

Minnesota labor leader Dave Roe dies at 92

Roe was president of the Minnesota AFL-CIO from 1966 to 1984.

By [Randy Furst](#) Star Tribune

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STAR TRIBUNE FILE Labor leader Dave Roe in 1984

Dave Roe, an influential figure in Minnesota's labor movement and a former University of Minnesota regent, died Monday. He was 92.

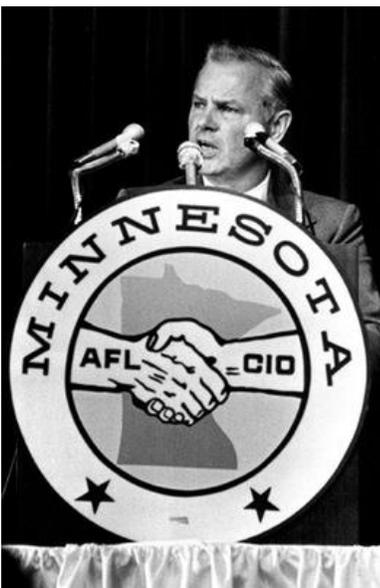
Roe served as president of the Minnesota AFL-CIO from 1966 to 1984 and emerged as a powerful figure in state labor battles and in Minnesota politics. More recently, he was instrumental in the creation of a Workers Memorial Garden at the State Capitol, which honors the state's laborers.

Former Democratic Vice President Walter Mondale called Roe "a great labor leader and an honest and decent citizen."

Roe became a friend and confidante of state political leaders, including the late Vice President Hubert Humphrey.

Humphrey called Roe the night before he died in 1978. Roe said later that what touched him most was Humphrey insisted on speaking to Roe's wife Audrey. She died last October after 70 years of marriage.

Roe spent a dozen years as a member of the U's Board of Regents, where he was a sometimes controversial force.



Dave Roe at the podium introducing Walter Mondale on October 6, 1976.

He was a frequent critic of embattled President Kenneth Keller, and drew criticism for saying publicly that Keller would likely be forced to quit after an audit questioned the \$1.5 million spent to redecorate the president's official residence. Around the same time, Roe blasted Legislative Auditor James Nobles for placing at least some of the blame at the financially troubled physical plant on the prevailing wages paid to union employees.

Roe had a reputation for being gruff and didn't shy from disagreement. In a 2015 interview on "The Mary Hanson Show," a cable program, Roe said one of his toughest decisions was to keep the state federation's convention from endorsing Democrat George McGovern for president in 1972.

George Meany, the president of the national AFL-CIO had ordered local state union bodies not to back McGovern, Roe said in an interview.

“I viewed Dave as the model of what a labor leader ought to be,” said Pete Benner, former executive director of AFSCME Council 6. “He had this gut-level approach to representing average working people and it just oozed out of him.”

After Roe left the federation, he led a long campaign to create a labor interpretive center and he was disheartened after Gov. Jesse Ventura withdrew money for the project.

Nonetheless, the workers garden was finally completed last year.

At home, Roe was devoted to his wife and children.

“He raised three daughters, all strong independent women,” said daughter Judy Grudem, who worked in the AFL-CIO office. His other two daughters, Nancy Holtz and Susie Olson, also worked in labor union offices. All three daughters live in Apple Valley, as did Roe.

In 1977, when 17,000 taconite mining workers went on strike on the Iron Range and in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, Roe weighed in on the strikers’ behalf.

Lloyd McBride, international president of the Steelworkers Union, spoke at a strike support rally on the Range three months into the walkout, urging workers to accept a contract that the union leaders felt was inadequate. Roe, who was also a rally speaker, urged the strikers to listen to their local leaders, recalled Joe Samargia, then president of the local at the Minntac plant. “It bucked everybody up,” Samargia said.

Ron Cohen, former research director at the state AFL-CIO, said that Roe was an inspirational leader, but “never one to admit a mistake.”

Former Republican Gov. Al Quie said that he met with Roe before being sworn in to ask him how he should govern.

Roe was taken aback. “He said no Democrat ever asked him that,” Quie said chuckling.

“We could be totally honest with each other. He took his position, and I took mine.”

Visitation is Sunday from 1 to 4 p.m. at Washburn-McReavy Edina Chapel, 5000 W. 50th St., Edina. A funeral will be held Monday at 11 a.m. at Mount Zion Lutheran Church, 5645 Chicago Av., with visitation at 10 a.m.