



Los Angeles Times

LEGACY: During his more than 50 years in the Assembly and Congress, Hawkins shaped many key civil rights laws.

## Augustus F. Hawkins: 1907-2007

# A pioneer for black lawmakers in L.A.

By CLAUDIA LUTHER  
and VALERIE J. NELSON  
Special to The Times

Augustus F. Hawkins, the first African American from California to be elected to Congress and a champion of workers, fair housing and civil rights, has died. He was 100.

Hawkins, a Democrat who represented South Los Angeles first in the state Legislature and then in Congress for

more than half a century, died Saturday at Suburban Hospital in Bethesda, Md., of symptoms related to old age, his niece, Susan Jefferson, said Monday.

He began his public service career in an era that was far less congenial to minority politicians, serving as a state assemblyman from 1935 before winning election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1962 as the civil rights [See Hawkins, Page A16]



# Longtime South L.A. legislator

[Hawkins, from Page A1] movement was taking center stage.

By the time he retired in 1990, Hawkins had served as a legislator for much of the 20th century.

His legislative legacy includes 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 fought with president after president 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.

He also helped form the Congressional Black Caucus in 1971 and was the dean of the caucus when he retired.

Rep. Diane Watson (D-Los Angeles) said Hawkins had mentored a generation of black politicians.

"He was 'the only' for a long time," she said, 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."

In a statement, 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."

Waters considered him a

mentor as did Los Angeles County Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke, who met Hawkins in the 1950s when he spoke at her UCLA political science class.

"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, now an assemblyman from Compton, was an aspiring young Democrat when he visited Hawkins years ago at the urging of the United Auto Workers. They struck up a friendship and Hawkins hired Dymally as a coordinator of community groups that were working to elect President Kennedy in 1960.

"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 1983. Before running to the Assembly in 2002, Dymally had been a state assemblyman and senator.

While soft-spoken, Hawkins was fiery in defense of his constituents. At the time of 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 more modern methods of control."

After the riots, Hawkins procured substantial funds to fight poverty for his constituents.

When Hawkins retired at 83, he was widely praised for his unflagging legislative efforts to help bring those who had been

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. Hawkins attended Jefferson High School and earned a degree from UCLA in 1931. With jobs scarce during the Depression, he 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 Sell the Negro Trade" as he drove to Sacramento.

Through quiet determination, however, Hawkins earned respect in the Assembly and began to make his mark. In 1959, he barely missed being named Assembly speaker. Meanwhile, 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.

He also strongly defended forced busing to achieve integration, saying it was essential to reach the destination of equal access to educational facilities.

"Take away busing as a tool for getting there, and you seriously jeopardize the whole trip," Hawkins said.

When he left Congress, he was praised as "a real champion of poor kids in this country" by the Child Welfare League of America, and "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.

In retirement, Hawkins lived in the Washington area because his wife preferred it there. He was 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.

Hawkins' first wife, Peggy Adeline Smith, a concert singer, died in 1966. His second wife, Elsie, whom he married in 1977, died two months ago.

He is survived by two stepdaughters, Barbara A. Hammond and Brenda L. Stevenson; a stepson, Michael A. Taylor; two grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.

Services to be held in the Washington, D.C., area, are pending.

valerie.nelson@latimes.com  
Claudia Luther is a freelance writer and Valerie J. Nelson is a Times staff writer. Times staff writer John L. Mitchell contributed to this report.

Rep. DIANE WATSON, a Los Angeles Democrat

gave us the ideas... He has left a sterling legacy'

gave us the credibility. It was Gus Hawkins who

gave us the ideas... He has left a sterling legacy'

gave us the credibility. It was Gus Hawkins who

gave us the ideas... He has left a sterling legacy'