

Miguel Contreras, Leader of Los Angeles Labor Federation, Dies at 52

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Published: May 10, 2005

LOS ANGELES, May 9 (AP) - Miguel Contreras, a son of farm workers who helped revive Southern California's unions as head of the politically powerful Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, died on Friday. He was 52 and lived in Los Angeles.

The cause was a heart attack, said Tyrone Freeman, president of the Service Employees International Union Local 434B.

Mr. Contreras, whose political clout extended from City Hall to Sacramento and beyond, was credited with bringing together the federation's 345 local unions in recent years to organize workers and pressure employers more effectively.

He was known as a kingmaker for local and state politicians. The labor federation, regarded as the most influential political machine in Southern California, has endorsed Mayor James K. Hahn in his current election campaign.

Mr. Contreras began working in the fields of the Central Valley outside Dinuba, Calif., at the age of 5. By age 17, he was handing out grape boycott leaflets at grocery stores for the famous United Farmworkers campaign.

He eventually became a strike captain and was sent to Toronto by the labor leader Cesar E. Chavez. He worked with unions in Salinas and San Francisco before the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union recruited him as a national organizer, taking him to Los Angeles in the late 1980's.

He told The Los Angeles Times in a March profile that working with Chavez transformed him.

"Mexican farm workers were seen as nothing more than agricultural implements, to be used and discarded like you would discard an old shovel or an old hoe," Mr. Contreras said. Mr. Chavez "gave us a feeling of real self-worth and a feeling of breaking away those imaginary shackles you had to the grower and standing up for yourself."

Mr. Contreras was not satisfied with his accomplishments, however, telling The Los Angeles Times that he hoped for one more political success.

"I have one desire left," he said, "one thing I want to accomplish: to help take someone to the White House."

Mr. Contreras is survived by his wife, Maria Elena Durazo, leader of Local 11 for the hotel and restaurant workers union Unite Here, and two sons, Michael and Mario.