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Los Angeles is Not a Sanctuary City

Scott Doyle · Wednesday, April 12th, 2017

Just a few days after Trump’s election last year, dozens of immigrants’ rights organizations sent a letter to LA City and County officials, detailing the steps that needed to be taken *before* Trump even assumed office. In essence, they were asking Mayor Garcetti and others to declare Los Angeles a Sanctuary City—and then outlining the concrete policies that would give such a declaration real teeth.

City Council President Herb Wesson had already announced a motion to explore the creation of a special Ad Hoc Committee on Immigrant Affairs. But it took more than two months for the Committee to convene its first meeting; and that didn’t take place until *after* the Inauguration. It took another two months for the Committee to have its second meeting, where the main order of business was a report from the Chief Legislative Analyst as to whether or not there was an accepted legal definition of the term “sanctuary city.”



Wesson had raised that very question way back on November 17. Five months later, the City is still bogged down in semantics. Meanwhile, other cities, including nearby Santa Ana, have moved forward with bold, proactive policies.

Yet while claiming that the term is an elusive and even meaningless label, City leaders simultaneously have been feeding the (mis)perception that Los Angeles is in fact, for all intents and purposes, a Sanctuary City. Just last week, the term rang out through the Council chambers at City Hall as a delegation of visiting governors from Mexico praised the City for its leadership. Councilmember José Huizar, who sits on the Ad Hoc Committee, said that “de facto, in practice, we are a sanctuary city.”

Paradoxically, it is now almost necessary to loudly and publicly declare: No, Los Angeles is *not* a Sanctuary City—a message some activists began pushing as the Ad Hoc Committee readied for its third meeting on Wednesday.

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No, there is no set legal definition of the term “sanctuary city” (something immigrants’ rights organizations could have told the City months ago). But there is a consensus amongst advocates on a meaningful policy definition: 1) a City ordinance drawing a clear line between policing and immigration enforcement; and 2) an inclusive public fund to ensure legal representation and due

process for those facing deportation proceedings.



As he has been for months, Mayor Eric Garcetti continues to be at the center of a linguistic tap-dance, and an accompanying set of terminally cautious half-measures on policy. His latest move, announced at a splashy press conference on March 20, is Executive Directive 20: “Standing with Immigrants: A City of Safety, Refuge, and Opportunity for All.”

Conspicuously absent is the word “sanctuary.” But semantics aside, the policy itself, while representing real progress, falls well short of anything that might warrant Los Angeles calling itself a Sanctuary City. It is largely an extension of Special Order 40, an internal directive that restricts explicit collaboration between LAPD and ICE, but allows for subtler, pernicious kinds of cooperation.

A big problem with Special Order 40 (and by extension the Mayor’s Executive Directive), says Emi MacLean of NDLO (the National Day Laborers Organizing Network), is that as an internal mandate it lacks the force of law. What we need, she says, is “an ordinance that would limit city officials from participating in immigration enforcement. We also need a bias-free policing policy by LAPD, which still shares information with ICE, turns people over to the Sheriff’s Department which turns people over to ICE, and participates in joint task forces with ICE which result in deportations.”



Photo by Tessie Borden

According to many advocates, the gold standard for such city ordinances is the one passed in nearby Santa Ana—a mere 35 miles from City Hall, and in the heart of the far more conservative Orange County. “If they can do it, why can’t we?” asks Walter Nicholls, a member of Indivisible Highland Park, which has been urging Gil Cedillo, who chairs the Ad Hoc Committee, to introduce the Santa Ana language as a starting point.

In keeping with the urgency local advocates have asked of Los Angeles leaders, the Santa Ana ordinance was passed three days before Trump’s Inauguration... and before the Ad Hoc Committee even held its first meeting.

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Indivisible Highland Park is one of many such local units that have sprung up locally and across the country to resist the Trump agenda. While most have focused on organizing around Congressional districts, the Highland Park chapter has taken a more neighborhood-based approach—in part because a chapter focused on CD 34 already existed.

But that presented an opportunity, some members say, to explore the intersections between local and national issues. In part spurred by the compelling story of a local father of four detained by ICE (Immigrations & Customs Enforcement) after dropping one daughter off at her Highland Park school while another filmed the arrest from the back seat, the group has chosen to focus on the fight for immigrants’ rights.

Yet according to member Deborah Falb, the group has tried to remain mindful of its relative

privilege, and to use that privilege to have the backs of groups like NDLO. It has also tried to frame the issue as one in which the entire community has a stake. “Once the government denies due process to one group, it can deny due process to any.” We are defending a way of life, and whole communities, she says.



That was very much the spirit of a collaboration last Saturday at the NELA Art Walk between the group, local artists, and a local business, Social Study. Owner Katherine Ferwerda opened up one of her store windows for a Sanctuary-themed immersive art installation by Lani Trock. Other artists printed up “Immigrants Make California Great” postcards for people to fill out with messages to Mayor Garcetti.

The public premiere of the installation, which will remain on display for the rest of the month, was accompanied by a short informal program. Members of the community, joined by Councilmember Gil Cedillo, read from a piece crafted by Falb that invites the public to “take sanctuary here, proudly and visibly, on behalf of the millions who cannot.” Members of the family of Rómulo Avelica-Gonzalez joined the gathering after having earlier that day visited him at the ICE Detention Facility in Adelanto.

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