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## Tribute to Phil and Sala Burton - June 1st 2006

By Bill Hough

Phillip and Sala Burton Center

To pay homage to the late congressman Phillip Burton and his wife Sala who succeeded him in Congress, labor and environmental groups have established the Phillip and Sala Burton Center for Human Rights at the Presidio in San Francisco. The Center is planning a tribute to the Burtons on June 1st to commemorate their accomplishments. The mission of the Center has been to promote international human rights, and to advance the cause of labor and of the environment in the interests of economic and social justice.

At 4:00 p.m. on Thursday June 1st, the Burton Center will hold a ceremony near the stature of Phillip Burton in the Upper Fort Mason meadow. The public is invited. Participants will then retire to the Fort Mason Officers Club to hear comments from people who knew and worked with the Burtons over the course of their careers. Panelists will include Dr. Edgar Wayburn former President of the Sierra Club; Dolores Huerta, former President of the United Farm Workers, Judge Harry Low who has served as California's 38th Insurance Commissioner and as the Presiding Justice of the California Court of Appeals, former Mayor of San Francisco, Willie L. Brown, Jr.; and Richard L. Trumka Secretary-Treasurer of the AFL-CIO (unconfirmed).

The theme of the June 1st tribute is that everyone has a basic human right to a safe and clean environment. The core issues are public health and quality of life for all our citizens. Organized Labor is on the front lines of this battle demanding quality health care and safe working conditions. The fight for safe working conditions in this country has been going on for 200 years and working people have laid down their lives in that cause. When it comes to mine safety for example, the pro-union vigilante group, the Molly Maguires from Appalachia and the Pennsylvania coal fields certainly helped bring the mine owners to the bargaining table, ultimately involving President Teddy Roosevelt as an arbitrator in the Anthracite Coal Strike of 1902.

The fight for justice is in fact never won. Witness the depredations of the Bush Administration in regulating mine safety and the massive environmental degradation their policies have brought about by encouraging open pit mining. It was hard to believe when one Bush administration official, who, when he announced a lowering of the standard for ambient coal dust in the mines, quipped that allowing dirtier air in the mines would force more workers to wear their masks and would therefore improve their health. Anything to increase coal production; and for what cause? The increase in the use of soft coal will pump massive amounts of sulfur dioxide into the air we breath and will hasten the effects of acid rain killing our forests and emptying our lakes of fish and other forms of aquatic life! The fight goes on in 2006, and never have the bad guys been more obvious. I'm sure Mr. Trumka; the former President of the United Mine Workers Union will have some choice words for us on June 1st. Phillip and Sala Burton led the fight to pass the Federal Coal Mine Health and safety Act of 1969. The legislation provided compensation for miners and their family members who suffered from Black Lung disease and implemented stringent new rules for mine safety.

The tribute will honor the ideas and accomplishments of Phillip and Sala Burton and will promote the central theme of maintaining a safe and clean environment for future generations based on sustainable development.