

# Los Angeles Times

**Kevin Merida**  
Executive Editor

2300 E. Imperial Highway  
El Segundo, CA 90245  
[kevin.merida@latimes.com](mailto:kevin.merida@latimes.com)

To the judges,

The conversation was presumed to be private – a seemingly forgettable hour in the lives of three elected officials in Los Angeles and the county’s top labor leader. They had huddled at the county labor federation headquarters in October 2021, ostensibly to discuss how to retain and expand Latino political power – their own in particular – amid a charged redistricting process.

But the chatter quickly took an ugly turn: racist comments slung with casual ease, along with profane jabs and petty political scheming. The kind of comments that could end careers. And, secretly, it was being recorded.

Los Angeles Times reporters who cover City Hall obtained a copy of the recording on a Saturday evening in October 2022, a year after the gathering and just four weeks ahead of a consequential mayoral and City Council election. They knew the voices and flew into action, listening, transcribing, analyzing, deciphering and in some cases translating. They had to authenticate the recording. They had to reach out to the participants. A legal threat from the labor federation had to be assessed and batted down.

Hours later, just after 9 a.m. Sunday, The Times exclusively published the first story on the notorious recording of City Council President Nury Martinez, Councilmembers Gil Cedillo and Kevin de León and labor leader Ron Herrera.

The racism displayed, chuckled at or tolerated by people elected to run one of the nation’s most diverse cities rocked City Hall like few scandals ever have. The targets were many: Black people, Armenians, fellow Latinos. Especially devastating was a derogatory exchange referencing the young Black son of a white council member.

Outrage was instant. The story resonated across the country, even prompting a call for resignations from President Biden.

In the days and weeks that followed, The Times published dozens of stories, columns, editorials, along with audio and video content, examining the explosive recording and its impact. News coverage tracked developments in real time: the reaction, the fallout at City Council meetings, the protests.

Times journalists also explored bigger questions: What is the state of the Latino-Black political alliance in Los Angeles? Why don’t more Latinos vote in a city where they make up half the population? How does a city with a fractured racial history move forward? How much does labor control our elected officials? And, not least: Who recorded the meeting, and why did it remain concealed for a year?

Unsurprisingly, the recording has ended careers. Martinez resigned her powerful post within days. Herrera followed. Cedillo went into hiding for the remaining two months of his final term on the council, literally invoking sick time. De León has thus far rejected vociferous calls for him to step down, though an effort to recall him has been launched.

We are proud to submit this work for your consideration.

Sincerely,

