

The Life of Walter P. Reuther

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Walter Reuther is often remembered as the most accomplished leader in the history of the American labor movement. A man of character, resolve and boundless energy, he sought to level the playing field for American workers. Through his efforts, millions of working families continue to enjoy a more secure future.

Reuther was ambitious, but took pride in being the nation's lowest-paid union president. As head of the United Automobile Workers (UAW) from 1946 to 1970, he held enormous economic power, but used it to better the lives of the union rank and file. As an advisor to four American presidents Reuther had political influence, but applied it on behalf of the disadvantaged. He spoke and lived his guiding philosophy: "There is no greater calling than to serve your fellow men. There is no greater contribution than to help the weak. There is no greater satisfaction than to do it well."

The second of five children, Reuther was born on September 1, 1907, in Wheeling, West Virginia. He learned about social issues in family debates moderated by his father, Valentine, an active member in the Brewery Workers union. Walter Reuther recalled, "At my father's knee we learned the philosophy of trade unionism. We got the struggles, the hopes and the aspirations of working people every day." The younger Reuther developed a commitment to address social problems through union and political action.

After an apprenticeship in tool-and-die work, Reuther left Wheeling in 1927 to find work in Detroit's booming automobile industry and was joined later by his younger brother, Victor. A skilled worker, Walter easily found employment and eventually oversaw a team of die makers for Ford Motor Company. He characterized the industry at that time as a "social jungle" in which workers were "nameless, faceless clock numbers."

In 1932 Walter was fired because of his campaign work for Socialist Party presidential candidate Norman Thomas. The following year, Walter and Victor started out on a world tour, hoping to work at the Soviet Union's Gorky automobile factory, which had been equipped by Henry Ford. While waiting for Soviet visas, the brothers stayed with relatives in Germany and learned firsthand of the Nazi domination of their parents' homeland.

Once in the Soviet Union, the brothers and other foreign workers trained Russians in tool-and-die work at the Gorky plant. During their year at the factory, the Reuther brothers were impressed by Soviet industrial achievements. "We are seeing the most backward nation in the world being rapidly transformed into the most modern and scientific," Walter wrote in a letter to a friend. At the



same time, he also became aware of the purges and repression under Stalin's totalitarian regime.

Later in his career, Reuther was faulted for his shift from the political left to a moderate position. This change included the adoption of a strong anti-Communist philosophy. All this was less sweeping than it seemed. What remained constant was Reuther's strong belief in social democratic action: he had always rejected any political system based on totalitarian rule.

By the end of 1935, the Russian workers were trained and the Reuther brothers returned to Detroit just in time to participate in the great union-organizing struggles in the automobile industry. To more effectively "organize the unorganized," Walter Reuther worked to combine several small Detroit local unions into the Westside Local 174. He became president of the large local, and at the UAW's 1936 convention, he was elected to the union's executive board.

Success came rapidly to the UAW in 1937. General Motors and Chrysler recognized the union after sit-down strikes crippled their production. Henry Ford's intractable resistance dashed all hopes of the third automobile giant quickly recognizing the UAW. Reuther would soon discover the extent of Ford's anti-union tactics.

On May 26, 1937, Walter Reuther and other UAW organizers passed out leaflets at a pedestrian overpass next

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Continued from page 12 to the Ford Rouge factory complex in Dearborn, Michigan. What followed, now known as the "Battle of the Overpass," began when members of Ford's private police organization, euphemistically called the Service Department, attacked the UAW group. "After they kicked me down all the stairs," Reuther recalled shortly after the battle, "they then started



to hit me again...driving me before them." The incident was a public relations disaster for Henry Ford, but he continued to resist the UAW until April 1941, when a massive strike shut down the Ford Motor Company.

In 1939 Reuther was appointed the head of the General Motors department by UAW President R. J. Thomas. When General Motors stalled negotiations for a new union contract, Reuther called for a June strike, but only by tool-and-die workers. This tactic halted the all-important retooling for the 1940 model year. Faced with a production shutdown, General Motors agreed to a new contract.

Just before World War II, with almost half of the nation's auto-manufacturing capacity idle, Reuther received national attention for his plan to use factories in Michigan and elsewhere to build five hundred military aircraft a day. Although technically feasible, the plan was never implemented because automakers resisted what they considered an attempt to dictate their production. However, during the war the industry did produce aircraft, tanks and other war material in unprecedented amounts.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt was impressed by Reuther's aircraft proposal, which complemented his Arsenal of Democracy programs. Reuther gained a reputation for creative ideas and Roosevelt frequently consulted with his "young red-headed engineer" on wartime production problems. Reuther turned down an appointment with the high-profile War Productions Board to stay with the labor movement.

Walter Reuther was recognized as a labor leader of national stature when he led a strike against General Motors

at the end of 1945. Autoworkers had seen their buying power erode during the war and Reuther demanded a 30 percent pay increase. He claimed GM could grant the pay hike without increasing car prices and challenged the corporation to open its books to prove it. The UAW and GM reached a compromise without opening the corporation's books, but Reuther often returned to the theme that au-

tomakers had obligations beyond making money for their stockholders. They also had a duty to their employees and, ultimately, the American public.

