THE BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE:

Remembering a Great Civic Leader

Last weekend the Los Angeles community lost one of its leaders, Miguel Contreras. The son of migrant farmworkers, he became one of Los Angeles' most powerful labor leaders as head of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, an association of 345 local unions.

Some may think it unusual for me to use this column to express our sympathy for the loss of a leader of organized labor. Not at all. Miguel Contreras was a leader in his own right, and the fact that we did not always agree on issues makes his passing no less significant or sad.

Over the last 10-15 years, the dynamics of politics in Los Angeles certainly have changed. Where once the city's politics were dictated by a small group of key influential leaders, the ever-changing diversity of the community, the new composition of business (fewer large national companies and more minority-owned businesses), the increasing influence of organized labor, the growing involvement of neighborhood organizations and other factors have combined to spread the influence and involvement of all sectors of the community.

The fact of the matter is that this is good for Los Angeles. It brings to the table the many interests whose needs and opinions need to be considered—and hopefully, better public policy because of it.

It is a misperception for people to believe that the Chamber (and therefore business) and the AFL-CIO (and therefore labor) are always at odds, or that our agendas collide. In fact, in the last several years, we have worked closely with organized labor in the following areas:

1. Supporting a tax increase to fund emergency rooms and trauma centers, because we know the value of quality health care.
2. Being a major supporter of the Mayor's $100 million Housing Trust Fund.
3. Simplifying and reducing L.A.'s arcane business tax system which will make L.A. more attractive to employees so they can create new jobs.
4. Crafting the LAX Consensus Plan, a common-sense plan to make needed modernization improvements. In fact, our advocacy brought Mayor Hahn and Councilmember Miscavigo to the negotiating table and made the Consensus Plan a reality.
5. Actively promoting regional transportation solutions and infrastructure.
6. Studying the best ways to meet the needs of the uninsured in Los Angeles County—especially our children.
7. Fighting side by side with labor to keep Los Angeles together during the secession battle two years ago.
8. Promoting discussions, begun with last year's Chamber Chair George Kierfer and Miguel about developing a business-labor alliance to continue to identify areas where we could work together.

However, there are issues on which we have opposed labor, and those on which we will never agree. From living-wage increases to ever-increasing costs and benefits for public employees; from new mandates on employers that will slow the economic growth cycle to tax increases that will make Los Angeles less desirable for business; from opposing inclusionary zoning while supporting incentives that will assure that new housing is built, to fighting efforts to limit employer flexibility with work schedules and wages; we will continue to make our voice clearly heard.

But key to our strategy is to build coalitions with organizations and interests in areas where we can agree so that our disagreements will be less divisive.

For more than 100 years, the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce has been steadfast in its role as a trustee for the future of our region. Long before the organizations and interests with which we share today's civic stage, we have been advocating for an ever-improving quality of life and a growing economy for all of our residents. Labor has been our partner in many of these initiatives and will continue to be in the future.

We are sorry that Miguel Contreras won't be there at the table with us.

And that's the Business Perspective.