

ACOEM History and Archives Section Student Essay Contest 2023

The legacy of Jim (James) Moran

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James (Jim) Moran (1939-2020) is a longtime Philadelphia union organizer and labor activist. Born and raised in the Kensington neighborhood, he worked tirelessly for over 35 years in serving his fellow men by promoting the health and safety of the working class. In his own words, he said:

Now if you want higher wages let me tell you what to do. You got to talk to the workers in the shop with you. You got to build yourself a union, got to make it strong. But if you all stick together, boy it won't be long. You get shorter hours, better working conditions, and vacations with pay to take a kid to the seashore. It is not quite this simple, so I better explain just why you've got to ride on the union.⁵

Jim placed his priority on the well-being of his fellow workers. He is a warrior of justice for workers from various industries. Throughout the years, he has guided many movements and touched countless souls to speak for themselves and others in the ever-growing movement that is an extension of his legacy.

To better advocate for the working class, Jim and Rick Engler founded the Philadelphia Area Project on Occupational Safety and Health (PhilaPOSH), a union organization, in 1975. Its mission has been "the prevention of injury, disease, and death on the job through information, education, technical assistance, and political action."¹ The organization comprises members, workers, and legal and health professionals concerned with the health and safety of workers. Being the second organization of its kind in the history of the United States, it works with various governmental agencies, unions, councils, and other occupational health and safety

groups in Philadelphia to promote health and safety in workers and to prevent injuries and deaths on the job. It serves its members by providing different workshops and training on topics including exposure control, hazard recognition, and first aid. It also expands its service to collaborate with federal agencies, international unions, and national coalitions on occupational safety and health groups. Jim Moran was described as a leader with a constant smile, always with an attitude ready to work and move forward with different and perhaps difficult personalities. A coworker of Jim's commented on her time with him after his passing, "You wore your leadership lightly, tough to your adversaries. At the same time, kind, stubborn, funny, irreverent, and always, always on the side of the little guy."⁵ He guided the group not only with his leadership but also by enabling his followers to speak up for themselves in the workplace.

Jim has led many activities and events to raise public awareness about worker's rights and occupational safety and health. In 1995, Jim, Pat Eiding, and many union members walked down the city hall in support of Councilmen David Cohen's legislation of asbestos bill. Under the leadership and influence that Jim and many others had, this bill was successfully passed. Subsequently, it prevented the death of many workers from mesothelioma, cancer found in construction workers that is almost exclusively caused by chronic asbestos exposure.² This is just one example of the many activities that Jim has led throughout his lifetime that made a distinct impact on the health and life quality of his working fellow men and women.

Jim knew that the best way to advocate for the working class is to raise awareness of their situations and struggles through the media. In 2017, while serving on the board of the Philadelphia Community Access Media (PhillyCAM), he launched WPPM 106.5 FM, a radio station focused on sharing news and information regarding the labor movement. Each week he

and his co-host Charles Clarke would produce the weekly program Labor Justice Radio.

According to the Production and Programming Coordinator of WPPM, Allison Durham, “Part of Jim’s magic was his undeniable sense of humor, humility, and interest in digging deep. Even in casual conversation, it was easy to tell that Jim really cared to know and relate to others.”^{2,3} Not only did he advocate for the people, but he also encouraged the people to speak up and advocate for themselves by inviting them to present to the public on the radio. According to Allison:

I can’t think of a more dynamic duo out there sharing such compelling conversation and analysis of local labor and politics. Each week, Charles and Jim used WPPM as a platform to provide crucial information, interviews, and stories on labor issues, frequently inviting workers and organizers to the show.^{2,7}

Through his energy and passion, he touched the heart of the listeners and people he interacted with.

Coming from a unionist background, Jim continuously worked on international labor solidarity. In an interview clip, Jim voiced concern that multinational corporations receive much respect from society, but the same level of respect and attention is often not given to multinational workers’ unions. He knew the force that was trying to dissuade people from supporting labor solidarity and urged workers and unions around the globe to unite in the effort to protect their workers from oppression and physical and mental harm, and demand a safe and healthy work environment.⁴ In 2005, he joined 80 other countries around the world to initiate the celebration of May Day as a day to honor workers globally. Originally May Day started as an

event to honor the history of May Day and the many workers who died in the struggle for the eight-hour day in 1880. After over 10 years of hard work to advertise the event with his team, nowadays, May Day is an annual celebration in Philadelphia, organized by May Day USA Education Committee and co-sponsored by PhilaPOSH and the Pennsylvania Labor History Society. The event includes a march for various labor issues followed by a festival involving food, music, and entertainment.^{6,7} The event serves as a door opener to expand people's consciousness about struggles that workers face, inequality in the fight of the working class versus the capitalist, and the political battle that can change this dynamic.

Jim is described as the heart and soul of the labor movement in Philadelphia. It is his mission to organize workers to win the material goods that they need and the respect that they deserve for themselves and their families. Being from Kensington, a tough neighborhood in Philadelphia, he grew up learning to be loyal to his friends, his union brothers and sister, his community, and his nation. Not only did he influence his union members, but he also uplifted his family and friends around him. According to his nephew:

Jim is not like any other kid who grew up in Kensington. Usually, when you grow up in Kensington, you follow a very particular path, and only a few deviate from it. I was lucky to have an uncle who also is from Kensington but is not like anyone else from there. He brought knowledge into my house, and that's a whole different ball game. And it changed my life forever.⁵

Jim's journey has led many others to continue carrying on his legacy and advocate for themselves and others the rights that they deserve.

As I read and learned about Jim's life, I couldn't help but admire what a giant he has been to his family, his friends and colleagues, and his fellow men. I started working in a factory in Taiwan at the age of fifteen, a place and time when the safety and health of the workers were not highly valued. As a result, I have witnessed many cases of lung disease, musculoskeletal diseases, dermatological disorders, and even cancer and death among my coworkers, and even my own family. Such experiences led me to admire Jim and the hard work he put in throughout his life to advocate for a group of people whose voice is often unheard or ignored by the general public and legislative groups. May his spirit carry on in leading to greater things in the improvement of worker's health and safety in Philadelphia and around the world.

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