After Reuther was elected president of the UAW in 1946, he began to guide the union down a new path and pledged to work for "a labor movement whose philosophy demands that it fight for the welfare of the public at large." Under his leadership, UAW members won unprecedented benefits, including enhanced job security, cost-of-living adjustments, vacations and health-care insurance. Supplemental unemployment benefits (SUB), introduced in 1955, helped to ease the economic pain caused by the cyclical nature of auto work. With SUB, workers on layoff continued to receive a paycheck, which equaled 95 percent of their regular take-home pay. Reuther hailed SUB as "the first time in the history of collective bargaining [that] great corporations agreed to begin to accept responsibility" for their workers during layoff.

None of the gains enjoyed by unionized autoworkers came without struggle. Strikes once again became a familiar part of the landscape during the Reuther era. A 1949 strike at Ford established the union's right to have a voice in the speed of the assembly line. It took a hundred-day strike at Chrysler in 1950 to gain autoworkers a pension plan.

Reuther's drive to change the nature of work in the auto industry resulted in strong and steady opposition. Future Michigan Governor George Romney, then with the

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Automobile Manufacturers' Association, called Reuther "the most dangerous man in Detroit" for the labor leader's skill in "bringing about...revolution without seeming to disturb the existing...society." Ironically, the left wing of the UAW characterized Reuther as the "boss's boy," ready to do the Big Three's bidding.

There was also more sinister resistance. In 1938 gunmen barged into Walter Reuther's apartment in an attempt to kidnap and murder the labor leader. The criminals were thwarted by the presence of a small group of Reuther friends and relatives. On April 20, 1948, Reuther returned home late, as he often did, from meetings at UAW headquarters. While eating a warmed-over dinner in his kitchen, he turned to answer a question from his wife, May. At that moment gunfire erupted and he was felled by a shotgun blast to his right arm. Had Reuther not turned, the shots would have killed him. Reuther's assailants were never caught. Allegedly they had been hired by gangsters concerned about organizing attempts at the mob-dominated Michigan Stove Works. Reuther eventually regained

A quote from Walter Reuther's Labor Day radio address on CBS radio in September 1958: "On the occasion of Labor Day, we greet our fellow Americans in other walks of life and we extend to them the hand of friendship and pledge to work with men and women of goodwill everywhere in the task of making peace, freedom and justice secure in our world by making them universal."

limited mobility of his severely damaged arm but it pained him for the rest of his life.

Walter Reuther reached the height of national labor leadership in 1952 when he was elected president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The CIO had originally been set up within the American Federation of Labor (AFL) to organize mass-production industries such as automobile, rubber and steel. Under the leadership of John L. Lewis, the CIO split from the conservative AFL in 1937. Reuther, however, worked to negotiate a re-merger with the group, and in 1955 AFL President George Meany became the head of the new AFL-CIO. Over time Meany's conservative leadership frustrated Reuther. "The AFL-CIO lacks the social vision, the dynamic thrust, the crusading spirit that should characterize the progressive modern labor movement," he said in 1966. Two years later Reuther withdrew the UAW from the AFL-CIO.

With his rise to national prominence, Reuther worked to shape national policy on issues of social equality and justice. "You can't opt out of life," he said in 1968. "You've

got to make up your mind whether you're willing to accept things as they are, or whether you're willing to try to change them." The labor leader was influential in the passage of civil rights legislation and in developing President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty program. Reuther also advised the Johnson administration on the Model Cities program that provided greatly needed funds for the redevelopment of Detroit and other distressed urban areas.

Walter Reuther also demonstrated a personal commitment to civil rights and social justice. He marched with civil rights activists in Mississippi and hospital workers in South Carolina. Reuther was a strong supporter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and a friend of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The UAW financed the 1963 freedom marches in Detroit and Washington, DC. Reuther was one of the few non-African American speakers at the Washington march. In a recent Time article, Irving Bluestone, Reuther's administrative assistant and long-time friend, told a story about one perplexed marcher asking another "Who is Walter Reuther?" "Walter Reuther?" was the incredulous response. "He's the white Martin Luther King." Under Reuther's leadership, the UAW also provided essential financial and logistical support for Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers in their struggle to humanize agricultural work in the southwestern United States.

Believing that labor had to organize internationally to counter multinational corporations, Reuther forged ties with labor organizations worldwide. He was a founding member of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and affiliated the UAW with the International Metalworkers Federation.

Walter Reuther was also an advocate for worker education. In the late 1960's the UAW constructed an education center near Black Lake in northern Michigan. It was en route to the center that Walter and May Reuther were killed in a plane crash on May 9, 1970. The center is now named in their honor.

Friends and foes eulogized Walter Reuther for his leadership in the labor movement and for his commitment to social reform. "He saw the labor movement as an instrument for social justice" and "for human progress," said Bluestone. Michigan Senator Philip Hart offered: "You were part of Walter Reuther's constituency if you were poor, powerless...if you were old, if you were sick." Henry Ford II added, "Walter Reuther was an extraordinarily effective advocate of labor's interest. His tough-minded dedication, his sense of social concern, his selflessness and his eloquence all mark him as a central figure in the development of modern industrial history." Indeed, Reuther's legacy is part of the day-to-day lives of many Americans. Millions of workers enjoy a high standard of living because of advances won at the bargaining table by Walter Reuther.