

## *Police Unions Won Power Using His Playbook. Now He's Negotiating the Backlash.*

As officer perks and protections draw new scrutiny, an architect of longtime police bargaining tactics says unions are at risk of losing it all.



By **Michael H. Keller** and **Kim Barker**

March 10, 2021

Ron DeLord, a fiery former Texas cop turned labor organizer, has long taught union leaders how to gain power and not let go. He has likened a police union going after an elected official to a cheetah devouring a wildebeest, and suggested that taking down just one would make others fall in line.

He helped write the playbook that police unions nationwide — seeking better pay, perks and protections from discipline — have followed for decades. Build a war chest. Support your friends. Smear your enemies. Even scare citizens with the threat of crime. One radio spot in El Paso warned residents to support their local police or face “the alternative,” as the sound of gunshots rang out.

“We took weak, underpaid organizations and built them into what everyone today says are powerful police unions,” Mr. DeLord said in a recent interview. “You may say we went too far. I say you don’t know how far you’ve gone until you’re at the edge of the envelope.”

That moment may be now.

Since the death of George Floyd at the hands of the police last May set off protests nationwide, 27 states and Washington, D.C., have adopted new police oversight and reform laws, [according to](#) the National Conference of State Legislatures. Officials in [Boston](#), [Los Angeles](#) and other cities agreed to limit police spending. In November, voters overwhelmingly approved 17 ballot measures in six states to rein in police officers.



Protesters chanting “Hands up, don’t shoot” in San Antonio last June, soon after the killing of George Floyd. Eric Gay/Associated Press

Unions — many of which have dug in despite the protests and challenged [officers’ firings](#) in high-profile incidents — are also increasingly seen as out of step with the public. Officers in big cities can earn more than \$100,000 a year, far more than citizens they are assigned to protect. That success has stoked a backlash. Many cities say they are unable, or unwilling, to pay for ever mounting police costs.

As cities from [Portland, Ore.](#), to [Chicago](#) negotiate new police contracts this year, local officials are seeking to gain back concessions made decades ago.

Union and city leaders are especially watching negotiations in San Antonio. Years ago, officers there locked in some of the most highly coveted perks and protections of any department in the country: rules that helped shield officers from discipline; fat pensions, Cadillac health insurance plans, even taxpayer-funded payments for divorce lawyers. Their success became a case study for unions nationwide.

During the last negotiations, city officials claimed the contract would bankrupt San Antonio. Now, city officials are focused on undoing some disciplinary protections. Adding pressure, a May ballot measure in the Texas city could eliminate the union’s ability to bargain — a devastating blow.

Mr. DeLord, center, at a negotiation session in February between the City of San Antonio and the police union. City of San Antonio

An unexpected voice urging police unions nationwide to compromise is that of Mr. DeLord, who is the chief negotiator for the San Antonio union. “The unions need to bend,” he said. “They need to be prepared to bargain over things that their community thinks are fair.” Unions that don’t understand are “tone deaf,” he added.

It’s not yet clear what this means for some of the most contentious union protections, such as the right to appeal disciplinary decisions to an outside authority, which police chiefs complain erodes their control. In an early bargaining session, Mr. DeLord said the existing rules governing appeals were essential to officers’ rights — thinking otherwise was “hoey.”

Mr. DeLord’s influence as a union warrior can be found in the strategies and tools unions have long deployed to acquire power — power that critics say allows officers to avoid accountability and dominate the shaping of police practices.

The 1997 book Mr. DeLord wrote with a fellow organizer, John Burpo, and a political consultant, Michael Shannon, “Police Association Power, Politics, and Confrontation: A Guide for the Successful Police Labor Leader,” is pugnacious. The book repeatedly urges union leaders to ignore the “losers,” “whiners” and “naysayers” in their way. “A police association leader must throw out all those traditional notions of right and wrong,” it exhorts. “So long as it’s legal, you do what you gotta do to get where you’re going!” It also quotes one San Antonio union official saying, “If all else fails, we’ll drop the bomb and live in the ashes.”

Police unions nationwide have long employed high-pressure tactics. When a San Antonio City Council member tried to cut police costs in the 1980s, the union sent him an Easter basket with a dead rat. A Boston union in the 1990s [handed out pamphlets](#) emblazoned with the Grim Reaper, describing the area as “Fear City, USA” and advising people to stay off the streets — a tactic similarly used by [New York City](#) and [Newark](#) unions.

A 1975 pamphlet circulated by the New York City police union. Similar leaflets were later created in Newark and Boston. The Jack Bigel Collection, Newman Library, Baruch College

The president of the Dallas police union sent a campaign mailer targeting a local councilman.

