

From Jackson to Richmond: How Radical Mayors Left Their Mark



Well before the Trump era, U.S. presidents from both major parties failed to address urban problems or made them worse. Governors, members of Congress, and state legislators didn't perform much better. So the difficult job of fighting poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation shifted to the municipal level, where activist mayors have tried to mobilize the limited resources of local government on behalf of neglected causes and constituents.

When the U.S. Conference of Mayors came to San Francisco several years ago, our local paper, the *Chronicle*, congratulated its members for “shaking up the national agenda” by “tackling issues like climate change, education and police brutality.” In his keynote address to the group, then-President Barack Obama proclaimed that: “Mayors get the job done. It's not sufficient to blather on—you actually have to do something.”

Under Obama's successor, many municipal leaders—even some pretty crummy ones—have joined “the resistance” to federal attacks on immigrants, union members, or the urban poor. But, in cities across the country, powerful private interests and the local politicians they support still thwart progressive policy initiatives.

To overcome corporate opposition and “get the job done,” left-

leaning mayors or city councilors must take a nontraditional approach to running for and holding office, as Socialist Alternative leader Kshama Sawant has done in Seattle. Two new books about making change in smaller cities are worthy of close study by anyone hoping to push their own city hall in a similar left-wing direction.

Winning Richmond: How A Progressive Alliance Won City Hall (Hard Ball Press) is Gayle McLaughlin's memoir of her 14-year career, as mayor and city councilor, in Richmond, California, a blue-collar community in the Bay Area whose largest employer is a Chevron refinery. *Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi* (Daraja Press) is a collection of essays, interviews, and programmatic statements, co-edited by Kali Akuno and Ajamu Nangwaya. From various political perspectives, near and far, the book documents the municipal insurgency led by the late Chokwe Lumumba, an African-American radical, now succeeded, as mayor of Jackson, by his son, Antar.

Old Guard Politicians

Mississippi and California aren't much alike but the demographics of Richmond and Jackson share one thing in common: both cities are 80% non-white and voter registration is overwhelmingly Democratic. In both majority minority communities, corporate Democrats of color long ruled the roost, thanks to strong backing from local developers and manufacturers, other downtown business interests, and socially conservative black churches.

Richmond's old guard took its first hit from the left when Gayle McLaughlin, a white newcomer from Chicago and Green Party protégé of Peter Camejo, unexpectedly won a city council seat in 2004. As she recalls in her memoir, "the political culture was vastly different from anything" she had previously encountered as a movement activist. All six of Richmond's

black and Latino city councilors, including the city's African-American mayor, were business-oriented Democrats backed by Chevron.

On issues like promoting renewable energy or improving refinery safety, McLaughlin had, at most, only one reliable ally; when she was elected mayor in 2006, she was still the only Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA) member on the council. "I was a working class person consciously representing the voices of many people living in a system dominated by the rich," she writes. "One of the first things I realized was that I wasn't going to get anything done without an organizing campaign on each issue."

This realization informed the work of the RPA, which McLaughlin co-founded and describes in the book, and her use of city hall as a catalyst for change, mobilizer of public opinion, and ally of constituent groups. When she became mayor, Richmond was best known, in the Bay Area, for its street crime, gun violence, poverty, and pollution. During her eight years in office, the city acquired a different reputation—for battling Big Oil, Big Soda, Big Banks, and the landlord lobby.

Today, Richmond is a cleaner, greener, safer, and more equitable place because its new leaders hired a top-notch city manager and reform-minded police chief, boosted the minimum wage, adopted rent control, curbed police misconduct, defended immigrants, and sought increased tax revenue and environmental justice from its largest employer, a Chevron refinery.

Once elected, most politicians just try to maintain a personal fan base for future electoral campaigns. In contrast, McLaughlin never stopped being a real movement-builder. She remained accountable to the RPA, a multi-racial political formation, with its own elected leaders, dues-paying membership, and year-round, multi-issue organizing program. And she helped inspire younger activists who also became

successful candidates for local office by relying on Bernie Sanders-style small donations and local public matching funds, rather than corporate contributions.

As a result, Richmond Progressives now have a super-majority of five on the city council (that McLaughlin left last year to run for Lieutenant Governor of California, as a progressive independent). All are people of color who supported Sanders in 2016; four come from immigrant backgrounds and two are under 30. They won by running as part of RPA slates, committed to popular reforms like rent regulation and the requirement that landlords have just cause before evicting tenants.

A Southern State Capital

The political landscape of Jackson—the state capital and largest urban center in Mississippi—was equally challenging for activists who turned their attention to municipal politics after prior involvement in civil rights activity, black nationalist causes, or other radical organizing.

When criminal defense lawyer Chokwe Lumumba, co-founder of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM), gained a Jackson city council seat in 2009, it was, he reports, “my first election to anything.” As Lumumba noted later, his seven opponents, all black as well, had few ideas about how to:

“overcome decades of economic divestment, de-industrialization, suburban flight, a declining tax base, chronic under-and un-employment, poorly performing schools, and an antiquated and decaying infrastructure.”

In a contest between an “outspoken revolutionary nationalist” and what *Jackson Rising* contributor Kamau Franklin calls “the politics of careerism and moderation,” voters in Jackson Ward 4 opted for beginning “the process of transforming local government into a vehicle for economic and political change, guided by the principle of self-determination.”

