

*Rob Christensen*: Published: Sep 02, 2007 12:30 AM  
Modified: Sep 02, 2007 05:29 AM

## The trial lawyer as equalizer

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Hanging from a wall in the state AFL-CIO headquarters in Raleigh is a plaque memorializing six martyrs of the labor movement.

In 1929, sheriff's deputies opened fire on strikers at a textile mill in the hill country town of Marion, killing six and wounding 25. Most were shot in the back.

The sheriff, eight deputies and two mill officials were acquitted by a jury of murder charges. But a union organizer and three strikers were sent to prison for their role in trying to evict a strikebreaker who had moved into the home of a striker.

The labor movement found North Carolina fallow ground. Government, business, newspapers and churches were aligned against unions. North Carolina was a poor state that desperately wanted industry.

Even if government was neutral in the labor battles, unions would have been a hard sell. The state had no large cities. Many of the looms were operated by fiercely independent hill-country farm people -- not big on anything collective.

In 2006, North Carolina was still the least unionized state in the country, according to the U.S. Labor Department.

Low unionization is one reason trial lawyers tend to be bigger in the South than in most other places in the country.

A weak labor movement has meant that politics, government and laws tilt toward business. Trial lawyers have sometimes filled labor's vacuum. If you don't have a shop steward, you can call a trial lawyer.

Doctors and business people may dislike trial lawyers. But in mill towns, the trial lawyer was a respected figure who could challenge large institutional forces. This is something I know a little bit about. Three of my four grandparents worked in textile mills, and I helped put myself through college working in a textile mill.

During the 1998 Senate campaign, Republicans spent a lot of money on TV advertising attacking

Democrat John Edwards, who was the state's most successful trial lawyer. To their surprise, most of the public didn't care.

Trial lawyers are sometimes seen as the equalizer -- the avenging legal angels who will set things right. This is how Edwards sees himself, according to friends and colleagues.

It is not a coincidence that some of the great fictional Southern figures -- from John Grisham's lawyers to Atticus Finch in "To Kill a Mockingbird" -- are trial lawyers.

Without the help of Southern trial lawyers, Edwards would not be in the presidential hunt. Contributions from trial lawyers are a major reason Edwards is the leading presidential fundraiser in North Carolina and Alabama. It is why he is second in fundraising to John McCain in Mississippi, second to Rudy Giuliani in Louisiana and second to Mitt Romney in Tennessee.

Of the millions who grew up in Southern mill towns, Edwards is likely the first with a serious shot at the White House.

If Edwards becomes president -- a big if at this point -- it will be trial lawyers who provided the money and labor that provided the organizational muscle.

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