

Statement to the Los Angeles City Council April 28, 2008
by Cheryl Parisi, Chair, Coalition of LA City Unions

Good morning. My name is Cheryl Parisi, Chair of the Coalition of Los Angeles City Unions and Executive Director of Council 36 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

The six unions proudly affiliated with the Coalition of L.A. City Unions collectively represent twenty-two thousand City workers. They include librarians, 9-1-1 operators, traffic officers, streetlight electricians, road maintenance workers, wastewater treatment operators, and many others.

Over the course of the last year, our Coalition has pioneered a new era of modern-day labor-management relations. We were invited into "mutual gains bargaining" by the Mayor. After some initial reluctance – City workers affiliated with the Coalition agreed that the opportunities for problem solving were much greater when working together instead of apart.

Through mutual gains bargaining, we built new, lasting relationships that together have allowed us to move the City – and your deeply dedicated employees – forward.

We have all been through the budget process enough times to know that it is never easy —and never more so than when the economy is weak. I could stand here before you today and say – as we have every time the cycle has turned down – that we are going to war. We could question every single number printed in the Mayor's budget and mount a fight in the streets and in the media in an attempt to avoid layoffs.

But that's the old way. Under the mutual gains process, we are doing it differently. And that's not just rhetoric. Rather than waging war in the streets and on the airwaves, we have spent countless hours in the CAO's "war room" exploring options. We have engaged our members – the men and women on the front lines of City services – to tell us how the City can operate more efficiently, generate new income, and collect revenue that is being left on the table. We have been diligent. We have left no stone unturned.

So we come before you today in partnership. This economic downturn has hit hard among cities, states, businesses, and families across this country. Los Angeles has not been spared. Everyone is hurting, from those who are feeling the squeeze in the supermarkets and at the gas pumps, to the City of LA and the State of California.

Yet we all know during economic downturns, residents need City services more than ever. History has shown that during severe downturns such as this, crime goes up. And that is why we support your commitment to putting more police officers on the streets.

In addition to continuing with the police hiring plan, we encourage you to implement the recommendations resulting from the City Controller's audit on civilianization. Police officers should be on our streets performing their duties by fighting crime, not sitting at desks doing paperwork.

But public safety doesn't stop with the police...that's just where it ends. We can prevent crime by preserving after-school programs in our parks and assuring that libraries are open for our youth. We can help keep our neighborhoods safe by assuring that City workers are available to quickly replace burned out streetlights that keep vandals from reeking havoc

in our communities. And if – God forbid – a crime is in process, our 9-1-1 operators must be there to answer the call and be sure that help is on the way.

We know this is a tough budget and there is a large hole to fill. But we challenge you to take this budget as a starting point. Work hand-in-glove with us to protect these critical City services. Laying off the City's youngest and newest workers – those on the front line of service delivery – would not only result in service cuts but would put more Los Angeles families on the unemployment line in this fragile economy.

There is another way. Let's implement a plan to encourage those closest to retirement – your most expensive employees – to make way for front line workers. This will allow managers to restructure their departments, streamline operations, and train for the future while protecting the services Angelenos need now more than ever.

Rather than implementing a "short term layoff" plan that we are certain will affect service delivery, we challenge you to look at alternative ways to enhance revenue, cut costs, and deliver services more efficiently. It is impossible to cut workers – whether by the hundreds in layoffs or by the hour in furloughs – and expect the same level of City service. Impossible.

Unless you backfill someone's job with overtime – which is more expensive – a day less worked is a day less service. Cutting days from librarians means cutting days each branch can remain open. Cutting hours from Recreation Assistants means cutting hours of children's programs and after-school sports.

Every City worker is a City service. Trash cans don't pick themselves up. Potholes don't fill each other. Kids don't run their own art and recreation programs to keep themselves off the streets. They need us...

So we challenge the notion that the best thing a City worker can do for the budget is to give up his or her job. Instead, the best thing a City worker can do for the budget is to think like a leader.

And so we asked every single City worker affiliated with the Coalition to think like a leader. To step up and tell us how they can do things differently. And they have heard the call. We have received thousands of ideas from the front lines of City services and we have gone through them all with a fine tooth comb. Ideas continue to come in, and we are leaving no stone unturned.

So, it is with great respect that we present to you today this book of ideas from those standing up for City services, your dedicated employees. You will hear the details when workers testify in the coming days. When you do, we are confident that you will see that there are ways to enhance revenues, cut costs, and deliver services more efficiently. Overall, these ideas – from the small and easy to the grand and challenging – would improve the budget outlook by tens of millions of dollars in the next fiscal year, and much more in the years to come.

So on behalf of the Coalition of LA City Unions and the twenty-two thousand front-line workers we collectively represent, we ask you to join us in prioritizing service delivery over easy cuts. Join us in leadership that puts long-term investment over temporary fixes.

Thank you.