

Remembering Walter Reuther

By *Dave Boucher*

May 9th marked the 40th anniversary of Walter Reuther's death. Killed in the fiery crash of a leased, two-engine Lear jet that also claimed his wife May and three others in northern Michigan, the tragedy extinguished the flame of labor's most influential leader and visionary of the 20th century. Workers across America and the world lost a champion of social and economic justice unparalleled.

I read the coverage in the next day's newspaper as a new year continued as troubled and tumultuous as any in, what was then, the Sixties era. Days earlier, four students were gunned down at Kent State University, and the nation was becoming increasingly polarized over Nixon's escalation of the Vietnam War as casualties and opposition mounted. Even the staid University of Wisconsin – Whitewater was agitated after a short-lived takeover of the student union to support English department faculty "dissidents" who were being purged.

Conflict was everywhere.

But for many of us like me who had joined what now is the UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers), Reuther's loss created a huge vacuum in a labor movement he evolved into a progressive, social movement now at a crossroad after a two-year break with the AFL-CIO.

Reuther's brilliance was seeing unionism not confined to improving workers' lives but as a movement to uplift the entire community and change society. "What good is a dollar-an-hour more in wages if your neighborhood is burning down?" he reflected. "What good is another week's vacation if the lake you used to go to...is polluted, and you can't swim in it and the kids can't play in it?"

Walter Reuther rose through the ranks as a tool-and-die maker in the Detroit auto industry. His rise was interrupted when he was fired by Ford for organizing efforts and when he traveled to Europe and Russia with his brother Victor. He returned to Detroit in 1935 and began organizing workers for what was the small and struggling United Auto Workers union. Successful sit-down strikes brought union recognition to GM and Chrysler.

In organizing efforts at Ford's Rouge Plant in 1937, he paid a heavy price, severely beaten by Ford thugs in the Battle of the Overpass. Bloodied, broken but undeterred, Reuther pressed on. The UAW was finally recognized as representing Ford workers, which created benefits and respect in their workplace.

On the cusp of WWII in 1940, Reuther conferred with President Roosevelt and later served on numerous wartime boards once U.S. involvement in the war began.

In his famous 500 Planes Speech, he lobbied against corporate resistance to his plan to convert auto plants to wartime production. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the plants began producing 500 airplanes a day.

Reuther was elected president of the UAW in 1946 and began pressing for job security, health care benefits, workplace safety and pensions. He advocated for universal health care and increased environmental protections. While unable to secure these advancements for workers outside the UAW, his successes for UAW members still raised the standard of living for all workers in the country and laid the foundation for the creation of a middle class standard-of-living for average Americans, including a raise in Social Security benefits. "The rest of the world will judge us not by what we have," he said, "but by how we use it."

Trade unions have a mixed record on civil rights, but not Reuther, who worked closely with Martin Luther King Jr. to help organize marches in Selma, Ala., Detroit, Mich., and Wash. D.C. At the 1963 march on Washington, Reuther was one of the few non-African Americans invited to speak. When introduced at the lectern, an elderly woman was overheard asking her friend, "Who is Walter Reuther?" The friend replied, "Walter Reuther? He's the white Martin Luther King."

Reuther was a tireless champion of the worker, the poor, sick or old, the downtrodden and the oppressed. He was a friend to many, but his fight against social and economic injustice and the corporate, conservative machinations of the times created many enemies, as it always has. He survived two assassination attempts; his brother Victor lost an eye in the first, and Walter's right arm was shattered by a shotgun blast in the other. Little effort went into investigating the crimes, even though FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was obsessed with Reuther as the agency tracked him incessantly.

Years later in 1968, Robert Kennedy and Dr. King, the other members of the "progressive triumvirate" were murdered. Reuther's stand against the war and U.S. foreign policy was seen as a threat, earning him top place on Nixon's enemy list.

Education was paramount to Reuther as a means of empowering workers and the poor, perhaps because he had to quit school at age 16 after his father's death, or perhaps because so many in his home state of West Virginia were poor. His dream of a leadership and family education center for workers began with construction in 1967.

The Walter and May Reuther Family Education Center, a 960-acre complex on the shores of Black Lake in northern Michigan, was near completion in 1970. Featuring Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired classrooms and a lodge and conference center built in the forest, Reuther's drive from Detroit to see the new facility was planned with May and architect Oscar Stonorov. But the trip was later changed to a charter flight. At 9:33 p.m. on May 9, the plane clipped treetops after being cleared for landing at Emmet County Airport in Pellston, Mich. The plane came down burning, crashing over a mile southwest of the airport and exploding. Walter Reuther, his wife May and three others were gone.

Walter Reuther's legacy is with us today in the day-to-day lives of people enjoying greater social and economic justice. But that legacy is threatened with downsizing, job losses and plant closings decimating communities, as multinationals detach themselves from national allegiance and community to pursue greater profits. The corporate, conservative machine continues its campaign of misinformation to convince people this is the right path to take. Many people, even those enjoying the benefits of Reuther's efforts, consider unions and government, not corporations, the creators of job and community destruction.

Membership in the UAW is at its lowest point since the 1930's, and the UAW is faced with difficult decisions to contain costs and expand membership. It is the cruelest irony that the Family Education Center which bears the Reuther name and cost him his life is now up for sale.

"Hope," St. Augustine wrote, "has two beautiful daughters. They are anger and courage. Anger at the way things are, and the courage to see they do not remain the way they are." Walter Reuther must have been the unnamed son, declaring in 1968, "You can't opt out of life. 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."

In observance of his death on May 9 and beyond, we would do well to take up his challenge. As Nelson Lichtenstein said in his book "The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit," 'Labor needs to once again organize and educate the lower-working class and immigrants at the bottom of the wage scale, and help those groups develop a sense of political and economic citizenship.'

People and the labor movement need to confront, not compromise with, leaders of both political parties; compromising is their job. We have little to lose by challenging the elite and those that have and want everything at the expense of a decent, middle-class life for workers.

A union of the people or of the corporations? The choice is ours.

Labor is down, but not necessarily out. Again, the choice is ours.

Eugene Debs, an early 20th century activist jailed for "subversive" actions, had a prescription for action. While led to his cell he yelled, "Organize! Educate! Agitate!"