David Roe, giant of Minnesota labor, dies at 92

Roe led Minnesota AFL-CIO as president from 1966-1984

By Steve Share, Labor Review editor

MINNEAPOLIS — David K. Roe, a fierce advocate for workers and leader during decades of growth and change in the labor movement, died February 13 at age 92.

“No Minnesota labor leader loomed as large as David Roe did,” said Bill McCarthy, president of the Minnesota AFL-CIO. “His example as both a leader and a person is still the gold standard for our state’s labor movement. His death is a huge loss to both our movement and our entire state.”

Roe served as Minnesota AFL-CIO president for 18 years beginning in 1966. Prior to that, he was a leader of the state’s Building & Construction Trades unions. Following his retirement in 1984, he continued his work on behalf of labor, most notably as the driving force behind creation of a Workers Memorial Garden on the grounds of the state Capitol.

“He helped modernize the state, modernize the labor movement,” said former U.S. Vice President Walter Mondale, speaking at a 90th birthday celebration for Roe in November 2014. Upon hearing of Roe’s death, Mondale remarked, “We’ve lost a dear friend in David Roe.”

Mondale was elected to the U.S. Senate the same year that Roe won election as Minnesota AFL-CIO president, and “We’ve been almost like members of the same family ever since.”

The two worked together on many issues, including establishment of national workplace safety standards through the creation of OSHA — the Occupational Safety and Health Administration — in 1971, Mondale

Unions claim victory as Trump pick for Secretary of Labor withdraws

WASHINGTON — Fast food executive Andrew Puzder, the controversial nominee for U.S. Secretary of Labor, withdrew from consideration February 15, drawing applause from unions and other groups that had opposed him.

The withdrawal “shows the power of collective action by workers,” said national AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka on Twitter.

Numerous organizations, led by the Fight for 15 movement, held hundreds of demonstrations in recent weeks opposing the nomination.

The decision came as Senate Republicans reportedly told the White House that Puzder was losing support in their party and would not get the minimum number of 50 votes needed to be confirmed. Puzder had been scheduled to make his first appearance before the Senate February 16.

“Puzder was an outrageous pick for Labor Secretary and to head an agency responsible for promoting “the welfare of wage earners, job seekers and retirees,” the Communications Workers of America said in a statement. “His long record of public statements and action opposing a fair minimum wage, overtime pay and other basic policies that support working families made him an unacceptable choice.”

As CEO of CKE, the corporation that owns Hardee’s and Carl’s Jr. fast food restaurants, Puzder has faced numerous charges of wage theft, sexual harassment and anti-union activity.

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MRLF endorses Elliott in special election for mayor of Richfield

RICHFIELD — The Minneapolis Regional Labor Federation, AFL-CIO has endorsed Pat Elliott for mayor of Richfield in a special election coming Tuesday, March 7. (Debbie Goettel, the incumbent, was elected Hennepin County Commissioner in November).

Polls will be open March 7 at Richfield’s regular precinct polling locations from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

In addition, voters may vote early by absentee ballot by mail or in person at Richfield city hall.

Request an application for an absentee ballot by calling 612-861-0580 or visit MNvotes.org to request an application online.

Early voting will be available in-person at Richfield city hall from February 28 through March 6 from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (5:00 p.m. on March 6) and Saturday March 4 from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

An attorney by profession, Pat Elliott is a three-term member of the Richfield city council. He is a Richfield high school graduate and he lived in his Richfield home for 32 years, where he and his wife raised three children. Elliott is a former member of UNITE HERE Local 17.

For more information, visit patformayor.com.
said.

"Under David’s leadership, the Minnesota AFL-CIO became a strong voice both at the State Capitol and at the voting booth," McCarthy said. "David understood how vital it was for union members and all working people to be involved in the political process and his record proves it. As president, David led the labor movement in successful efforts securing collective bargaining rights for public sector workers and enacting Minnesota’s first minimum wage."

‘A great teacher’

Danny Gustafson, who succeeded Roe as Minnesota AFL-CIO president, recalled that Roe "had great support and a great following in everything he did — and he earned it. . . It’s going to be a long time before somebody like that comes around again."

