



**VICTORY ON MEASURE J:
STILL STRUGGLING ON CRENSHAW**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 11-29-12, p.A-6

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

While an emerging new coalition worked hard for the re-election of Pres. Obama on a national level against the big-money funded madness of the Right, another coalition was waging and winning an important struggle here on the local level. It was a struggle against the attempt of Mayor Villaraigosa and the MTA to extend the existing sales tax until 2069 in the interest of big real estate and construction companies, and their arrogant and insensitive disregard for community rights and concerns about racial and social justice, environmental concerns, and equitable and effective allocation and distribution of resources. And for our community, it was especially unacceptable, for it asked us for support for a measure that had no allocation for our community and came on the heels of the Mayor's public disregard and rejection of our community's legitimate request for a fully underground subway on Crenshaw Blvd. and a station at Leimert Park Village, a vital cultural and business center for our people.

Measure J was driven by corporate and special big-money interests with many millions of dollars, false and deceptive advertisements and the coerced, cooperative or convenient silence and self-sidelining of various Black and progressive leaders and legislators. Thus, it was assumed to be a done deal, all over but the shouting and sharing of the future ill-gotten gains. But something game-changing happened on the way to the forum and polls. A people-oriented, community-based coalition for transit justice was set in motion and the measure was defeated.

As always, there are lessons to be learned from this victory for the people and they are numerous and need to be studied, duplicated and expanded. The first lesson is the power and possibilities of coalition politics. It brought together a wide-range of varied groups among which were: the Crenshaw Subway Coalition and allied Black organizations; the Bus Riders Union; Union de Vecinos of Boyle Heights; Northeast Residents Against Measure J; the Los Angeles Community Action Network and Beverly Hills residents and leaders. In one sense, it might at first seem an odd coupling of working and middle class people of color with residents and leaders of the Northeast and Beverly Hills. But it reflected common-ground coalition politics, based on single issues vs. common ground alliance grounded in shared principles and ongoing cooperation around shared concerns and interests.

The essential lesson here is that not only is there strength and winning power in unity, but also that this victory points towards other possibilities of cooperation and struggle around other shared interests in public policy. Thus, it revives and opens up with added insight an overdue and needed conversation about possibilities inherent in multicultural and multiclass cooperation and struggle, and the practical initiatives to pursue such possibilities.

Secondly, the victorious struggle around J, similar to the Presidential election, reaffirmed the power of a united people, and the continuing effectiveness of grassroots, on the ground organizing, even when struggling against multi-million dollar campaigns by both super pac and billionaire

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business interests. Thirdly, the victory rightly shifts the focus and opens a new opportunity for a more inclusive and democratic discussion on how to distribute Measure R funds for transit projects in a more equitable and effective way. And this means giving due consideration to community concerns, racial equity, social justice, and environmental issues in developing transit policies and initiatives.

Also, this successful campaign was a sign and message to the Mayor, MTA and the corporate funders, friends, allies and benefactors, that there is a penalty to pay for riding roughshod over and arrogantly and arbitrarily rejecting the rightful claims, interests and requests of involved communities. And it specifically sent the signal that Black community concerns and interests must be taken into serious account in the discussion and development of transit policy and the allocation of resources.

Finally, this victorious campaign and the companion struggles around the Expo Line and the Crenshaw Subway fostered and reflects the evolving of a new Black community leadership model rooted in the advocacy and struggle for transit justice for and by the Black community as expressed by the brilliant policy analyst and strategist,

Damien Goodmon and the Crenshaw Subway Coalition and its allied organizations such as the united front, the Black Community, Clergy and Labor Alliance (BCCLA). This leadership exhibits a capacity to reach effectively across our geographic distances and also demonstrates a rightful concern for mutually-beneficial coalition-building with other communities and interest groups. But it does not seek to submerge, erase or explain away its racial, ethnic or communal character and interests. For only as a self-conscious community can a community build coalitions and construct alliances with others on the basis of distinct and yet interrelated interests we call common ground. Indeed, if we have no identity, we can have no interests; and if we have no identity or interests, how can we seriously speak of finding common ground interests with others who know and respect themselves as distinct and define and advance their interests as such? Thus, the grounding and unavoidable proposition here is this: we have both the right and responsibility to exist as a people, define, defend and promote our own interests and with others similarly situated and interested, struggle to build the good and sustainable society we all want, demand and deserve.

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