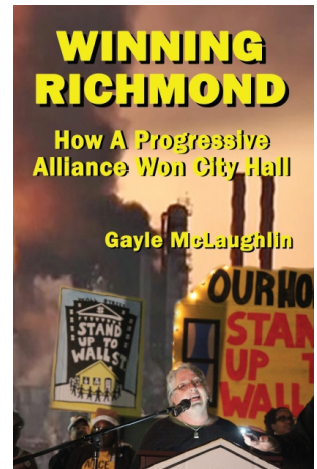


A Working Class Mayor Is Something To Be



Review: Winning Richmond: How a Progressive Alliance Won City Hall by Gayle McLaughlin. Hardball Press, 2018.

Well before the Trump era, U.S. presidents from both major parties failed to address urban problems or made them worse. Congress, state legislatures, and governors weren't much better. The 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 constituents and causes.

When the U.S. Conference of Mayors met in San Francisco several years ago, the SF Chronicle congratulated its members for “shaking up the national agenda” by “tackling issues like climate change, education and police brutality.” In his keynote address, 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, creative municipal leadership has become part of widespread resistance to federal attacks on immigrants, union members, and the urban poor. But in cities across the country, powerful private interests and the

politicians they support still stand in the way of progressive initiatives. To overcome corporate opposition and “get the job done,” mayors or city councilors must take a nontraditional approach to running for and holding office.

Union or community activists hoping to capture city hall will find a good role model and much practical advice in *Winning Richmond*. This new book is Gayle McLaughlin’s memoir of her 14-year career as mayor and city councilor in Richmond, California. Set in a state where politics is much dominated by men and women who are rich, famous, and/or corporate-connected, McLaughlin’s story is a case study in working class leadership development, female empowerment, and grass roots base building.

Located in the East Bay near Oakland and Berkeley, blue-collar Richmond was once notorious for its street crime, gun violence, poverty, and pollution. During McLaughlin’s tenure in office, the city acquired a far different reputation—for battling Big Oil, Big Soda, Big Banks, and the landlord lobby. Today, this majority minority community of 110,000 is cleaner, greener, safer, and more equitable because it hired a top-notch city manager and 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.

The Richmond Council, New and Old

As McLaughlin reports, the group she co-founded to achieve these goals—the Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA)—now has a super-majority of five on the city council. All five of these RPA leaders are people of color who supported Bernie Sanders in 2016; four come from immigrant backgrounds and two are under 30. One is a black Latina lesbian and Teamster public employee. One is a retired public school teacher, also a union member. Three others are advocates for tenant rights, renewable energy, and immigrant women, respectively.

This rainbow coalition didn't gain office or influence overnight. In fact, when McLaughlin, a white newcomer from Chicago and member of the Green Party, won her first election in 2004, she became the lone progressive on the city council, for the next four years. As she recalls in her memoir, "the political culture was vastly different from anything I had ever encountered."

All six of Richmond's black and Latino city councilors, including the mayor, were corporate Democrats backed by Chevron. On issues like promoting renewable energy or improving refinery safety, she had, at most, only one reliable ally, then Richmond city councilor and now mayor Tom Butt.

"I was a working class person consciously representing the voices of many people living in a system dominated by the rich...," McLaughlin 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—and how the RPA acted on it—informs McLaughlin's account of her inside/outside role as a catalyst for change, mobilizer of public opinion, and ally of constituent groups.

A Durable City-Wide Formation

Too many would-be reformers, once elected, don't want to break with business as usual or build anything other than a personal fan base for future electoral campaigns. In contrast, McLaughlin never stopped being a movement-builder.

The result is a durable, city-wide political formation, with its own elected leaders, a dues-paying membership, a year-round, multi-issue organizing program, and candidates who run as a slate, committed to a common progressive agenda. Whether they are Democrats, Greens, or independents, all RPA candidates run "corporate-free." They refuse all business contributions, relying instead on Sanders-style small donors and local public matching funds.

Last year, McLaughlin stepped down as a Richmond city councilor so she could pursue a long-shot campaign for lieutenant governor of California. Her purpose was not to become the next Gavin Newsom (Governor Jerry Brown's longtime understudy and would-be successor). But rather, she wanted to “encourage others to build local political power in their own cities” and a “powerful, independent network of progressive forces across the state.”

Despite her working class background and her long record of mayoral activism on behalf of labor causes, only the United Electrical Workers (UE), a small national union with just a handful of California members, has endorsed her. Most big unions have gotten behind state senator Ed Hernandez, a wealthy southern California doctor and corporate Democrat who does favor single-payer health care. Even the California Nurses Association, a reliable past supporter of the RPA and Ralph Nader's biggest union backer when he ran for president in 2000, fell in line behind Hernandez because of his single-payer stance. Much to the chagrin of rank-and-file nurses who favored McLaughlin, CNA officials wouldn't even grant the progressive independent from Richmond a candidate interview.

Backed by Our Revolution

Undeterred, McLaughlin has traveled the state, winning the enthusiastic support of nearly 35 California affiliates of Our Revolution (OR), the activist network spawned by Sanders' presidential campaign. In January, national Our Revolution responded to this grassroots sentiment by endorsing her as well. In late April, Our Revolution President Nina Turner is due to appear at California events on behalf of McLaughlin and the OR-backed Assembly campaign of RPA leader and Richmond city councilor Jovanka Beckles.

If more California union members—not to mention their organizations—got behind her, McLaughlin's labor-oriented candidacy (like Sanders' in 2015-16) wouldn't be viewed as

such a long shot. But, of course, being an “outsider” who is vastly out-spent is not a new experience for the winner of four consecutive elections in Richmond, including the 2014 contest in which Chevron spent more than \$3 million to defeat McLaughlin and the RPA.

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., corporate lawyers, doctors, bankers, developers, and other multi-millionaires) will be much inspired by McLaughlin’s story.

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Hear speakers from the Richmond Progressive Alliance at the Labor Notes Conference, April 6-8 in Chicago.

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