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Frank Wilkinson, 91; Civil Libertarian

posted by [polymoics](#) on Friday January 06 2006, @10:18AM

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Frank Wilkinson, 91; Civil Libertarian

The L.A. housing official, imprisoned for refusing to testify before HCUAC, became an advocate of 1st Amendment rights.



By Dennis McLellan, [LA Times](#)

Frank Wilkinson, who began his half century as a national civil liberties leader after being fired from his job as a Los Angeles Housing Authority official during the McCarthy era and was later imprisoned for refusing to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, has died. He was 91.

Wilkinson, the former longtime director of the National Committee Against Repressive Legislation, a civil liberties activist and lobby group, died from complications of old age Monday at his home in Los Angeles, said his wife of 39 years, Donna.

Wilkinson, who spent nine months in prison after being held in contempt of Congress for asserting

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his 1st Amendment right not to disclose his associations and beliefs before HUAC in 1958, helped form the National Committee to Abolish HUAC in 1960.

The organization was renamed the National Committee Against Repressive Legislation about the same time that HUAC was abolished in 1975. Ten years later, Wilkinson co-founded the nonprofit First Amendment Foundation, which defends the right to dissent. He served as its longtime director.

"For the last 50 years, Frank has been the one or two people most closely identified with the defense of the 1st Amendment," Kit Gage, director of the National Committee Against Repressive Legislation and the First Amendment Foundation, told The Times this week.

Nadine Strossen, national president of the American Civil Liberties Union, described Wilkinson as "a towering and inspiring figure throughout his entire career, starting from when he was a young person being an advocate for equal rights for the poor and members of racial minorities."

Wilkinson "was also constantly challenging government's power to restrict 1st Amendment freedoms of belief, speech and association, and also opposing government violations of privacy, as well as government secrecy, which continues to be dramatically relevant today," she said.

Gara LaMarche, vice president and director of U.S. programs at the Open Society Institute, a New York City-based foundation, said:

"At a time of fresh revelations and renewed

the editorial focus of this site consistent, while allowing for a free exchange of ideas.

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concern about government spying on Americans, Frank's life story — from being the target of Joe McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover to crusader for 1st Amendment rights — has much to teach us."

Wilkinson's efforts as a nationally known civil liberties leader grew out of his role in a planned public housing project in Chavez Ravine in the early 1950s.

Wilkinson, who had gone to work for the Housing Authority in 1942, was special assistant to the executive director and was director of the office of information.

The authority's \$110-million plan to build 10,000 low-income housing units outside poor areas of the city was viewed with suspicion by many in Los Angeles' conservative business establishment, who labeled the effort "creeping socialism."

In what has been described as its biggest battle, the authority began in 1952 to condemn property in Chavez Ravine, north of downtown Los Angeles, for 3,500 new public housing units.

The primarily Mexican immigrant barrio was considered one of the prime pieces of property for an integrated public housing project, and Wilkinson went door-to-door to persuade residents to give up their pieces of land with the assurance that they would have homes in new Richard Neutra-designed high-rises.

"It meant bringing black people and brown people and Asian people out of ghettos of various kinds and have them living with Anglo people in Chavez Ravine," Wilkinson told *The Times* in 1995.

During the eminent domain hearing in which

Wilkinson was called as an expert witness to testify on behalf of the authority, the attorney for the opposition had completed his questions about the property when he asked Wilkinson to name all the organizations to which he belonged.

Wilkinson refused, asserting his 5th Amendment right against self-incrimination. He was immediately suspended from his job, and the incident spurred both the City Council and the Los Angeles Times to demand an investigation of communist infiltration in the Housing Authority.

After being subpoenaed to appear before the state Un-American Activities Committee later that year, Wilkinson again took the Fifth. Although he and two other Housing Authority employees targeted as Communist agents had signed annual loyalty oaths over the years, they all lost their jobs.

