

# Ernie Goodman

Ernest “Ernie” Goodman became nationally known as a lawyer who fought against injustice and entrenched special interests. His parents were Russian immigrants and shopkeepers. Born in 1906 near Saginaw, he grew up in Detroit.

Goodman was a member of the first graduating class at Detroit City Law School (now Wayne State University Law School) in 1928. When he was a young lawyer, his first job involved evicting poor immigrants and factory workers for landlord clients. The experience profoundly changed him, and he turned to union and personal injury litigation.

In 1950 he became a founding partner of the city’s first integrated law firm, specializing in civil rights and constitutional law. In his practice he often focused on freedom of speech and desegregation issues. Cases that cemented his reputation as a top defense attorney involved Black Panthers members and inmates tied to the Attica Prison riot.

Goodman was married in 1932 and had two children. He died in Detroit in 1997.



# Ernie Goodman's Detroit

As Ernest "Ernie" Goodman entered the law profession, Detroit was entering the Great Depression. Hundreds of companies went out of business and thousands of people were out of work. The city's population fell by 300,000 between 1929 and 1930.

The city rebounded when Detroit became the "Arsenal of Democracy" during World War II. Following the war, however, the spirit of patriotic unity that prevailed throughout the conflict was followed by a period of retrenchment and fractious idealism.

A series of social upheavals followed. Labor unions grew strong and clashed with Detroit's powerful industries. Entire neighborhoods were displaced by urban renewal projects. The fight for equality and civil rights sparked confrontations between Detroit's racially divided communities.

The suburbs expanded while the City of Detroit's population decreased. New satellites of business and commercial activity became established outside the city limits, reducing capital investment and vitality at the city's core.



# Hero?

Ernie Goodman was revered by union supporters, civil rights workers and anti-war activists for his spirited courtroom defense of their rights. He was also highly regarded by civil libertarians for his lonely efforts during the Red Scare of the 1950s to defend those accused of “subversive” ideas.

As associate counsel for the United Auto Workers, Goodman earned the respect of his peers in 1945 when he won a landmark case before the U.S. Supreme Court to protect free speech for union supporters in the South. It was one of six cases he would argue before the high bench regarding worker rights and civil liberties, losing only once.

In the 1950s Goodman and George Crockett founded one of the first interracial law partnerships in the country. After his peers in the National Lawyers Guild elected him president in 1964, Goodman mobilized legal volunteers to go to Mississippi and help win voting rights for African-Americans.

The State Bar of Michigan named Goodman a “Champion of Justice” in recognition of his work representing the poorest and most beleaguered defendants in the criminal justice system, usually for no fee. “Ernie was a voice for the hopeless, the voiceless and the downtrodden,” said U.S. District Judge Damon J. Keith. “He was their lawyer and their spokesperson.”



# Villain?

Ernie Goodman was reviled by conservatives, cold warriors, the FBI and many business leaders as a leading example of a radical lawyer who could skillfully bend the law to acquit felons, protect communists and subvert law and order.

Corporate lawyers in the 1930s and 1940s condemned Goodman and his mentor, Maurice Sugar, for their aggressive courtroom tactics defending sit-down strikers and other union supporters seeking collective bargaining.

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who believed that anyone defending the civil liberties of communists must himself be a threat to national security, went so far as to place Goodman's name on a secret list (the "Security Index") that marked him and thousands of others for arrest and "custodial detention" in the case of a national emergency. Cold warriors likewise denounced him for urging détente with the Soviet Union.

In the 1960s Senator James Eastland of Mississippi accused Goodman and his law partner, George Crockett, of being "legal carpetbaggers" whose representation of civil rights workers was "capitalizing on racial unrest to create violence and bloodshed." In Detroit, patriotic groups labeled Goodman a "traitor" for opposing the Vietnam War and counseling young men on their legal rights regarding conscription.

