

Labor History Loses a Great Voice: Jim Green

By ILHS Vice President Mike Matejka

Bringing history to life, particularly transporting it from the lecture hall to the streets, is no small task.

Labor History lost a true leader in that effort, Dr. James Green of the University of Massachusetts, who died of leukemia on June.23.

Taking labor's dramatic stories, Green was able to translate them into accessible and popular books, including his "Death in the Haymarket" and most recently, "The Devil is Here in These Hills: West Virginia's Coal Miners and Their Battle for Freedom." This book was the foundation for the Public Television documentary last February, "The Mine Wars." In the 1970s he assisted Barbara Koepple with her award-winning documentary "Harlan County, USA" and PBS for its "The Great Depression" series.

Green happily shared his time and talents with the Illinois Labor History Society, including an appearance as guest speaker at the 2010 ILHS Union Hall of Honor. He worked closely with the ILHS, its members and officers, while developing his Haymarket book.

Green was a very patient and gentle soul, who moved history beyond academic halls into union halls. His 2000 book, "Taking History to Heart," told his own journey, making labor history accessible and meaningful to a general audience.

His roots were in Illinois, growing up in Oak Park and then Carpentersville, where his father was a math teacher and his mother a school clerical worker. His grandparents included a railroad switchman and a clothing factory worker, people with stories he took to heart. Jim graduated from Northwestern University in 1966 and completed his doctorate at Yale in 1972. In 1977 he came to the University of Massachusetts as a professor in the College of Public and Community Service, where he also directed their public history program. He also taught labor history for the Harvard Trade Union program and the University of Massachusetts' Union Leadership master's degree program. He worked for affordable housing in Boston and was active in the community.

Jim was a rare soul -- a teacher who could touch a class as well as a union hall, a gifted writer, and most of all, a very caring and thoughtful individual. Not only did he impact many lives, he left a legacy for labor history and a touching example of broad outreach to all.