

THE STATE

The Stirrings of a New Progressive Movement Can Be Heard

By Peter Dreier
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Seventy-five years ago, Upton Sinclair stood on "Liberty Hill" in San Pedro, a site that had been named by striking dockworkers and members of the Industrial Workers of the World. By candlelight, the famed muckraker had begun to read the 1st Amendment when he was promptly arrested, held incommunicado for 18 hours and then suddenly released. Public outrage over his treatment by authorities inspired the formation of the Southern California branch of the American Civil Liberties Union. It also stimulated Sinclair's efforts to build a broad coalition of progressive movements in Los Angeles and throughout California.

Ten years later, in the midst of the Depression, Sinclair wrote "I, Governor of California and How I Ended Poverty: A True Story of the Future." The pamphlet, which described how its author put the state's unemployed farmers and laborers to work in state-supported cooperative enterprises, galvanized public opinion and launched Sinclair's 1934 campaign for governor. His banner: "End Poverty in California," or EPIC.

Sinclair's political crusade attracted a wide range of radicals and progressives, utopians and technology advocates, Okies

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and *Mexicanos*, labor organizers and social reformers, educators and ministers. Together, they made up a new type of progressive coalition. Some 60 years later, are circumstances right for the development of a similar progressive movement, one that could reshape political discourse in Los Angeles and California? There are signs, especially in L.A., that a reborn progressivism is possible.

Initially, California's business and political establishment was caught off guard by Sinclair's crusade. He surprised many when he captured the Democratic nomination, with the largest primary vote in the state's history, including many newly registered voters. More than two-thirds of his vote came from Southern California; more than half from economically devastated Los Angeles.

By November, however, big business had regrouped. The state's major industries, including large agricultural growers, film-studio executives, daily newspapers and figures like insurance magnate Asa V. Call, mounted a vicious public-relations campaign against Sinclair. EPIC activists were harassed and defamed. Historians identify this attack as the first major negative-media-dominated campaign. Combined with big business' money, the media campaign helped to defeat Sinclair. But despite the loss the EPIC campaign succeeded in inspiring thousands of activists who became the nucleus of a wide range of progressive movements—unions, civil



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rights, housing reform and gay rights, among others—whose influence lasted through the 1960s. For example, Augustus F. Hawkins was elected to the state Legislature on the EPIC ticket and later became the first African American congressman from Los Angeles.

If Sinclair were alive today, trying to recapture the spirit of Liberty Hill and

the EPIC campaign, what issues would he focus on? What constituencies and social movements would he try to mobilize and coalesce?

For starters, he would seek reform of politics, now dominated by big money and media sound bites. So alienated is the public that less than one-third of registered voters are expected to vote in this November's elections. Surely, Sinclair would place campaign-finance reform at the top of his agenda.

Second, Sinclair would want to focus on the region's widening economic divide, a gap that threatens our social fabric. A recent report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities disclosed that the gap between rich and poor in California is one of the widest in the country. The average income of the wealthiest one-fifth of the population (\$127,719) is more than 14 times greater than that of the poorest one-fifth (\$9,033).

The environment provides a third set of issues for a Sinclair-like progressive revival. Misguided land-use, transportation, water and development decisions have taken a toll on the environment, and the list of problems seems to get longer. It includes air and water pollution, expanding pesticide use, the growing number of toxic chemicals in the workplace and communities, the loss of open space, destruction of habitat and our inadequate public-transit system.

Who would be the constituents for a new EPIC-type appeal? Contrary to con-

ventional wisdom, Los Angeles is buzzing with political activism. Not since Tom Bradley's campaigns for mayor in 1969 and 1973 has the city experienced the kind of grass-roots energy evident today. But the organizations involved in union, environmental, neighborhood-improvement, education and ethnic issues are fragmented. They represent a patchwork of progressivism with no unifying theme, agenda or movement. Still, the emergence of this new type of community activism, consisting of groups dealing with such basic issues as housing, work, transportation and food, deepens the potential agenda for a progressive renewal.

Can these disparate constituencies unite around a common agenda and strategy? Is there a leader with Sinclair's talent and charisma to transform what otherwise seems a crazy quilt of activists, movements and issues into a compelling message of grass-roots action and political change?

Next Saturday, Oct. 3, a conference on Progressive L.A., to be held at Occidental College, will bring together many local activists to explore this question, Sinclair's lessons and the roots of L.A.'s progressive traditions, among others. Perhaps it will inspire the next Sinclair to write another pamphlet: "I, Mayor of Los Angeles, and How We Will Empower Our Communities to Revitalize Progressive Politics." □