



California LABOR Federation

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For Immediate Release

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Jack Henning, California Labor Federation Executive Secretary-Emeritus, 1915-2009

Passing of a Lion of the Labor Movement

San Francisco, June 4 — Longtime California labor leader Jack Henning died today at his home in San Francisco. He served as executive secretary-treasurer of the California Labor Federation, AFL-CIO for 26 years before his retirement in 1996.

“Jack was a lion of a man and a great labor leader,” said California Labor Federation Executive Secretary-Treasurer Art Pulaski. “His vision and his magnificent oratory inspired several generations of union activists.”

He was an iconic figure of the American labor movement, an extraordinary man with a brilliant mind and a deep commitment to working people. He was always the first to stand for social justice and the strongest voice for the underprivileged.

Henning's leadership produced some of the great milestones in California labor history. Almost immediately after his election to the top office of the state AFL-CIO, he joined the struggles of the United Farm Workers, campaigning successfully for passage of the historic Agricultural Labor Relations Act in 1975. He led the campaign to restore Cal-OSHA in 1988 a year after it was abolished by then-Gov. George Deukmejian, and spearheaded a successful drive to reform the state's worker's compensation system.

“His commitment to global unionism and anti-racism were ahead of his time, and he never hid from a good fight,” Pulaski said. “He led the labor movement at times of great growth and opportunity, and through challenging times as well. There will be a silence where his voice once was heard, and he will be dearly missed.”

The man whose oratory and commanding bearing came to symbolize the California labor movement was born in 1915, the son of a charter member of the Plumbers union. His father's three-foot steamfitter's pipe wrench, now copper-

plated, adorned his office for decades. His mother's father was an early member of the famous Teamster Local 85.

He was a man of remarkable and convincing presence. His speeches were, in a word—spellbinding. Enthralled union conventioners would rise to their feet cheering, matching the crescendo of Jack Henning's voice.

He was the father of seven children, 12 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren. His wife Betty passed in 1994.

Henning was 7 when San Francisco building trades unions were crushed in the post-World War I anti-labor movement and his father was thrown out of work for nearly a year. He began his successful career in the labor movement in 1938 while working with the Association of Catholic Unionists in San Francisco. That same year he joined his first union, the United Federal Workers of the CIO not long after graduation from St. Mary's College. Later he was a member of the Boilermakers in San Francisco. He became administrative assistant to C.J. Haggerty, then head of the California Labor Federation, AFL of L, in 1949, and frequently represented the Federation before state commissions and regulatory bodies.

Gov. Edmund G. (Pat) Brown named Henning director of the state Department of Industrial Relations in 1959. Three years later, he was summoned to Washington by President John F. Kennedy where he served until 1967 as United States Undersecretary of Labor. President Lyndon Johnson appointed Henning as U.S. ambassador to New Zealand, where he served through 1969. He returned to the California Labor Federation and was elected executive secretary-treasurer in 1970 to succeed Tommy Pitts as principal officer of the state AFL-CIO.

While at the helm of the California Labor Federation for 26 years, Henning was faced with an 18-year reign of Republican governors. Despite the odds, he produced legislative gains that amassed nearly \$4.2 billion for the state's worker's compensation, unemployment insurance and unemployment disability insurance programs, benefiting millions of California workers—a remarkable achievement.

His influence was reflected in progressive legislation that brought broad improvements in working conditions, the minimum wage, women's rights, labor standards enforcement, low-income housing, consumer protection, safety and health standards, education, and child labor laws.

He led battles in the Legislature that produced advances in collective bargaining rights for all workers employed by public agencies encompassing employees of cities, counties and the state; for teachers and public school employees including those of the University of California and California State University systems.

At the same time, he defended workers against employer assaults on their rights and established gains, such as attempts to destroy the 8 hour day standard,

eliminate prevailing wage requirements, erode job safety protections, privatize work in government and education, reduce social insurance benefits, impose a school voucher system, abolish teachers' tenure and the endless anti-union pursuit to make California a "right-to-work" state.

His work in the labor movement was considered by many as an expression of his progressive ideals engaged in class warfare against the chilling influence of conservatives, reactionaries, right-wingers and constant corporate assault on workers, the poor and the disadvantaged.

He served 12 years as a Regent of the University of California where he fought for affirmative action and led the successful fight to have the university divest in apartheid South Africa. His public service included numerous boards and commissions, community and church positions. Henning was a recipient of the 1986 Statue of Liberty Ellis Island Medal of Honor. He was awarded honorary doctorates by St. Anselm's College, St. Bonaventure University, and St. Mary's College.

While he was noted for visionary speeches and writings, Henning also stressed the basics of trade unionism throughout his stewardship. "I believe strongly in social unionism. We begin with the fundamentals of wages, hours and conditions, employment. However, the very nature of labor organization brings the movement into the areas of social change, to concern with seniors, with race discrimination, with housing, with unemployment—issues that go beyond the bargaining table."

During his speech at the 1996 Federation convention, Henning delivered a thundering defense of political liberalism that was his farewell address after 26 years as executive secretary-treasurer of the California Labor Federation. The loudest, longest cheers followed Henning's closing words:

"And if by a suspension of the laws of nature I were young again, I would follow no other course, no other flag but the flag of labor."

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