

James “Jim” Moran- Hero of the Philadelphia Labor Movement

By: Magdi Elghannam

James “Jim” Moran is a name that resonates with unions, labor activists, and workers all over Philadelphia. Hailing from Kensington (dubbed the “skid row of Philadelphia”), Mr. Moran was no stranger to the struggles that faced the working class. Mr. Moran began his journey of labor activism when he dropped out of Northeast High School at the age of 16 to start working at the North American Lace Factory.<sup>1,7</sup> It was here Mr. Moran joined his first union, the Textile Workers Union.<sup>1</sup> After experiencing the power and advocacy of the Textile Workers Union, Mr. Moran continued to work exclusively in union factories, and he had been a member of seven unions until he was terminated from Gould ITE for leading a wildcat strike.<sup>2</sup> While the termination was an attempt to suppress workers' rights, it inadvertently led to the foundation of one of the biggest workers' advocacy groups in Philadelphia.

“One night the phone rang in my office - it was Jim Moran, "recalls labors rights activist Rick Engler.<sup>3</sup> “He was calling to see if it was okay to bring 20 of his coworkers from Gould ITE to an educational lecture I ran in Hahnemann Hospital about basic workplace safety and health issues for workers.”<sup>3</sup> At the time, Mr. Engler was having difficulty recruiting workers to rally for labor rights, and to him, that phone call felt like a spark of hope. Mr. Engler expressed his admiration for Mr. Moran’s ability to connect with and unite people from all walks of life, stating, “Jim was a dynamic leader and motivated people to mobilize by providing bedrock leadership.”<sup>3</sup>

From then on, a powerful partnership bloomed, and in 1975, Mr. Moran and Mr. Engler cofounded the Philadelphia Area Project on Occupational Safety and Health (PhilaPOSH).<sup>1</sup> PhilaPOSH organizes and mobilizes unions, health, and legal professionals with the primary

focus of addressing health and safety issues faced by workers. One of their most influential triumphs was their campaign to pass one of the strongest Right-to-Know laws in the country, despite opposition from large corporations like Rohm and Haas.<sup>4</sup> Mr. Moran and PhilaPOSH activists gave city officials a glimpse into the life of workers by opening an unknown canister of gas in city hall and asked them a simple question “Don’t we have the right to know?”<sup>4</sup> The subsequent Right-to-Know law guaranteed access to information on any of the 450 chemicals designated as toxic by OSHA.<sup>4</sup> It gave workers and community residents the right to know the generic names of the chemicals being used, stored, or manufactured in the workplace or neighborhood. After passing the Right-to-Know law in Philadelphia, PhilaPOSH continued to advocate until they got the law passed in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.<sup>7</sup> Moran and PhilaPOSH ultimately took the fight to Washington D.C., leading to the establishment of the Right-to-Know as an OSHA standard that covered 100 million workers and their families.<sup>7</sup>

Jim Moran was known for his extravagant advocacy style, often employing powerful and controversial tactics to elicit change. When Mr. Moran found out that congressman Cass Ballenger had introduced a bill to weaken the Federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), he did not write letters or get signatures for a petition. Instead, he decided a wanted poster was more fitting. The congressman's “mugshot” along with his crime of “Conspiracy to maim, injure and kill American workers” were printed and plastered all over the country. This and other worker advocacy efforts led to the death of the bill.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Moran was fearless and was ready to take the fight for labor rights anywhere, including City Hall. Close friend and colleague Pat Eiding recounts a time when Mr. Moran organized a walk-through of Philadelphia City Hall with a casket to support one of the strongest asbestos bills in the country: “We could not have gotten this bill through without Jim pressing the issue and leading the way.”<sup>5</sup>

Mr. Moran even organized a protest of 120 people right out front of Pennsylvania Senator Richard Schweiker's house after he sponsored a bill to cripple OSHA.<sup>6</sup>

While he might have been known as a mischievous disrupter to corporations and lawmakers, his friends, family, and coworkers knew him for his kindness. “He was upbeat and positive about people's potential to make a difference” PhilaPOSH cofounder Rick Engler commented in an interview.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Engler continued to describe Mr. Moran’s enormous patience and big heart as he recounted watching him spend hours working with individuals on their worker's compensation cases. Individuals who were so touched by Mr. Moran’s kindness, went on to become leaders at PhilaPOSH continuing the fight for workers who were once in their position.

Apart from his work at PhilaPOSH, Jim Moran was interested in revitalizing the Labor Movement by organizing community gatherings and parades such as the Labor Day parade, Worker's Memorial Day, and the May Day celebration. Mr. Moran believed that the most important part of reviving the labor movement was to “get people on their feet, learning to march, learning they are part of something larger.”<sup>7</sup> So, when Mr. Moran found out in the late 80s that there had not been a Labor Day parade in Philadelphia in over 106 years, he went to work and founded the Labor Day committee.<sup>7</sup> He continued to be the chair of the committee for the following 16 years.<sup>7</sup> During the first parade in 1988, only a handful of workers showed up, but now the parade is coming up on its 36<sup>th</sup> year and regularly has thousands in attendance.<sup>1</sup>

The annual Worker’s Memorial Day observance takes place on April 28th to remember workers who have lost their lives or have been injured while on the job. In a beautiful and somber procession, Mr. Moran would lead a march of hundreds of mourners wearing placards with the names of the fallen around their necks down Columbus Boulevard.<sup>8</sup> The procession

would then travel down to the Delaware River, where the names of the victims would be spoken in turn next to an empty casket.<sup>8</sup> After each name was read, the mourner would place a flower into the river to “represent life’s continuous flow and reaffirm the struggle to prevent injury, disease, and death on the job.”<sup>8</sup> Mr. Moran and fellow organizers thought that by naming the workers that passed, we honor them and their memory. They hoped this would motivate the public to do everything in their power to stop another tragedy from happening<sup>8</sup>.

Jim Moran was also the chairman of the May Day USA Education Committee. This committee was founded in 2008 to promote education and awareness about the history and ongoing struggles of workers and labor movements, especially May Day, a day Mr. Moran describes as being “as American as apple pie”.<sup>7</sup> Moran stumbled upon May Day, a holiday to commemorate the victory of the American Labor movement getting the 8-hour workday, when he was reading a history book while in labor school.<sup>7</sup> At the time the only information broadcasted about May Day was that of the Moscow Red Square May Day parade, which gave the holiday a “red” connotation<sup>7</sup>. Disgusted with the blatant suppression and misinformation about this imperative holiday, Moran vowed to revive May Day and educated people about the real history and heroes of this holiday.<sup>7</sup> Before his passing, Mr. Moran annually organized a full program of speakers who spoke about the labor movement’s efforts to organize workers, the fight for a safe workplace, immigration reform, and much more.<sup>9</sup> The Philadelphia May Day celebration is regularly held at Elmwood Park Labor Monument and is coming up on its 15<sup>th</sup> year with no sign of stopping anytime soon.

Whether it was union workers, immigrant workers, discrimination issues, injured workers, welfare recipients, disability rights, the unemployed, or the homeless, Jim Moran worked tirelessly to uplift and give those oppressed in Philadelphia a voice. Mr. Moran will

always be remembered for his vision, valor, and steadfastness in his lifelong fight on behalf of the Working Class and the disenfranchised.

## Works Cited

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