



Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations

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The Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations Salutes Black History Month 2009 in L.A. County with a Tribute to the late Congressman Augustus Freeman Hawkins

On February 2, 2009, the Commission approved a motion introduced by Commissioner Bill Lambert and seconded by Commissioners Dr. Sandra Thomas and Susanne Cumming to recognize and pay tribute to a former longtime member of Congress, Augustus F. Hawkins, who passed away in November 2007 at age 100. U.S. Rep. Hawkins was a champion for civil rights and a tireless advocate for fair housing and fair employment practices.

Did you know that Augustus Freeman Hawkins:

- First African American from California to be elected to Congress
- Also known as 'Gus,' was a champion of workers, fair housing and civil rights
- Died at the age of 100 on November 10, 2007 in Bethesda, Md.
- Began his career serving as a state assemblyman from 1935 before winning election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1962 as the civil rights movement was taking center stage.
 - Member of the State assembly, 1935-1962
 - Elected as a Democrat to the Eighty-eighth and to the thirteen succeeding Congresses (January 3, 1963-January 3, 1991).
- Chairman, Committee on House Administration (Ninety-seventh and Ninety-eighth Congresses)
- Committee on Education and Labor (Ninety-eighth through One Hundred First Congresses)
- Joint Committee on Printing (Ninety-sixth and Ninety-eighth Congresses)
- Joint Committee on the Library (Ninety-seventh Congress)
- Represented South LA first in the state Legislature and then in Congress for more than 50 years.
- Graduated from Jefferson High School in 1926, from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1931, and from the University of Southern California in 1932.
- Retired in 1990. By that time had served as a legislator for much of the 20th century.

Legislative legacy

- Played a key role in shaping federal statutes, most importantly as sponsor of the equal employment section of the landmark [1964 Civil Rights Act](#) that created the [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#).
- Hawkins repeatedly fought with presidents for minimum-wage increases and, with Sen. Hubert Humphrey (D-Minn.), wrote the [Humphrey-Hawkins Act of 1978](#) that was designed to reduce unemployment and inflation.
- Also helped form the [Congressional Black Caucus in 1971](#) and was the dean of the caucus when he retired.

Measures closely identified with Hawkins

- [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act](#), which was designed to create jobs.
- **Youth Employment and Demonstration Projects Act of 1977**, which created jobs for young people involving conservation and community improvement activities
- [Pregnancy Disability Act of 1978](#), which barred employers from discriminating on the basis of pregnancy and required them to cover pregnant workers in disability and health insurance plans.

Other accomplishments/facts

- Director of the **Hawkins Family Memorial Foundation of Educational Research and Development**, which he founded in 1969 to give college scholarships to young women in his district.
- Soft-spoken, but “fiery in defense of his constituents”
- During the 1965 Watts riots in his district, he declared that police had been “abusive and arrogant and have attempted to control things by force, not by modern methods of control.” After the riots, raised funds to fight poverty for his constituents.
- Strongly defended forced busing (practice of attempting to integrate schools by assigning students to schools based primarily on race, rather than geographic proximity) as a means to achieve integration, saying it was essential to reach the destination of equal access to educational facilities.

Biography

- Was born in Shreveport, La., on Aug. 31, 1907, the youngest of five children of Nyanza and Hattie Helena Hawkins.
- So fair-skinned that he was often mistaken for white, a slight that helped politicize him and sometimes caused problems.
- When he rode streetcars as a child in Shreveport, he often sat in the back but found that the conductors would exclude him by moving the “blacks only” sign behind him so he would be in the white section.
- “I got so angry with the whole thing and embarrassed that I would just walk,” he recalled.
- The family arrived in Los Angeles soon after World War I when Hawkins was 11.
- Attended Jefferson High School and earned a degree from UCLA in 1931. With jobs scarce during the Depression, he first worked in real estate.
- In the early 1930s, he became involved in a “[Don’t Shop Where You Can’t Work](#)” campaign that targeted merchants on Central Avenue in Los Angeles who refused to hire blacks.
- In Hawkins’ first foray into politics, “he discovered he had a commitment, talent and a liking for it. All three played a role in his political start,” William C. Beverly, a retired L.A. County Superior Court judge, told The Times.
- In 1934, Hawkins launched his political career when he was elected to the Assembly. He defeated the legislative body’s first black member, Frederick M. Roberts, a Republican. Hawkins gained an edge by promising to cut the streetcar fare in Los Angeles in half, to a nickel.
- During his early days in the Assembly, the **California version of the South’s anti-black Jim Crow laws were in effect**, and it was not unusual for Hawkins to see signs such as “**We Do Not Solicit the Negro Trade**” as he drove to Sacramento.
- Hawkins earned respect in the Assembly and began to make his mark. In 1959, he barely missed being named Assembly speaker.
- He introduced a **fair housing act, a fair employment practices act, low-cost housing and disability insurance legislation, and workers’ compensation provisions for domestic workers.**

- After the 1960 census, district lines were redrawn that virtually guaranteed Hawkins' election to Congress. He easily won a House seat in 1962 and moved to Washington, where he continued fighting for workers' rights and fair housing. In ensuing elections, he often garnered at least 85% of the vote.

What others have said on Hawkins

- [Child Welfare League of America](#): "a real champion of poor kids in this country"
- **Leadership Conference on Civil Rights**: "not just someone who votes correctly but is someone who is always on the front lines on behalf of civil rights legislation" by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights.
- Rep. [Diane Watson](#) (D-Los Angeles): Hawkins had mentored a generation of black politicians. "He was 'the only' for a long time," referring to his role as one of the first African American members of the Assembly and Congress. "It was Gus Hawkins who gave us the credibility. It was Gus Hawkins who gave us the ideas... . He has left a sterling legacy."
- Rep. [Maxine Waters](#) (D-Los Angeles), who holds Hawkins' former seat called him "the author of some of the most significant legislation ever passed in the House ... particularly in the areas of education and labor... . He cared about poor and working people."
- Former Los Angeles County Supervisor [Yvonne B. Burke](#): "He passed on a new tradition – that African Americans can be elected, get high position in committees and set the tone and become leaders. He was a leader," said Burke, who served in the House with Hawkins in the 1970s.
- [Mervyn Dymally](#), assemblyman from Compton: "I owe my presence in politics to Gus Hawkins," said Dymally, who became the state's first black lieutenant governor in 1974 and served as a congressman from 1981 to 1993. Before returning to the Assembly in 2002, Dymally had been a state assemblyman and senator.

Principal sources and for more information, go to:

(LA Times) Ex-lawmaker Augustus Hawkins dies

<http://articles.latimes.com/2007/nov/13/local/me-hawkins13>

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress

<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=h000367>