The Democratic Party, identity politics and the Los Angeles City Council scandal

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Leaked audio of leading Democratic Party politicians in Los Angeles, California, making racist statements about African Americans, indigenous people, Armenians and Jewish people has generated widespread popular anger in America's second largest city and thrown the political establishment into crisis.

The Democratic Party, desperate to contain social opposition, has responded with well-rehearsed posturing of moral outrage and the usual shopworn calls for the exemplary punishment of individual malefactors. But far from being a case of a few bad actors, the incident exposes both the reactionary character of the racialist political strategy of the Democratic Party and the rottenness of American capitalist politics as a whole.

On October 9, an individual anonymously posted audio of a conversation held last fall between the head of the Los Angeles County AFL-CIO, Ron Herrera, and three Democratic members of the Los Angeles City Council: Council President Nury Martinez, Kevin de León and Gil Cedillo.

The conversation took place at the county headquarters of the AFL-CIO during a meeting to discuss "redistricting," the process by which the politicians representing the city's elite carve the population into racial enclaves and distribute the spoils of government power.

Employing the crass language of racial tribalism, Nury Martinez referred to the black child of a rival City Council member as a "*changuito*," the Spanish term for "little monkey." Saying the child "needs a beatdown," she added, "Let me take him around the corner." She attacked former Los Angeles County District Attorney George Gascón for being "for the blacks."

In a discussion related to which faction of the local elite should control the area around Koreatown, Martinez (2020 salary = $207,000) mocked the area's indigenous immigrants, who are impoverished, often undocumented and come from the southwestern Mexican state of Oaxaca, as "short little dark people" without shoes. These comments expose the Latino bourgeois politicians in the Democratic Party as hostile to the defense of immigrants' rights.

The stench of racism and chauvinist reaction hangs over all the parties of capitalism. In Pennsylvania, Republican candidate for governor Doug Mastriano denounced Jewish schools in an openly anti-Semitic attack on his Democratic opponent, who is Jewish. Racialism and nationalism are intrinsic to bourgeois politics. In every country, the ruling class perceives and explains the world in racial terms and aims to maintain its domination by fomenting antagonisms within the international working class.

In the Los Angeles audio, City Council President Martinez disparaged "the white members of this Council" and noted with striking eloquence that they "will motherfuck you in a heartbeat." The Council members describe other individuals by the color of their skin (example: "Was she a black lady?"). Herrera states proudly that the meeting participants are forming "a little Latino caucus of our own."

During the same meeting, AFL-CIO head Herrera referred to Jewish state Assemblyman Richard Katz as "Katz and his crew," stating obliquely that they "have an agenda." Martinez responded affirmatively, saying the *judíos*—the Jews— "cut their deal with South LA" and "are going to screw everyone else."

Martinez also referred to an Armenian City Council member, saying, "He also wants his guy elected. … They want to assure, they want to be reassured that they have, not an Armenian district in the Valley, because that doesn't exist, but they want as many Armenians in that district as possible to be able to play." Gil Cedillo then remarked that all Armenians have last names that "end in i-a-n."

This is not a case of a few minor players in local politics. The four people captured on the audio are leaders of the Democratic Party in the largest state in the country. Martinez has been floated as a possible future mayor. Cedillo is a former state senator, and De León is former president pro-temp of the state Senate, who ran for the US Senate in 2018.

Before becoming head of the county AFL-CIO, Herrera (2019 salary = $149,627) was head of the Teamsters at the Port of Los Angeles. In January of this year, Herrera appeared with Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg at the port and pledged to enforce a speedup to ease port congestion.

On Tuesday, hundreds of protesters of all races, including many Latinos with signs saying "fuera Martinez!", broke up a meeting of the City Council and demanded the resignation of the three Council members. Herrera resigned as head of the LA County Federation of Labor Tuesday. On Wednesday, protesters again filled the Council chambers and prevented the Council from reconvening. On Wednesday afternoon, Martinez announced her resignation from the City Council.

White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said that Biden viewed the racist remarks as "unacceptable" and "appalling." Biden himself, however, has a long history of racist remarks. In 2007 he referred to Barack Obama as "the first mainstream

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African American who is articulate and bright and clean." In 2006 he said "you cannot go to a 7-Eleven or a Dunkin' Donuts unless you have a slight Indian accent." In 1977 he said desegregated schools would force white children to "grow up in a racial jungle."