And in 2017, after a Dallas councilman fought the union over pay and pensions, the group's president sent election mailers [calling him](#) "a menacing threat to the security of North Dallas families."

In San Antonio, where Mr. DeLord's new approach is now being tested, the union president says he wants to build a better relationship with the city.

"Reform is here," said the president, Danny Diaz. "We're willing to work with everyone."

## **The .44-caliber mouthpiece**

In the 1970s, many Texas police departments were considered backwaters. Some required officers to pay for their handcuffs, bulletproof vests, even insurance for patrol cars. Departments tracked overtime unevenly, if at all.

Mr. DeLord, a police union member in Mesquite, Texas, wanted to change that. He quit being a patrolman and soon became a full-time police labor organizer. In 1976, he helped create a statewide group for police unions — a

bold move in a state historically hostile toward organized labor.

But the police rallied to the cause. By joining Mr. DeLord's organization, they got help from experienced negotiators to win better deals. In its first five years, the Combined Law Enforcement Associations of Texas signed up groups representing about 5,000 officers in 66 Texas communities.

*A slide from a presentation Mr. DeLord gave to union officials.*

Mr. DeLord, now 73, said he championed some changes that helped professionalize police, including annual weapons training and mandatory drug testing.

He proselytized about police and power, quoting icons more typically associated with social-justice activism: Saul Alinsky, the self-described "[professional radical](#)," and [Frederick Douglass](#), the escaped slave and abolitionist. "Power concedes nothing without a demand," Mr. DeLord frequently said, quoting Mr. Douglass.

The San Antonio union, which joined Mr. DeLord's association, became a test case in the mid-1980s for the tactics he taught. The union contract called for contributions to be deducted from officers' paychecks to fund a new political action committee. By 1987, that PAC was the biggest donor in City Council races, a union leader later boasted.

The money also built a war room with 100 telephones and computers loaded with voter data. If a politician defied the union, it flooded constituents with negative mailers and calls. The group "would not have to stand in line to have its proposals and concerns heard!" declared Harold Flammia, the union president nicknamed "the .44-caliber mouthpiece," in a chapter he wrote for Mr. DeLord's book.

The union's biggest win, achieved with help from a negotiator from Mr. DeLord's association, came in [the 1988 contract](#). The police won some of the best benefits and compensation nationwide. A new fund paid lawyers to represent officers facing criminal charges like drunken driving, or going through divorce — a benefit one officer used during at least five breakups. Union members and their spouses paid no health care premiums into retirement. Officers collected double pay for working the city's annual Fiesta event.

By 1992, jobs there were so coveted that aspiring cadets waited in line for hours to take the entry exam. "Everybody wanted the San Antonio contract," Mr. DeLord said.

Toby Futrell's copy of the police unionizing guide Mr. DeLord wrote with a fellow organizer and a political consultant. Kim Barker

Elsewhere, police and city officials studied the book. “After I read it, I understood we were in over our heads,” said Toby Futrell, a former Austin city manager. “Even though we knew what the playbook was, we had never played — it’s one thing to read the football rules and it’s another to play football.”

## **The boogeyman**

In 2013, [a San Antonio analysis](#) warned of a looming budget crisis: The police and fire contracts, long unchallenged, would bankrupt the city within a few decades.

“What I found was excessive by any metric. It was out of control financially,” said Sheryl Sculley, then the city manager.

Cities around the country, still recovering from the recession, faced similar challenges. Police unions also faced new realities: No longer were officers in big cities poorly compensated. No longer were they regarded with blind law-and-order reverence. The [killing](#) of unarmed Black men by white officers, including the 2014 deaths of Eric Garner on Staten Island and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., set off protests over police violence and race.

Ms. Sculley said she discovered other problems with the police contract when officers’ ex-wives told her about inequities it created. If the women needed to change custody schedules or alimony, their former husbands would tell them to go to court. The city paid the officers’ legal fees; the ex-wives had to pay their own.

Sheryl Sculley, former city manager of San Antonio, tangled with the police union during the last contract negotiations. Christopher Lee for The New York Times

When the police contract came up for debate in mid-2014, Ms. Sculley decided to fight.

Union officials fought back. They argued that the city's financial projections were inaccurate and pointed out that the department, with about 2,400 officers, had fewer officers per capita than elsewhere in Texas. The union's next steps came straight from the old playbook. It stalled, tried to outgun the city, and sought to intimidate and discredit Ms. Sculley.

"The fight must be personalized — there must always be a 'boogeyman,'" the playbook, updated in 2008, teaches.