Four years later, according to contributor Carl Davidson, Lumumba again caught “Jackson’s political elite off guard” by making “use of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to run as an independent in the Democratic primary for mayor, defeat the incumbent, and force a run-off...which he then won overwhelmingly.”

Lumumba’s brief tenure in office illustrated not only how city hall can become a laboratory for visionary ideas, but also the fiscal constraints and legal restrictions facing modern day “sewer socialists.” *Jacobin* editor Bhaskar Sankara visited Jackson and then interviewed the new mayor in February, 2014, just several days before his sudden death of heart failure at age 66. In *Jackson Rising*, Sunkara recalls that:

“Lumumba had just passed a one cent local sales tax to fund Jackson’s infrastructure. The taps ran brown and many roads were in disrepair...[T]he Environmental Protection Agency had threatened action if waste water systems weren’t upgraded. There was nothing especially radical about the tax, except for the fact that Lumumba took his case to the people, explaining the situation and winning consent for the measure in a referendum.”

In a special election held six weeks later, Lumumba’s son, Antar tried to succeed him. He lost to a black minister, who soon ditched his predecessor’s plans for recycling measures, city-supported cooperatives, and more exercises in participatory democracy to help Jackson residents re-shape public policy. Several contributors to *Jackson Rising* tell the story of how the MXGM and Cooperation Jackson, an allied initiative, rebounded from this tragic set-back.

One vehicle was a “Jackson Rising: New Economies Conference,” held in May 2014, which brought together 500 participants, including organizers of a community land trust and other cooperative ventures like recycling and laundry businesses, a five-acre urban farm, and a worker-owned construction firm.

The city continued to attract activists, like the many co-founders of Cooperation Jackson, who, according to reporter Katie Gilbert, “moved to Jackson from cities outside of Mississippi” to be part of a “new society experiment” which “tries to help people unlearn the lessons the old economy taught them and train them to be democratic in every aspect of their lives.”

Last summer, Antar Lumumba ran again for mayor in a field of sixteen Democrats. This time, he defeated, without a run-off, the floundering incumbent, Rev. Tony Yarber. Lumumba won 55% of the primary vote—ten thousand more ballots votes than his father received four years earlier, making the general election a shoe-in. His primary competitor was state senator John Horhn who, according to Gilbert, raised the specter of a state-takeover of Jackson “if the city’s finances didn’t take a few steps back from the edge of potential bankruptcy, if crime didn’t abate, and the schools didn’t improve their outcomes.”

There was understandable rejoicing on the left, locally and nationally, about MXGM’s comeback and the new mayor’s post-election declaration that he was going to make Jackson “the most radical city on the planet.” Behind the scenes, Gilbert reports, activists continue to debate whether their focus should be “to capably govern the city or to altogether re-imagine it,” a project continually hampered by “the very real problem of insufficient resources.”

Meanwhile, since Mississippi state legislators and its Republican governor also conduct public business in Jackson, pre-emption is a big threat right within the city limits. As Rukio Lumumba, sister of the current mayor notes in her Foreword to *Jackson Rising*, conservatives in state government have already diverted some of the city’s new sales tax revenue in other directions. Nor is there much legislative enthusiasm for amending state law that currently restricts cooperatives to farms, utilities, and credit unions, categories not broad

enough to permit wider development of a “solidarity economy” in the city or state.

In addition, GOP legislators have proposed that Jackson be stripped of control over its airport and related commerce and that downtown business interests be allowed to shape development plans. The latter arrangement—par for the course elsewhere—would have eventual electoral consequences. As Akuno argues, “the forces behind the gentrification of Jackson are deliberately trying to dilute the numerical strength of the Black working class in order to change the political character of the city.”

Despite the wealth of information and insight in *Winning Richmond* and *Jackson Rising*, each book has some puzzling omissions. In her memoir, McLaughlin barely mentions the critical behind-the-scenes work of Richmond’s professional city manager Bill Lindsay or former police chief Chris Magnus, who turned the RPD into a widely acclaimed model for community policing. Changing local law enforcement behavior, even under a progressive city administration, is no easy task. As the first Mayor Lumumba explained to Sunkara, it took careful maneuvering to get Jackson Police Chief Lindsey Horton more “in line with our vision” of how “jobs and other programs could reduce the need for crime.” While McLaughlin does describe the key role of progressive unions in supporting the RPA, the Akuno-Nangwaya collection sheds little light on the backing that both Lumumbas received from the Mississippi Alliance of State Employees (MASE), which includes Jackson city employees whose labor-management relations were improved as a result.

Set in a state where politics remains much dominated by rich, famous, or corporate-connected Californians, McLaughlin’s story stresses working class leadership development, female empowerment, and grass-roots base building instead. Anyone else of modest means—a tenant, a worker, a union or community organizer—who hopes to succeed in electoral politics against

the usual well-funded foes (i.e., doctors, bankers, corporate lawyers, developers, and other multi-millionaires)—will be much inspired by the former Richmond mayor's compelling personal story.

Similarly, the MXGM experience shows how patience, persistence, and deep roots in the community can pay off—not just at the polls, but in day-to-day organizing and political consciousness raising around a wide range of issues. In *Jackson Rising*, Chokwe Lumumba warns of the tendency among some urban activists to “put their movement on hold and to rely exclusively on the mayor and the mayor's staff to get things done for the people.” As these case studies of Richmond and Jackson demonstrate, electing left-wing mayors has a lot more impact if their campaign supporters remain mobilized, post-election, and don't leave the governing to them.

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