immigrants, driven from their countries by economic and political upheavals. The newly arrived immigrants included not only Mexican workers, but hundreds of thousands from other countries, including Iranians, Samoans, Central Americans, Armenians and Koreans. It was during this time that right-wing demagogues exploited widespread feelings of economic insecurity to push through the anti-immigrant Proposition 187, which cut off social programs from so-called illegal aliens.

Because of the high cost of living, any household income making less than \$47,800 is considered low income, meaning that thousands of families who would ordinarily consider themselves middle class are struggling to get by. The boom in the real estate market, which has seen growth as high as 13 percent each year, has put home ownership out of reach for millions of working families. Home ownership here is lower than in any other American city except New York.

The situation is no better for renters. During their strike earlier this year, many Los Angeles janitors said they were forced to work close to 100 hours a week to pay for a modest two-bedroom apartment, which averages \$766 a month. Not surprisingly, homelessness is chronic. Thousands of families are forced to double and triple up on housing and over 100,000 people live in garages.

Despite an overall nationwide decline of child poverty over the last seven years, California's rate of child poverty rose by 62 percent between 1979 and 1998. During that time, the number of poor children jumped from 900,000 to 2.15 million in the state. According to a Columbia University study released in July, the number of children living in poverty in LA County doubled during the first half of this decade, even before the Clinton administration destroyed guaranteed welfare benefits. Seventy percent of Los Angeles Unified School District's 711,000 students live in poverty. Their schools, moreover, are generally overcrowded and underfunded in a state that ranks fortieth in the nation in per pupil spending.

On the eve of the convention the California HealthCare Foundation and the Commonwealth Club of California released a new report noting that of the nation's 44 million uninsured citizens, 7.3 million live in California—or 24 percent of the population under 65. Of those, 2 million are children. It also noted that 6 million of the state's uninsured came from working families in 1998. Forty percent of Latinos, 23 percent of African Americans, 22 percent of Asians and 15 percent of whites in California were uninsured in 1998. Forty percent of California's uninsured have been without health coverage for at least five years.

Finally, the income gap between rich and poor in California has widened during the Clinton-Gore years, despite the Democrats' constant refrain about “never

leaving anyone behind.” Households in the bottom 10 percent of all incomes went from median incomes of \$15,000 in 1989 to \$11,300 in the mid-1990s recession and then to \$13,000 in 1997. At the same time, the richest 10 percent of all California households saw their median incomes go from \$121,000 in 1989 to \$117,400 in the mid-1990s to \$130,000 in 1997, a trend seen nationally, connected to the stock market boom.

These figures only provide a glimpse of the social distress that permeates Los Angeles, the nation's second largest city.



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