

Remembering Bernie Firestone

By Mike Kerwin

Mike Kerwin is a board member and chair of the program committee for the Michigan Labor History Society. Bernie Firestone will be remembered during a special program starting at 6 p.m. on May 11, 2011 at the Operating Engineers Local 324 Detroit Training Center, 1550 Howard St., Detroit.

Bernard J. Firestone was “Bernie” to the labor movement in Detroit and Michigan in the 1970s and ‘80s. He represented the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU), but he was also the symbol of united labor of all unions – and for workers not yet organized.

It would be no exaggeration to say that Bernie represented the soul of organized labor.

His official title was Secretary-Treasurer of the Chicago and Central States ACTWU Joint Board. Next, perhaps, was his place as officer and board member of the Metro Detroit AFL-CIO, under the successive presidencies of Tom Turner and Ed Scribner.

In a tribute to Bernie after his death in September, 1989, Jack Scheinkman, national officer of the ACTWU said: “Bernie Firestone plucked the thistles of life and planted in their place the flowerbeds of an idealism that he nourished with love, with friendship, with devotion. . . , To him the members were not his servants, but he theirs. . . He envisioned a better world for all of us.”

The clothing and textile workers of the Central States were well served. As Bernie’s close friend David Hecker put it, Bernie was known for his ideas of how to deal with labor problems: ideas of what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and especially who will do it. But, as Dave said, “Ideas alone were not what organized members in ACTWU, and are not what produced good contracts. Leafleting, home visits, late night meetings are what organized. Solid research, all night bargaining sessions produced contracts.” This was Bernie.

Sounds like a job that would keep one human being busy from “break of morn’ ‘til end of day.” But not for Bernie. If a trade unionist or a local union, any local union, was in trouble, Bernie was there.

Bernie co-chaired the Labor Crisis Support Committee of the Metro Detroit AFL-CIO. Locally or nationally, if there was a contract impasse, an organizing drive, an unfair labor practice, a strike, or a lock-out, Bernie’s first question was: “What can we do

to help you?” And it was always: “You tell us. What do you need?” And Bernie would be off to the races.

An example of the scope of Bernie’s concern: At the Labor Crisis Support Committee meeting of August 29, 1989, the last one Bernie would chair, the following crisis situations were on the agenda: IAM-Eastern Airlines (national) * United Mine Workers-Pittston Coal Co. (Virginia) * AFSCME-Detroit Records Court * NABET-Channel 2 * ACTWU-Samson and Delila (clothing) * United Farm Workers-grape boycott * Utility Workers-Consumers Power * UAW-Detroit Hoist and Crane * UAW-Colt Industries (Connecticut) * UFCW-Warehouse Club * SEIU-Advance Nursing Home * CWA-Michigan Bell Telephone * and a half dozen others. United labor had a support operation going on in each struggle, and Bernie’s fingerprints were on every effort.

Yet with all of this, for Bernie, family was always first -- his wife, Charlene, and his daughters, and his home in northwest Detroit. Bernie made time to serve on the board of the neighborhood group, the University District Community Association.

His outlook was global. He always had projects going: Histadrut in Israel, persecuted unions in Central America, the anti-apartheid cause in South Africa. He gave leadership to “Freedom Tours,” the summer trips for Detroit-area high school students to follow the Civil Rights route from Detroit to Selma, Alabama.

Bernie was a great one for music, particularly labor songs. When he planned a meeting, if any stretch of the imagination allowed it, there was at least one great labor song – and local singer – on the agenda. In 1986 the national AFL-CIO put on the first regional labor sing-along in Chicago. Bernie went, he saw, he conquered: “If Chicago can have this, so can Detroit,” and, sure enough, in 1987 we had the Great Midwest Labor Song Exchange in Detroit -- at IBEW Local 58 and at UAW Region 1A. He later was a prime mover in the labor drama group, “Workers’ Lives, Workers’ Stories.”

There was no stronger labor advocate for the connection between the bargaining table and the ballot box. As part of the Metro Detroit AFL-CIO in the 1980s, he set up the Good Government Committee –aimed at two things: promoting labor’s political agenda and getting union members involved in the processes of government. He was also a board member of the First Congressional District Democratic Party, working closely with U.S. Representative John Conyers.

In Bernie’s view the chief vehicle for labor’s political and community activities was the central labor body, the Metro Detroit AFL-CIO. He worked closely there with President Tom Turner, and later, with President Ed Scribner. Or, maybe, they worked closely with him.

Bernie put a high priority on Detroit's Labor Day Parade. Sadly, the parade was discontinued in 1967 after the racial uprising in Detroit, and no parade was held for fourteen years. Along with the Michigan Labor History Society, Bernie was a major force behind the parade's revival in 1981. He served proudly as Parade Grand Marshal in the 1989 parade, marking the 75th anniversary of the Amalgamated. The ACTWU marching unit – all workers, no vehicles – that year taught us a new labor chant, which we have since all learned:

Everywhere we go-oh – (echo) – People want to know-oh – (echo)
Who we a-are – (echo) – So we tell them – (echo)
We are the union – (echo) – Mighty, mighty union – (echo)

Tragically, two days later, September 6, 1989, Bernie was shot and killed in the offices of the Amalgamated by a distraught member who was convinced, with no reason, that he was being denied his pension.

The labor movement was aghast.

Perhaps Tom Turner spoke for all of labor as he said: “When the poet wrote that ‘Love is a many splendored thing,’ he surely must have had Bernie Firestone in mind, for Bernie lived a many splendored life, full of love, compassion, dedication, and concern for humanity. . . I was blessed to have Bernie carry the ball on so many programs, to establish a presence in so many areas, and to touch so many people. . . At a time when some of our membership have forgotten the bonds that make us a union, Bernie preached brotherhood and sisterhood and brought us back to labor's basic theme: *An injury to one is an injury to all.*”

Some months later, when Bernie's killer was found guilty of first degree murder and possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony, Bernie's daughter, Nita Firestone, said the family hoped the conviction would rekindle debate about handgun control legislation, echoing her father's long-held position.

At the special memorial gathering on September 24, 1989, to honor Bernie's legacy, there were many eloquent testimonials. Perhaps the one that came closest to what Bernie meant to workers was a letter from a rank-and-file member of Detroit Air Transport Local Lodge 141, International Association of Machinists. The IAM had been in a long and bitter fight against the labor depredations of Eastern Airlines. Local Lodge 141 at Detroit Metro Airport was the Detroit focus of this struggle. Needless to say, Bernie had effectively led the effort to bring them the full support of Detroit labor. The letter said:

“When I first met Bernie Firestone . . . The second time I saw Bernie. . . The third time I saw Bernie . . . I know that Bernie Firestone will always be in our hearts and

minds, for the Eastern 37 are grateful to him for caring . . . My name is David Frank Elster. I am one of the Eastern family. Thank you for reading this letter.”