

American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations



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April 15, 2014

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of the AFL-CIO and the American labor movement, I am writing to express my enthusiastic support for the nomination of legendary organizer, Fred Ross Sr., for the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Ross's life embodied all that the medal seeks to honor: "especially the meritorious contribution to the security and national interests of the United States, world peace, cultural or other significant public and private endeavors."

Ross fought racism, discrimination, and all the injustices confronting working men and women for five decades. He helped build the labor movement and the bridges between labor, religious, civic, and neighborhood organizations. He was a pioneer in opening doors to women and people of color, encouraging their full participation in leadership roles.

Ross became interested in organizing when he observed Congress of Industrial Organizations organizers and "dust bowlers" fight against terrible mistreatment by the growers in the early 1940s. Their courage and hunger for justice became the impetus for Ross's lifelong dedication to union organizing.

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Shortly after the end of World War II, Ross worked with Japanese Americans to help find housing and employment in the midst of residual wartime hysteria, prejudice and discrimination. He enlisted San Francisco Labor Council leader, Jack Shelly, to challenge employers' illegal and immoral discriminatory practices.

In the late 1940s, Latino leaders appealed to Ross to help them organize Community Service Organizations (CSOs). The founding leaders, including members of the Steel Workers, the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, Meat Cutters and the Laborers, helped to build the most effective and militant Latino civil rights organization in California. The CSO leaders built a powerful coalition that included the NAACP, the Japanese American Citizens League, the Catholic Church, and the Jewish community. Together they fought for fair housing and working conditions.

By 1958, the CSO had become a state-wide organization with twenty-two chapters. When the labor movement was faced with an extremist "right to work" initiative, the CSO stepped up. Using "get out the vote" methods created by Ross and Cesar Chavez, the CSO registered 160,000 new voters, turned out an unprecedented vote, defeated the "right to work" initiative and elected Democratic Governor Pat Brown.

From 1966 to 1978, Ross worked with Chavez to establish and develop the United Farm Workers (UFW). Ross recruited and trained men and women from the fields to the cities, many of whom became legends in their own right in labor, politics, and civil rights. Ross recruited and trained more than 2,000 organizers from unions, universities, and religious congregations in every major city in the United States and Canada. He taught them the value of solidarity with the rest of the labor movement. He built labor power, which, in turn, translated into legal precedents codifying workers' rights, including the strongest labor law in the country, the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act of 1975.

Ross taught his organizers to find people one at a time, teach them to develop their own powerful voices, and turn their anger about injustice into hope by encouraging them to take collective action. According to Ross, the organizer works quietly behind the scenes, patiently asking questions, listening respectfully, teaching new leaders, pushing them to take action, and creating hope with great enthusiasm.

His goal was "to help people do away with fear; fear to speak up and demand their rights, to push people to get out in front so that they could prove to themselves that they could do it.'

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Our country continues to benefit from the legacy of Fred Ross Sr. Over the past thirty years, the organizing ranks of no fewer than 18 international unions and countless labor councils and state federations have been filled with Ross trainees.

In the name of the labor movement, I urge you to recognize this unsung hero by conferring the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Sincerely,


Richard L. Trumka
President