The union voted to increase dues for a ["war chest."](#) It also hired a new chief negotiator: Ron DeLord.

After the city sued over a contract provision it claimed was unconstitutional, the union's longtime president, Michael Helle, arranged attack ads targeting Ms. Sculley. In an interview, Mr. Helle bragged about "how much I got underneath her skin." He said the ads, which often had unflattering close-ups of her face, preyed on her vanity. They accused her of being an overpaid, wasteful power-monger who thought cops made too much money.

The union also scoured through her expenses and publicized payments that the union felt were questionable, he said.

Mr. DeLord's book advises unions to comb through public records about any "enemy." The New York Times found that unions nationwide deployed the tactic to intimidate city officials or overwhelm them with paperwork. In Denver, for instance, the union filed a public-records request in 2016 asking the city's police monitor for voluminous records from its investigations.

"I'm sure they are sweating bullets now," the union president wrote in an email to the union's lawyer, obtained through a public-records request. "Let's make them pay on this one."

In San Antonio, after two years of fighting, a judge overseeing the lawsuit ordered the city and the union into mediation. The deal would limit the legal fund and make officers contribute to some health care premiums. Both sides claimed victory.

Yet Ms. Sculley, who later [wrote a book](#) about the city's struggle, said in an interview she was disappointed that years of negotiations hadn't achieved more.

While the updated contract has cut costs, it continues to give officers disciplinary protections that some city officials and residents feel impede good policing. In many instances, infractions more than a few years old can't be considered during disciplinary proceedings — in effect, erasing them from review. And arbitrators, not city officials, ultimately decide whether an officer is fired.

Such protections, common nationwide, have drawn new scrutiny. Arbitrators reinstated about half of officers who appealed their firings in recent years, The Times [found last year](#). In San Antonio, these included an officer who repeatedly called a [suspect](#) a racial epithet and a lieutenant who used [racist language](#) about Mexicans.

In 1976, Mr. DeLord helped create the Combined Law Enforcement Associations of Texas, a statewide group for police unions. Christopher Lee for The New York Times

A Thin Blue Line flag, a symbol of solidarity with the police, at the Austin offices of Mr. DeLord's organization. Christopher Lee for The New York Times



Oji Martin, co-founder of Fix S.A.P.D., a San Antonio group [working to reform the police](#), said the system tied the hands of both officials and citizens.

“We don’t have a choice,” she said. “We don’t have a voice. We just have to go with it.”

## One vote from losing everything

Several years ago, Mr. DeLord issued a warning of sorts. His latest book, published in 2017, included a section titled “A Message to Police Unions: The Road Does Not Go On Forever and the Party Eventually Ends.”

The conversation around policing had changed, he wrote. Police officers and firefighters were no longer “the heroes of 9/11.” Because of body cameras, residents could watch recordings of high-profile incidents; many demanded change.

In big cities, officers earned good salaries and enjoyed better benefits than many American workers. The average annual wage for police and sheriff patrol officers, excluding overtime, [topped \\$100,000](#) in a dozen metro areas in California, according to 2019 figures. [In San Antonio](#), about a quarter of officers earned at least that much, nearly twice the city’s median household income. In Western New York, the highest-paid municipal employee was a [Buffalo](#) detective who pulled in \$216,000.

“The unions have got to realize they’re just one vote from losing it all,” Mr. DeLord said. He’s expressed similar sentiments over the past nine months on [radio](#), [in magazines](#) and on [a panel](#), often alongside reformists.

In Portland, Ore., the city wants [increased transparency](#) in discipline cases. In Columbus, Ohio, [contract negotiations](#) will focus on setting up a new voter-mandated police oversight board.

In the San Antonio negotiations that started last month, the city [is going after](#) discipline protections. Among [other goals](#), the city wants to open an officer’s entire disciplinary record when deciding discipline and give the chief — not an outside arbitrator — the final say over discipline.

Mr. DeLord repeatedly said he and the union [understood](#) the city’s positions during the first three meetings. He also [offered](#) to open certain disciplinary records. But when it came to the power of arbitrators, Mr. DeLord [refused to budge](#).

Ms. Martin, the activist, said the sessions felt like the “same old, same old.”

But these negotiations face a deadline unlike any in the past. The upcoming ballot measure in May, [pushed by](#) Ms. Martin’s police-reform organization, [looms over](#) whatever the city and Mr. DeLord do. If city residents aren’t happy with how the negotiations are going, they have a choice: They can vote to get rid of the union’s ability to bargain altogether.

James Dobbins contributed reporting. Susan C. Beachy contributed research.