



*International
Brotherhood of
Electrical
Workers*

Local Union 441

309 N. Rampart Street
Suite M
Orange, CA 92868-1855

(714) 939-3131
(714) 939-3132 FAX
www.ibewoc.com

Douglas M. Chappell
Business Manager

Affiliated with:

*Los Angeles/Orange Counties
Building and Construction
Trades Council*

*State Building and Construction
Trade Council of California*

*California State Association of
Electrical Workers*

*Joint Executive Conference,
Southern California Electrical
Workers*

California Labor Federation

American Federation of Labor

*Congress of Industrial
Organizations*

*Orange County Federation
of Labor, AFL-CIO*

February 28, 2013

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D. C. 20500

**Re: For Your Consideration
Presidential Medal of Freedom – Fred Ross, Sr.**

Dear President Obama:

The purpose of my letter is to respectfully request your consideration of legendary organizer, Fred Ross, Sr., as a candidate for the Presidential Medal of Freedom, posthumously. For nearly half a century, Fred educated, agitated and inspired people of all races and backgrounds to overcome fear, despair and cynicism. He was a pioneer who fought for racial and economic justice.

Last year, when Dolores Huerta received the Presidential Medal of Freedom she recognized Fred Ross Sr. as the organizer who mentored both her and Cesar Chavez. Cesar once described his relationship with Fred Ross by saying "I learned quite a bit by studying Gandhi, but the first practical steps I learned from the best organizer I know, Fred Ross, Sr. ...he changed my life." The fact that Fred remains an unsung hero, despite decades of unselfish work and achievements, is largely his own fault. Renowned Journalist Carey McWilliams may have put it best when he wrote: "(Fred) is a man of exasperating modesty, the kind that never steps forward to claim his fair share of credit for any enterprise in which he is involved."

The causes, campaigns and achievements of Mr. Ross would take pages and pages to enumerate, so I will list those accomplishments that really stand out and inspire me as a union organizer and activist residing in California, specifically Orange County.

In the thirties and early forties, Fred Ross, Sr. organized "Dust Bowl" refugees in the migratory worker camps that John Steinbeck wrote about, helping them form camp councils and self-governance. In the mid-forties, he worked with Japanese Americans during World War II. He organized community support to combat wartime hysteria and prejudice. He helped newly released "internees" find employment and housing in Cleveland and San Francisco.

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After WWII, in the midst of KKK activity, Ross organized eight Civic Unity Leagues in California's Citrus Belt, bringing Mexican Americans and African Americans together to battle segregation in schools, skating rinks and movie theatres. In Orange County he organized parents to fight the practice of segregation in local schools and successfully integrated School Boards across the Citrus Belt through voter registration drives and civic engagement. One of the most dramatic outcomes of his work in Orange County occurred when parents sued the School Districts and prevailed. (*Mendez et al. vs. Westminster School District, et al. 1947*), creating the legal precedent for the landmark *Brown vs. the Board of Education* decision.

In the early 1950s, Ross met Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta and became their lifetime mentor. He recruited them to become fulltime organizers with the CSO. Together with CSO leaders across California and Arizona, they successfully overcame voter suppression efforts and passed landmark legislation on behalf of immigrants. Ross recruited and trained many other Hispanic leaders, including Cruz Reynoso who was later appointed the first Hispanic Supreme Court Justice in California, and who received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2000.

Perhaps, Fred Ross Sr. is most remembered for his work with America's farm workers and their struggle for justice and dignity during the 1960s and 1970s. He trained close to 2,000 grape and lettuce boycott and strike organizers in every major city in the United States and Toronto, Canada. The powerful pressure that resulted from massive collective action led to the passage of the historic California Agricultural Labor Relations Act signed into law by California Governor Jerry Brown in 1975. The late Los Angeles Times Associate Editor, Frank del Olmo, called Ross "one of a small cadre of underappreciated people who saw the potential in the Mexican American community long before anyone else did, literally generations before anyone else did, and helped nurture it and bring it along at a time when there was really no certainty that the potential they saw would ever come to fruition. I'm enough of an historian to believe that this kind of quiet heroism should not be forgotten."

In 1983 Fred Ross, Sr. joined his son, Fred Ross, Jr., and trained organizers to defeat the unfair Recall election of San Francisco Mayor Diane Feinstein who had been targeted because of her support for tough gun control regulation in the aftermath of the assassination of Mayor George Moscone and Harvey Milk. Fred Ross, Sr.'s house meeting method was instrumental in recruiting the hundreds of volunteers who turned out to defeat the Recall by an 80% margin.

On the occasion of his 80th birthday, Leader Nancy Pelosi said, "Fred Ross Senior left a legacy of good works that have given many the courage of their convictions, the powers of their ideals, and the strength to do heroic deeds on behalf of the common person."

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Fred Ross, Sr. passed away in 1992 at the age of 82, leaving an enduring legacy as an organizer who built collective action, citizenship engagement, and leadership development. The issues and injustices he fought for over the years are just as relevant and important to our democracy now as they were then.

President Obama, in recognition of this unsung hero we urge you to confer the Presidential Medal of Freedom posthumously upon Fred Ross, Sr. This recognition would be a beacon of hope for living and future organizers committed to social justice.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Douglas S. Mangione". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Douglas S. Mangione
Business Representative/Political Registrar

DSM:db
Opeiu#537/afl-cio