

Democratic Party austerity, pseudo-left posturing and a MAGA aspirant: The 2026 Los Angeles mayoral race

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On June 2, voters in Los Angeles will cast ballots in the mayoral primary amid a billion-dollar budget crisis, mass layoffs and the still-smoldering wreckage of a wildfire catastrophe. There are fourteen candidates, but only three are competitive, while none represents the interests of the working class. The race distills, in miniature, the bankruptcy of the entire political order: an incumbent defending austerity, a pseudo-left “change agent” whose record is indistinguishable from the incumbent’s and a right-wing celebrity recycling Trump’s playbook for a city in genuine social crisis.

Since no single candidate is likely to get a majority, the top two will advance to a November runoff. The latest UC Berkeley poll, released May 28, shows a virtual three-way dead heat: incumbent Karen Bass at 26 percent, City Councilmember Nithya Raman at 25 percent and former reality-television personality Spencer Pratt at 22 percent.

The mayor of Los Angeles presides over a city of nearly four million people with a budget of roughly \$15 billion. The office carries significant executive authority but must operate through a 15-member City Council. The result is a political structure that diffuses accountability while concentrating power in the hands of real estate developers, the police union and, fundamentally, the Democratic Party machine that dominates every level of city government.

Bass entered office in December 2022 declaring a state of emergency on homelessness and positioning herself as the experienced public official who would bring order to a sprawling and dysfunctional city bureaucracy. Her record has been the opposite.

Nearly 50,000 people remain unhoused across Los Angeles County. Her signature homelessness initiative, Inside Safe, costs approximately \$6,900 per participant per month and funnels public money through hotels, security firms and service providers without creating permanent housing. A *ProPublica* investigation found that hotels receiving Inside Safe contracts continued to collect public

funds despite repeated health and safety violations.

In January 2025, the Palisades wildfire tore through western Los Angeles, killing 12 people and destroying thousands of homes while Bass was in Ghana for a political event. She had previously cut the city fire department’s budget by \$17.6 million, drawing sharp criticism from Fire Chief Kristin Crowley. After trading accusations in the aftermath of the catastrophe, Bass fired Crowley, who is now suing for retaliation.

In the summer of 2025, the City Council unanimously declared a “fiscal emergency” amid a projected \$1 billion budget deficit, paving the way for the largest round of job cuts since the 2008 financial crisis. Bass has proposed eliminating 1,647 positions. Her 2026-27 budget slashes spending on homelessness by 17.3 percent.

More than half of likely voters view Bass unfavorably, but she has been endorsed by leading California Democrats including former Vice President Kamala Harris and current Governor Gavin Newsom.

Raman, a 43-year-old who immigrated from India as a child and holds degrees from Harvard and MIT in urban planning, was elected to the City Council in 2020 with the backing of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Her candidacy is not a challenge to the Bass administration from the left—it is a safety valve, designed to absorb mounting working-class opposition and redirect it back into the Democratic Party machine.

Raman entered the race in February 2026, just before the filing deadline and weeks after her own endorsement of Bass had been publicly announced. She positions herself as a “change agent” frustrated, however, by the limitations of her Council seat, criticizing Bass’s Inside Safe program as too expensive and her police union contract as fiscally ruinous. But Raman is not an external critic of city governance; she is an integral part of it.

She voted for the fiscal emergency declaration that authorized mass layoffs, supported dismantling the Los

Angeles Homeless Services Authority and redirecting hundreds of millions to private contractors, and led efforts to carve out developer exemptions from Measure ULA, a tax on luxury real estate transfers she had initially championed.

The DSA's own crisis compounds the exposure. After years of electoral work within the Democratic Party, the organization found itself unable to endorse either of its two affiliated candidates in the race. DSA-LA co-chair Leslie Chang acknowledged the absurdity openly: "The worst thing we can do right now for our movement is to issue no endorsement"—which is precisely what the organization proceeded to do. Three of the four DSA-aligned council members endorsed Bass. The DSA censure of Raman over her acceptance of an endorsement from Democrats for Israel, a pro-Zionist formation, signaled a profound political and organizational collapse.

This trajectory mirrors the national pseudo-left pattern. In New York City, DSA mayor Zohran Mamdani, elected on progressive pretensions, almost immediately declared his intention to pursue a "partnership" with Donald Trump to secure federal funding. Raman offers Los Angeles the same: socialist rhetoric in pursuit of votes, managerial accommodation of capital once in office.

Then there is Pratt, age 42, a registered Republican and former star of "The Hills," an MTV reality show. He lost his home in the Palisades fire and announced his candidacy on January 7, 2026, at a rally titled, "They Let Us Burn," blaming Bass and the Democrats for destruction rooted in decades of capitalist neglect and climate change.

Pratt is the latest in a lineage of American movie and television personalities who have leveraged celebrity into right-wing political careers, from Ronald Reagan to Arnold Schwarzenegger to Donald Trump. Sources close to his campaign say Pratt "studies Trump," including old episodes of "The Apprentice" and rally speeches. Trump returned the admiration on May 20: "I'd like to see him do well. He's a character. I heard he's a big MAGA person."

Veteran Republican operatives run Pratt's campaign. His operation has paid more than \$60,000 to the executive director of America First California, a MAGA advocacy organization founded by former Trump advisers. He has outraised both Bass and Raman, pulling in \$3.26 million.

Pratt pounds on homelessness, crime and fire preparedness without offering realistic alternatives. He calls unhoused people "zombies" and "bums," and advocates declaring encampments "grave-disability zones." His call to expand the LAPD to 12,500 officers from 8,600 reprises the approach of former chief Daryl Gates, whose brutal sweeps in the late 1980s produced mass arrests while devastating Black and Latino communities across south Los Angeles. Pratt was caught claiming to live in an Airstream trailer on

his burned-out property when he was in fact staying at the Hotel Bel-Air, where rooms run up to \$2,000 per night, when not living in his father's home in Santa Barbara.

Pratt supporters have shared AI-generated videos depicting him as Batman and Luke Skywalker rescuing Los Angeles from a dystopian hellscape, with Bass portrayed as The Joker, pummeled in the face with tomatoes.

Despite homicides standing at their lowest point since the 1960s, burglaries down 30 percent from the previous year and unsheltered homelessness declining for two consecutive years, all three candidates have built their campaigns around the narrative of a city in collapse. This narrative has a purpose. The fiction of total breakdown justifies expanded policing, further privatization of social services and the suppression of any politics that names the actual cause of the crisis.

What none will say, because none of them can, is that the crisis in Los Angeles is not a failure of management but the outcome of a social order in which housing costs are too high, wages are grossly inadequate and stagnant, healthcare is inaccessible and public resources are gutted to fund tax cuts for billionaires at home and imperialist wars abroad.

So far, 2026 has seen more than 100,000 Los Angeles workers engaged in labor battles, with many more on the horizon. They will find no advocate among these three candidates. What is needed is not a new mayor but the independent political mobilization of the working class—organized in rank-and-file committees, outside and against the union bureaucracies and both capitalist parties—in a common struggle against the profit system that produces these conditions.



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