Wilkinson's first wife, Jean, was suspended and later fired from her job as a public school teacher. After many months of unemployment, Wilkinson became a night custodian at a Pasadena department store — a job offered with the proviso that he not publicly disclose that he had been hired.

In the wake of the Housing Authority controversy, plans for the project in Chavez Ravine were scrapped and the land eventually was obtained by the Dodgers and became the site of Dodger Stadium.

By late 1953, Wilkinson had become secretary of the Citizens Committee to Preserve American Freedoms and worked to support individuals who had been subpoenaed by HUAC and other investigative committees.

In 1958, during a trip to Atlanta to support civil rights activists called before HCUAC, Wilkinson was subpoenaed. Asserting his 1st Amendment right in refusing to testify, he was cited for contempt of Congress.

"A number of folks previous to him had taken the 1st Amendment before HCUAC," said Gage. "Frank wanted to bring that case to the Supreme Court."

In 1961, by a vote of 5 to 4, the Supreme Court ruled against Wilkinson, and he began serving nine months of his one-year prison sentence. He and civil rights activist Carl Braden were the last two people imprisoned for contempt of Congress for exercising their 1st Amendment rights.

After his release in 1962, Wilkinson returned to the work he and others had started in 1960 when they formed the National Committee to Abolish HCUAC. He also worked with and helped build membership of the National Lawyers Guild, the ACLU and other groups.

Gage said Wilkinson worked "to help people to recognize that the Bill of Rights is a living document but not self-enforcing; The only way the Bill of Rights will continue to exist is by the people of the United States acting to exert their rights."

Wilkinson, who had joined the Communist Party in 1942 and remained a member until 1975, discovered in 1986 that the FBI had surveillance files on him and the organization against repressive legislation. He filed a Freedom of Information Act suit against the FBI and eventually received 132,000 pages of files.

The files, which spanned 38 years, included information chronicling the FBI's surreptitious work to cancel meetings, infiltrate and disrupt events and discredit Wilkinson, said Gage, who served as editor of Robert Sherrill's 2005 biography of Wilkinson, "First Amendment Felon."

When Wilkinson's lawsuit against the FBI was settled in 1987, the bureau agreed to remove his surveillance records from its files and to never spy on him again.

The son of a physician, Wilkinson was born in Charlevoix, Mich., in 1914. The family moved to Los Angeles in 1925 and Wilkinson graduated from Beverly Hills High School.

After graduating from UCLA in 1936, he considered becoming a Methodist minister.

But travel to the Midwest, New York, North Africa, Palestine, Europe and Russia in which he encountered extreme poverty caused him to change his plans.

In 1939, he went to work for Msgr. Thomas O'Dwyer, founder of the Citizens Housing Council of Los Angeles, to promote public housing.

Hired by the Housing Authority in 1942, Wilkinson managed the first integrated housing project for the poor on the West Coast, in Watts, and soon was managing several other projects, one of which he lived in with his family.

"He was somebody who was not just important because of the historical role he played," said the ACLU's Strossen, "but because he continued to be a forceful leader and teacher, especially

speaking to young people on college campuses and helping them to see the connection with what happened in the past to what is happening now."

Wilkinson was portrayed in the theater group Culture Clash's play "Chavez Ravine" at the Mark Taper Forum in 2003, and Ry Cooder wrote a song about Wilkinson, "Don't Call Me Red," for his recent CD "Chavez Ravine." Wilkinson also was featured in the recent documentary "Chavez Ravine" by filmmaker Jordan Mechner and photographer Don Nomark.

In addition to his wife, Wilkinson is survived by his three children from his first marriage, Jeffrey, Tony, and Jo; three stepchildren, John, William and Robert Childers; 19 grandchildren; and six great-grandchildren.

A memorial service for Wilkinson will be held at 2 p.m. Jan. 28 at Holman United Methodist Church, 3320 W. Adams Blvd., Los Angeles

Contributions in Wilkinson's memory may be made to the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, 6120 S. Vermont Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90044, or to the First Amendment Foundation, 3321 12th St. NE, Washington, D.C., 20017.

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