

Fraser was epitome of the labor statesman

by *The Detroit News*

Former UAW President Douglas A. Fraser, who died Saturday at 91, was a tough negotiator who sought the best deal for his members. But he also knew that unless the companies where his members worked stayed in business, the best labor contract didn't mean anything.

Fraser played a key role in Chrysler's survival in the late 1970s, when the company won \$1.5 billion in loan guarantees from the federal government, which helped it stay afloat. As part of the deal, the UAW's Chrysler unit had to accept concessions.

As the Douglas Fraser exhibit at Wayne State University's Walter Reuther Library in Detroit notes, three times within 14 months he persuaded members to make these contract concessions; in return, Fraser won a seat on Chrysler's board, the first time any top union official gained such a post. He worked closely on the deal with Michigan Congressman James Blanchard, who went on to serve two terms as governor in the 1980s. The company later paid back all of the debts guaranteed by the U.S. government.

Chrysler has since had its ups and downs, and like all automakers, its fortunes have depended on the popularity of its products. But UAW members have had jobs at Chrysler for the last three decades thanks in no small part to Fraser. On his watch as UAW president from 1977-83 the domestic auto industry lost market share and struggled to compete with Japanese firms, but Fraser helped the industry ride out problems at the time.

While he could be tough, he was also enough of a conciliator to withdraw from contention for the UAW's presidency following the 1970 death of one of the union's founders, Walter Reuther. He deferred to Leonard Woodcock, then head of the General Motors bargaining unit, before winning the presidency himself in 1977. Born in Scotland in 1916, he emigrated with his family to Detroit as a small child. By his mid-teens, he was working in an auto plant and moving up in the union. By 1944, he was president of a UAW local.

After his retirement, he served as a professor of labor studies at Wayne State University and in 1997, the university created the Douglas A. Fraser Center for Workplace Issues within the Walter P. Reuther Library. In his later years, his craggy face, topped by a thatch of white hair, was quick to break into a smile. But he was firm and steadfast in his political and pro-union views.

As UAW President Ron Gettelfinger said of him, "He never forgot that we were working for our active and retired members." Douglas A. Fraser served his union, his industry and his country well. He became a living embodiment of the phrase "labor statesman."

Reprinted from The Detroit News. CNS

Fraser was epitome of the labor statesman by The Detroit News