



Remembering Kent Wong, champion of worker rights and education

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Kent Wong, long time Director of the UCLA Labor Center, [passed away October 8](#) at the age of 69. He will be remembered as an inspiring speaker, a fearless advocate for working people, and visionary labor educator who never wavered in his determination to serve the labor movement.



Wong in front of the UCLA James Lawson, Jr. Worker Justice Center in MacArthur Park. (UCLA)

Kent Douglas Wong served as the Director of the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education (the Labor Center) from 1991-2023, building the program from just three staff members to over 40 by the time he stepped down. Wong assembled a team of creative researchers and educators who compiled a record of influential policy research in support of California's robust labor movement. Since the early 2000s, the Labor Center has operated out of the former ILGWU union hall in an immigrant neighborhood and within walking distance of many local union headquarters. The Downtown Labor Center became a vibrant hub of activity, hosting countless gatherings of community organizations, unions, and delegations of trade unionists from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. In 2021, the building was rededicated as the James M. Lawson, Jr. Worker Justice Center.

Before joining UCLA, Wong worked as staff attorney for SEIU Local 660. He was recruited to the job by David Sickler, Regional Director of the AFL-CIO and chair of the Labor Center's advisory board, and retained close ties to the union movement throughout his career. He was friends with young progressive union leaders like María Elena Durazo and Miguel Contreras, and supported efforts to link the cause of unions, immigrants, and people of color. In the 1990s, the Labor Center held a series of campus-labor teach-ins featuring national union leadership like John Sweeney and Rich Trumka, and worked with the AFL-CIO organizing institute to train college students in "union summer" programs. Reflecting his commitment to racial justice within the union movement, Wong was a founding leader of the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA).



Wong picketing in solidarity with Los Angeles janitors in the Justice for Janitors campaign of 1995. (UCLA Labor Center)

On the UCLA campus, Kent was a much-loved teacher. He co-taught a class on Nonviolence and Social Movements alongside his mentor the civil rights leader Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr. His introductory labor studies lecture course routinely enrolled 300 students, meaning he was personally responsible for introducing thousands of students to the labor movement. Kent was a passionate advocate for undocumented students at a time when few in the university were sympathetic. Most recently, he championed the [Opportunity for All](#) campaign to open university employment to all students regardless of immigration status.

In addition to his teaching and public engagement work, Kent had an extensive list of publications including collaborations with students, [Underground Undergrads](#) (2008), [Undocumented and Unafraid](#) (2012), and [Dreams Deported](#) (2016). He recently co-authored [Revolutionary Nonviolence](#) (2021) with James Lawson and Michael Honey, and [Asian American Rising: APALA's Struggle to Transform the U.S. Labor Movement](#) (2021).

Earlier this summer, after federal troops occupied Los Angeles by federal troops in the first wave of Trump's campaign against sanctuary cities, Kent spearheaded a massive training program to prepare unionists and allies for non-violent direct action. The largest of these trainings brought together [nearly 1,500 participants](#). It was the kind of audacious move that made Kent a revered figure in the L.A. labor movement. He was preparing to take these trainings to other cities when his life was cut short.

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Tobias Higbie is Professor of History and Labor Studies at the University of California Los Angeles, and the Director of the Institute for Research on Labor & Employment. His research focuses on the history of organized labor, social movement education, and immigration in the United States. Higbie is the author of *Labor's Mind: A History of Working-class Intellectual Life* (2019) and *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest* (2003), as well as articles on immigrant workers, print culture, and robots. He holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of Illinois and is a member of the American Federation of Teachers.