

Requiem for a Union Boss in His America

As we collectively wring our hands over wealth inequality in the U.S., perhaps we should look no further than our disembowelment of unions.

It was nearly 9 p.m. the other night and more than a couple thousand people had already paid their respects at a wake held in a union hall for a man who led his life helping others climb the ladder. Now the line had thinned to fewer than 200 who stood in the chill outside Florian Hall in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston waiting to offer one final prayer for Mike Mullane, firefighter and union leader who died early last week at 68, leaving a legion of people grateful for his unyielding commitment to a cause that seems distant in today's culture of self-absorption and self-promotion.

"His whole life, he wanted people to get paid fairly," his brother Bo Mullane, a retired Boston police detective, was saying. "He didn't care what color or what religion you were, if you were on the job he was gonna fight for you. And if you didn't have a job, he'd fight for you too."

Mike Mullane was a firefighter, a union guy all his life, a vice president of the International Association of Firefighters. He was part of a job that when the call comes, the bell rings and the doors of the firehouse open nobody asks if those who need help are Muslim, Catholic or atheists.

The ladder truck and Engine 21 roll down the boulevard, the firefighters on board not knowing or caring who they'll find hanging from a window, caught in a hallway or hiding from flames and smoke beneath a bed or in a closet. Climb the ladder. Save a stranger. Do your job, the only mantra.

For more than a decade now unions in America have been under a more sustained assault than our government sometimes seems to have waged against ISIS. Unions have been weakened, enrollments diminished, negotiating strength reduced.

Certainly the union movement has suffered from some self-inflicted wounds but in the debate about income inequality in America few voices have been stronger and louder in pushing to close the gap and move working people's wages forward than unions. Negotiating alone is like trying to walk on water. You drown.

"His wake and the funeral Mass were amazing," Bo Mullane was saying. "You had big people and little people. The Secretary of State, John Kerry, was at my brother's funeral. Imagine that. Like he doesn't have other stuff to do? Wow.

"He was there because he knew Mike was his guy. Knew Mike was in his corner. When Kerry was running for president, Mike told him, 'John, you're surrounded by guys in suits who couldn't find Fields Corner for you. I'll get my guys out for you.' And he did. And Kerry won New Hampshire.

"Right up until he died he was looking at the candidates for president this year and he couldn't believe it. He was saying to me when he'd hear what this Cruz or Trump was saying and Mike would say, 'Jesus, Bo, we'll be walking around in loincloths if any of these people ever get the big job.' My brother knew how to negotiate. He knew what was fair and he knew what was unfair. Wanna know where he did his best deals? He'd tell you he settled more contracts in the s***house than anyplace else. He'd tell me, 'Bo, they all gotta piss. Just wait for 'em there and talk to them.'"

Mike Mullane could help settle anything successfully: a labor deal, a college application, a mortgage default, a rent payment, a marriage, a street corner argument or a family feud.

“All the guys who spoke at his funeral, they were all great. Joe Finn, ‘Edso’ Kelly, they were terrific. The one I loved though was when my nephew stood up and told about the time he was getting kicked out of UMass for screwing up or something and he called Uncle Buck, that’s what he called Mike

“He tells him what the problem is and Mike says he’ll see what he can do and, of course, he fixes things up and the kid gets back into UMass. And he thanks Mike and tells him that the light finally went on in his head and he pauses and tells the people in church that Mike said to him, ‘And it’s a dim light at that.’”

A decent wage and a good education. Two items always held in high regard by a man who fought hard so that everyone would have a shot at both in a country where the language of fear and the politics of division angered and frustrated him.

Michael Mullane climbed the ladder of life and he wanted everyone else to have a decent chance at doing the same thing, one rung at a time, without anyone in public life trying to rig the game. He sought a few simple things that once seemed to be the strongest aspect of the American spirit: fairness and opportunity, and he died fighting to the end.

Many thanks to Mike Barnicle of the Daily Beast for this article.