Dennis McDermott
1922-2003

Dennis McDermott, trade union leader and latterly a diplomat, was born in Portsmouth in England. He served in the Royal Navy throughout World War II and soon afterwards emigrated to Canada. Although he was a trade union man for most of his working life, he accepted Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's invitation to become Canada’s Ambassador to Ireland 1986-9.

McDermott began his work as a welder and assembler with Massey-Ferguson in 1948. In 1954 he became the International Representative for the United Automobile Workers of America, a position he held for 14 years. This was followed by 10 years as the Canadian Director of the United Auto Workers, now the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW). From there he moved up in 1978 to assume the leadership of the Canadian Labour Congress, and was its president until 1986, when he became a diplomat in Dublin.

He opposed wage controls, a major concern during the days of soaring inflation in the 1970s, and he resisted any infringement of collective bar-
gaining, which was an issue of conflict within the unions.

From his early years, Dennis was instrumental in building Canadian support for the struggles of Cesar Chavez and the United Farmworkers of America. His concern for the whole human family was expressed in several ways, including as an active member of the Inter-American Regional Organization of Workers, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the Commonwealth Trade Union Council (CTUC).

Dennis will be remembered for his unwavering belief in the need for union workers to be politically aware and active. As he put it: “Our problems are social and economic; the solution is political.” This led him to put strong emphasis on education and training of union staff. For some years he chaired the board of the Labour College of Canada, and he also chaired the CLC Labour Education and Studies Centre. And he served as a member of the Ontario Labour Relations Board. In recognition of his trade union work, he was inducted into the Order of Ontario in 1988.

His work for human rights was recognized with the Cesar Chavez Black Eagle Award and the Ontario Federation of Labour Human Rights Award (1994). He was on the executive of both the Ontario and the federal New Democratic Party and received the J.S. Woodsworth Award.

In 1976 he married Mary Claire Caza, and they had four sons – Michael, Mark, Patrick and William – and one daughter, Maureen. And he relaxed by gardening and by painting in both oils and acrylics.