Roe helped to mentor new labor leaders who followed him. "He was a great teacher," Gustafson said. "David Roe’s presence in the lives of so many labor leaders in this state has been a major force in shaping the labor movement in Minnesota," said Louise Sundin, former president of the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, longtime member of the Minnesota AFL-CIO’s general board, and longtime executive vice president of the Minneapolis Regional Labor Federation. "We were blessed that David led us and brought us together for the most important reason — to better the lives of working people in Minnesota. David was the reason that this state is known for its active, progressive, courageous, and ethical labor movement."

State Building Trades president Harry Melander remembered first meeting Roe in 1976 and said he was a “kind and supportive” person who counseled many emerging leaders in the labor movement. "Dave set the bar for what people within the labor community should be like, how people should work together," Melander said.

Roe first became a union member in 1946, joining the Brotherhood of Railroad Workers Local 1310. In 1949, he joined Lathers Local 190 as an apprentice and moved on to become a journeyman and then president and business manager of the local.

In 1953, the Minneapolis Labor Review ran a photo of a young Dave Roe participating in an annual memorial service at the statue of Farmer-Labor Party Governor Floyd B. Olson at Highway 55 and Penn Ave. So. Around that time, Labor Review editor Robley Cramer celebrated Roe as a powerful orator and up-and-coming leader of the state’s labor movement.

Roe was elected president of the Minnesota AFL-CIO in 1966 and served until his retirement in 1984. He remained active, however, serving 12 years on the University of Minnesota Board of Regents and tirelessly organizing for greater recognition for workers. "He was a fierce advocate for everything that is right about workers, labor and the value of life," said Paul Mandell, executive secretary of the Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board. "But he was also a teddy bear, an unbelievable family person."

Roe’s wife, Audrey, died in October. Mandell worked closely with both Dave and Audrey Roe on the labor leader’s final goal: the creation of the Workers Memorial Garden on the grounds of the Minnesota State Capitol. A new mural at the memorial was dedicated at special celebration May 30, 2016. The memorial is believed to be the only one of its kind in the country and is one of the most popular spots for visitors to the state Capitol, Mandell said.

"David always took pride in that," he said. "He was going to make sure Minnesota was the first to recognize the greatness of everyday workers."

At the celebration in 2016, Roe recalled his long and close association with Senator and Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Humphrey’s final speech to the Minnesota AFL-CIO, and their final phone call before Humphrey died of cancer in 1978. "He said ‘thank you’ and I said, ‘no, thank you,’” Roe remembered.

Twitter lit up the day Roe died with comments from elected officials and other praising Roe’s achievements. U.S. Senator Al Franken called him “an integral part of the Minnesota labor movement.”

Governor Mark Dayton said Roe “was a giant of a man and one of the most influential Minnesotans of his generation. His lifelong commitment to better wages and working conditions greatly improved the lives of thousands of hard-working Minnesotans.”

Lieutenant Governor Tina Smith added, “Few have had such a transformative impact in the lives of hard-working families. As we mourn the loss of a great leader today, I join workers across Minnesota in celebrating David’s many contributions to the betterment of our state.”

Ray Waldron, who, like Danny Gustafson, followed Roe’s path from leadership in the Building Trades to head of the state’s labor movement, said today’s workers can draw lessons from Roe’s persistence.

“One thing he always told me, time and again... every step, he would come in to me and say ‘it's never over,’” Waldron said. "He’s right... We're going to continue to [need to] make those fights."

Today, national “right-to-work” legislation has been introduced and Minnesota is surrounded by states that have enacted this legislation to cripple unions and undermine workers’ collective bargaining rights.

The October 21, 1954, edition of the Minneapolis Labor Review quoted a dire warning from Roe on that same threat: “We trust everyone will realize that it is the State Legislature where the effort will be made to destroy organized labor by passing the misnamed Right to Work bill. Election time is the time to stop that by electing candidates who are loyal to the principles of industrial democracy.”

Roe’s funeral took place February 20.

This story includes contributions from Union Advocate editor Michael Moore, Workday Minnesota editor Barb Kucera and material from a December 19, 2014, story in the Labor Review about Dave Roe’s 90th birthday celebration.

Dave Roe (right) and Vice President Hubert Humphrey (left) were close friends until Humphrey’s death in 1977.

Photos this page courtesy of Minnesota AFL-CIO