

Rest in Power

A black and white portrait of Kent Wong, an older man with dark hair, smiling slightly. He is wearing a dark jacket over a collared shirt. The portrait is the background for the entire announcement.

KENT WONG

1956 – 2025

APALA'S FOUNDER AND FIRST PRESIDENT

DISTRICT 7 TAVERN
380 WARREN STREET, ROXBURY, MA 02119
NOVEMBER 7, 2025 AT 4 PM



Tribute to Kent Wong

We gather to remember Kent Wong, who passed away on October 8, 2025, at the age of 69. He was a pillar of the labor and immigrant rights movement, a revered educator, mentor, bridge builder, and believer in collective dignity.

Many people knew Kent for his gentle and loving nature. His zest for helping others made them feel comfortable, like they belonged. He is known for his patience, nonviolent approach when handling conflicts, and achieving equality for all.

Kent is survived by his wife, Jai Lee; their sons, Ryan and Robin; his sister, Shelley Wong Pitts; and a brother, Marshall Wong.

He was the former Director of the UCLA Labor Center and served as the founding President of APALA, the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, AFL-CIO.

Early Life & Foundation



Kent Wong was a fifth-generation Chinese American whose roots shaped his commitment to social justice. He was born and raised in Los Angeles, the son of Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Delbert Wong, the first Chinese American judge in the continental United States, and Dolores Wong, a

psychiatric social worker and community leader who helped establish a public library in Chinatown. Their commitment to justice and community profoundly shaped Kent's lifelong devotion to equality and service.

After earning his law degree from People's College of Law in 1984, Kent began his professional journey as a staff attorney for the Asian Pacific American Legal Center (now Asian Americans Advancing Justice) and the Service Employees International Union Local 660.

His early legal and advocacy work laid the groundwork for what would become a lifetime of championing immigrant, worker, and community rights.





Leadership at the UCLA Labor Center

From 1991 until 2023, Kent served as Director of the UCLA Labor Center, later becoming Project Director of Labor & Community Partnerships. Under his direction:

- The staff grew from 3 to 42, dramatically increasing its capacity.
- He led the creation of key programs, including:
 - The Re: Work research-justice team
 - The Dream Resource Center for undocumented youth
 - The Community Scholars policy research program
 - The Los Angeles Black Worker Center
- In 2021, he secured **\$15 million** in state funding to purchase a permanent home for the Labor Center in MacArthur Park, named in honor of his mentor, Rev. James Lawson Jr.
- He expanded the labor-education model beyond UCLA, extending it into other University of California campuses and into Mexico.

Through this leadership, Kent made the Labor Center not just a scholarly institution, but also a movement hub uniting education, community, and organizing.

Founding & Growing



Kent Wong envisioned a national organization for Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander union members. Traveling across the country, he connected with AANHPI activists and proposed the idea of a national alliance to AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland, who embraced it. The AFL-CIO Executive Council formed a committee of seven unions with large AANHPI memberships—APALA's founding unions.

Ahead of the 1992 founding convention, these unions and AANHPI labor committees from New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles united to draft a constitution and organize the event. On May 1, 1992, more than 500 activists gathered in Washington, D.C., to launch the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), electing Kent Wong as its first president.

For more than thirty years, Kent continued to champion APALA's mission, mentoring generations of AANHPI union leaders and organizers. What began with just a handful of AANHPI union organizers has grown into a nationwide movement with representation across every union and industry. Kent's vision continues to inspire APALA's work today.





Advocacy for Immigrant Justice

Kent Wong's commitment to immigrant rights was unwavering:

- He helped found the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA) AFL-CIO, along with other organizations such as the Tourism Industry Development Council, now known as the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, Strategic Actions for a Just Economy, and the United Association for Labor Education.
- He taught the first U.S. course on the challenges of undocumented students in higher education, "Immigrant Rights, Labor & Higher Education," following California's AB 540.
- He launched Dream Summer, the first paid national fellowship program for undocumented

youth, and helped establish California's first Dream Resource Center.

- In 2007, he led a delegation of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor to China, establishing the first sister city labor council relations with Shanghai and Beijing.
- Kent emphasized nonviolent strategy as essential to labor and immigrant justice. In 2025, he led training sessions for more than 1,000 workers and organizers to peacefully resist immigration raids and racial profiling.

His philosophy held that dignity, opportunity, and belonging were not privileges, but rights, and that immigrant communities must be central to movements for justice.

Legacy & Impact

Kent Wong's legacy lives on through the institutions he built and the generations he inspired. His vision placed education and nonviolent action at the center of the labor movement, shaping how we fight for justice today.

- Institutions live on: the Labor Centers, Dream programs, and research hubs he helped build remain active.
- Thousands of organizers and students trace their roots to his mentorship.
- He placed the immigrant worker at the heart of labor justice, shifting narratives and building solidarity across race, nationality, and class.
- His strategy of nonviolent collective action continues to guide movements for labor and immigrant rights.



Community Reflection

Kent Wong taught us that justice is built by the many, not the few; that dignity is universal; and that change is most lasting when education, community, and collective action come together. As we honor his memory, we carry forward his spirit: to organize across silos, to uplift those too often unseen, and to act without violence but with unwavering resolve.



APALA

ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN LABOR ALLIANCE, AFL-CIO



GREATER BOSTON BUILDING TRADES UNIONS

