

RESOLUTION 60

In Honor of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy

Submitted by the Executive Council
Referred to the Legislation and Policy Committee

WITH THE PASSING of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, working people and our unions have lost our most loyal and effective champion in the United States Senate, and our biggest booster in American public life.

Sen. Kennedy was not just a senator for Massachusetts. He was our senator—a senator for working people, a senator for poor people, for the old and for the vulnerable. He embodied our aspiration to fulfill America’s promise—to make our nation more compassionate and more hopeful, to make sure every individual is treated with dignity and respect and equal justice under the law.

Sen. Kennedy could have enjoyed a quiet life of ease, thanks to the privileges that came with being a Kennedy. He chose not to. He chose to stand up for people whom others ignore, to fight battles that others safely avoid. In his eulogy for his brother Robert, he quoted his brother, saying:

“For the fortunate among us, there is the temptation to follow the easy and familiar paths of personal ambition and financial success so grandly spread before those who enjoy the privilege of education. But that is not the road history has marked out for us.”

However, Ted Kennedy’s commitment to working people was much more than the fulfillment of a self-imposed responsibility. It was driven by faith and deep personal affection—and the affection was mutual. His relationship with workers and our unions was best described as one of love.

Anyone who ever spotted Kennedy at a Labor Day event or local union meeting could see it. He listened closely. He understood and enjoyed us. He was one of us.

No one in our movement knew him better or was closer to him than the trade unionists of Massachusetts. “The enormity of the loss of Ted Kennedy cannot be overstated, especially in terms of the impact his life has had on the pursuit of social and economic justice in this country,” Massachusetts AFL-CIO President Robert Haynes said.

“His heart was with us,” said Joe Faherty, a Boston Edison utility worker who also served at the state federation. “That’s the best way to explain him. He had a great sense of humor, and he had a very serious side to him that looked deep into people’s problems. He was one of the most compassionate people I ever met,” recalls Arthur Osborn, another previous president of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO. “He was a perfect representative of the working person in the Senate. He was the greatest senator I ever saw. I loved him.”

Ted Kennedy has been called the greatest senator of the 20th century, perhaps the greatest in U.S. history. In a magnificent career, he achieved considerably more than most presidents. He was the author of more than 2,500 bills, several hundred of which became law. From 1973 to 2009 alone, 552 pieces of legislation sponsored by Sen. Kennedy were enacted into law. Virtually every major piece of legislation to advance civil

rights, health care, education and the economic welfare of working people in the past 40 years bore his name and benefited from his tireless efforts.

Four months after the assassination of his brother John, Ted Kennedy chose to devote his first speech on the floor of the U.S. Senate to the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964.

"My brother was the first president of the United States to state publicly that segregation was morally wrong. His heart and soul are in this bill. If his life and death had a meaning, it was that we should not hate but love one another; we should use our powers not to create conditions of oppression that lead to violence, but conditions of freedom that lead to peace."

For the next four decades, Ted Kennedy was the standard-bearer for working families on the Senate Labor Committee. He led 16 successful campaigns to raise the federal minimum wage, most recently in 2007. By the twilight of his Senate tenure, the Kennedy name had become virtually synonymous with better pay for minimum wage workers.

Sen. Kennedy also led the fight to pass the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) Act of 1988 to help workers coping with the deindustrialization of America. He insisted on passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act, giving parents 12 weeks of job-protected leave to care for babies or a serious illness in the family. He was a champion of strengthening the unemployment insurance (UI) system and extending federal benefits for the long-term unemployed. More recently, he was a leader in passing the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act to restore a fair rule for filing pay discrimination cases.

A longstanding champion for worker safety, Sen. Kennedy implored: "To all those who work hard for a living wage, let us provide new hope that the price of their employment shall not be an unsafe workplace and a death at an early age." Recently,

he played a prominent role in improving mine safety by negotiating the MINER Act of 2006.

His always was a voice for early childhood education, beginning with the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which created Head Start. Later, in 1994, he would help create the Early Head Start program, which serves infants and toddlers in poverty. And since enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Childhood Education (ESEA) Act in 1965, he was a leader in its reauthorization. And in 2007 he was instrumental in passing the College Cost Reduction Act, which authorized a \$23 billion increase in student aid, the largest such increase since the GI Bill.

In the 1980s, Sen. Kennedy led the successful campaign to establish a federal holiday in honor of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. He was at the forefront of the campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution. He was one of the chief sponsors of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. And he was chief sponsor of the Civil Rights Act of 1991. He was the chief Senate sponsor of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which prohibits employers from discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation. And he was the key Senate sponsor of the Civil Rights Act of 2008, which would restore core civil rights protections undermined by recent Supreme Court decisions. He was a key player in passing the Voting Rights Act of 1964 and 1982; the statute that lowered the voting age from 21 to 18; the first bipartisan campaign finance bill to help clean up the electoral system; and the Motor Voter Act. And he led the fight to pass the Anti-Apartheid Act of 1985.

Sen. Kennedy was involved in every health care accomplishment of the last 40 years, including Medicare; Medicaid; and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). In 1985 he led the fight to pass COBRA, giving American workers the right to temporarily continue employer health coverage when they lose their jobs. In 1996 he sponsored the Health Insurance Portability

and Accountability Act, which ensures access to coverage for an estimated 25 million Americans who move from one job to another, are self-employed or have pre-existing medical conditions.

Amid the unfinished business Ted Kennedy left, two grand projects loom especially large—health care reform and the Employee Free Choice Act. He warned in 1980, “We must not surrender to the relentless medical inflation that can bankrupt almost anyone and that may soon break the budgets of governments at every level. Let us insist on real control over what doctors and hospitals can charge, and let us resolve that the state of a family’s health shall never depend on the size of a family’s wealth.” Like his brothers John and Robert, Sen. Kennedy also understood that unions are the key to achieving a more just

society for working people. He was more than just a co-sponsor of the Employee Free Choice Act; he co-authored the legislation, and he was the first to introduce it in the Senate.

This year, when President Obama signs legislation guaranteeing affordable, quality health care for all, and then goes on to sign legislation restoring the freedom of every working person to organize and bargain for better wages, benefits and working conditions, America will owe Ted Kennedy a debt of incalculable magnitude. In his memory, we will continue to pursue our shared dream of opportunity for all, fight for the causes he championed so well and rededicate ourselves to winning guaranteed affordable health care for all, workers’ freedom of choice and lifting the lives of all Americans.