The Biden administration's real concern is that the crisis may impact next month's midterm elections or undermine his administration's efforts to escalate the war against Russia in Ukraine. Biden will be in Los Angeles for a fundraiser with Nancy Pelosi Thursday and is expected to deliver remarks on the matter.

For all the self-righteous denunciations coming from the Democratic Party and its media apparatus, the language used by the City Council members is the political language of the party itself. The Democratic Party is a filthy miasma of racial resentment on all sides, and the leaked audio reflects this reality.

For the last 50 years, the Democratic Party has abandoned any past association with social reform and has instead promoted racial politics as a mechanism both for cultivating support in the affluent upper middle class and for dividing the working class.

In the aftermath of the urban rebellions that shook the country in the 1960s—including the 1965 riot in Watts, which Democratic Governor Pat Brown suppressed with 14,000 National Guard troops—the Democratic Party sought to develop a base of support within the elite of various racial groups. A Democratic Party commission in 1972 (the McGovern-Kerner Commission) restructured party primaries and internal organization to minimize the role of the labor movement and elevate the importance of caucus groups based on race and gender identity.

In the subsequent decades, as identity politics came to dominate the Democratic Party, the Democratic Party became the dominant party in Los Angeles. An influx of immigrants from all over the world turned Los Angeles into one of the most diverse and international cities in history, with a powerful working class closely linked by the process of production to workers in Latin America and Asia. The Democrats engaged in an identity-based strategy of divide-and-rule, cultivating black nationalism, Chicano nationalism and other forms of identity politics as a method of rule while cutting social programs and taxes on the rich.

This strategy became more deeply embedded after the 1992 riot, when anger erupted across the city over the acquittal of police responsible for brutally beating Rodney King. In the 1990s, as the Democratic administration of President Bill Clinton "ended welfare as we know it," Democratic city politicians increasingly presented themselves as representatives of various racial groups fighting over ever-shrinking funding for social programs.

The audio of the meeting makes clear that identity politics has nothing to do with improving the conditions of workers. It is about weaponizing identity to enrich the affluent upper middle class. The Los Angeles Democrats' racist comments took place in the context of proposing ways to use racial identity to win patronage over government contracts and secure domination of various union locals so as to gain access to dues money and staffing positions.

It is not accidental that the racist conversation included the head of the county AFL-CIO, and it took place at its headquarters. Over the same period that the Democratic Party has made identity politics the axis of its operations, the trade unions have overseen massive losses in jobs and wages on behalf of American corporations, blaming foreign workers and promoting nationalism. De Leon and Cedillo were both longtime union bureaucrats before running for office, De Leon with the California Teachers Association and Cedillo with the Service Employees International Union.

Two of the figures exposed in the audio have close ties to the pseudo-left, which has long promoted nationalism and identity politics within the Democratic Party. In the audio, Cedillo talks about his former membership in the Stalinist Communist Party USA alongside previous Democratic Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. De Leon, for his part, spoke at a DSA-Los Angeles event in 2017. The Ventura County DSA hosted a "meet the candidate" event in 2018 to promote de Leon's run for the US Senate.

Though the leaked audio exposes the racism of leading Latino Democrats, the Democratic Party is steeped in racialist politics. African American Democrat Stacey Abrams declared in 2018 that there are "inherent racial differences." The *New York Times'* 1619 Project is devoted to a racialist reinterpretation of history, presenting the past as well as the present as characterized by irreconcilable racial conflict.

The audio proves the Democrats' racial politics and the open racism of the increasingly fascist Republican Party are only two sides of the same coin. Reading the transcript of the Los Angeles Democrats' conversation on redistricting, one would hardly know that the slurs and jokes did not come out of the mouth of Trump himself.

Identity politics has greatly enriched the wealthiest minority of each racial group, but it has been a disaster for the working class of all races and nationalities. Nowhere is this truer than Los Angeles, where there are over 50 billionaires and 70,000 homeless people, where the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment is $2,800 and gas costs $6 a gallon, where public transit is in shambles and 96,000 Angelenos have died of the coronavirus. Masses of undocumented immigrants confront daily the threat of deportation.

The depraved incident shows that racial and identity politics have nothing to do with the interests of the working class. A powerful movement of the global working class is emerging across every continent, and the task of socialists is to unite the working class across all racial, national, gender and ethnic lines into one movement for social equality. This means turning to class politics based on the real, economic divisions in society. It means waging a ruthless struggle against identity politics in all forms.

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