

'Brothers Reuther' autocratic, rich

By MARYANN DUNITZ
GREENSTONE

In 1970, a plan crashed in the woods of Michigan. Dead, as a result of the event, was Walter Reuther, the charismatic leader of the United Auto Workers, who, along with Jimmy Hoffa, was a symbol of American unionism and hope for working people.

This loss was felt as his humanistic programs, his basic beliefs in the beauty and integrity of the common worker, marked him as a man of vision and love.

Victor Reuther's account of the U.A.W. is both a memoir and a handsome tribute to his late brother. He has shown us that although the man is gone, his impact on the lives of those around him is still powerfully felt.

"The Brothers Reuther" is not only the story of a fascinating and productive family, but it is also a detailed and revealing account of the intricacies, passions and conflicts of the American labor movement.

Authoritative and rich in material, it is told by one who was present and from the inside out — who watched it develop and prosper.

For decades, Victor Reuther worked at the side of his more famous brother,

Walter, and the colorful panorama he presents appears to be as much a personal account of the Reuther clan — Walter, Ted, Roy and Victor — as it is a history of the United Auto Workers.

There is a bit of the crusader in Victor, and this reverent tone, acquired when he was chief propagandist for the U.A.W., permeates the pages.

The Reuther clan of a German immigrant and staunch union man, grew up in Wheeling, West Virginia. Their father, working in a brewery together, discovered an enemy in a steel mill, fought against strict craft unions that artificially separated the skilled and more highly-paid from the unskilled laborers.

Opposing the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, he successfully secured a charter from the International Brewery Workers' Federation, and the victory was achieved peacefully, and he taught his sons a lesson that was to influence them for the rest of their lives.

"Direct negotiations should always be conducted with courtesy and consideration for the other party's views when men of reason deliberate together, disputes can be settled, and without violent conflict, across the bargaining table," they espoused.

Also influential in the development of the Reuther brothers was Eugene Debs, whose father's worship of Eugene Debs' extraordinary efforts in support of railway workers, against whom the government brought an injunction, resulted in the government's use of troops and the imprisonment of Debs.

This circumstance had given Debs the stature of a martyred hero in the trade union movement. Debs was to be an example of "integrity of principle" for his compassion and zeal for justice.

Debs also taught the Reuther boys that victory is needed not only in the work place, but in the political arena as well. Certainly this, coupled with their father's attempt to win a seat in the State Legislature, influenced Walter's involvement with political elections and endorsements.

Their father's humanism and reverence for service, joined with their youthful idealism moved Walter and Victor to explore the world around them, trying to find the answers to questions that plagued them.

They toured and photographed the towns and cities of the Depression.

seeing what destruction the lack of work and incentive can reap. On a Ford-sponsored work-study exchange program, they spent two years in the Soviet Union, and on a short visit to Poland, tried to experience the greatest indignity of the most menial worker by pulling rickshaws themselves.

Returning to Detroit in 1935, they found the situation much the same as they had left it. Hundreds of people were still unemployed with little hope of the future.

However, from 1933 to 1935, there had been a great number of strikes, revealing a surge of militancy and a refusal to continue in the status quo. The workers were rejecting wage cuts and craft unions, insisting instead that the skilled and unskilled be united in one union.

This was a time of great organizing battles of Kelsey, Hayes Wheel, Fisher One and the General Lampl plants. Perhaps the most frightening vision of this era is that the 1937 picture of Walter Reuther and fellow organizer Richard Frankenstien being cheerfully beaten by company goons at Ford's River Rouge plant.

Despite the overpowering odds of armed police, hostile judges and unrestrained company "representatives", the impact of the brothers was felt. Victor humorously notes that one day he saw a sign in a window that read "How many of these Reuther bastards are there?"

The Reuther brothers continued to live in the center of the whirling storm on April 10, 1941, after the National CIO mounted a large campaign of assistance to the struggling UAW forces, terms of a settlement with the Ford Motor Company were reached.

Union shop, the check off of union dues, and affixing of a union label to all Ford cars were conditions of agreement, but moreover, the victory was truly one in terms of human values.

With Walter Reuther at its helm, the U.A.W., through collective bargaining, expanded its aims beyond economic equality and decent working conditions, to new benefits of security and dignity. The GM strike in 1946 provoked him to observe "The strike was about two questions.

"It was about the right of a worker to share — not as a matter of collective bargaining muscle, but as a matter of right — to share in the fruits of advancing technology.

"The second issue was, why should workers be victimized by inflationary forces, over which they had no control, and which eroded their true wage position."

While critics have often assailed labor leaders as leftist "Anti-Americans" or "Communists," Victor takes particular pains to show that there is no question about divided allegiance; militant anti-Communist who believed in the true ethics of democracy, Walter Reuther's patriotism is unquestionable.

That he put himself in constant danger, thinking only of those American workers who depended upon him, in 1948, in 1948, Walter was shot, gunned and almost killed in his own kitchen by assassins allegedly hired by the auto companies, and in 1949, Victor was their target. In both cases, the police, F.B.I. and establishment looked the other way, the author writes.

Victor points out that Walter's toughest adversary was George Meany, for there was a basic "incompatibility of the two men." Dissent erupted between them over Cesar Chavez's attempt to form a farm worker union, and the civil rights "March on Washington."

Victor's hostility toward the man is obvious, for he describes him as treating "some proud students of affiliated unions and members of his own council as vassals" and "irresponsible," possessing "vulgarity and anger" as well as a "desultory manner."

Disagreement on the Vietnam war "was the final blow to the wedge splitting the UAW and the merged AFL-CIO." When the protestors spoke out, Meany cried "Throw the kooks out!" and he charged that the resolution, supported by the Reuthers, that called for an end to the war, "had been written in Hanoi." Thus, the withdrawal of the UAW from the merged organization was inevitable.

The UAW felt it could no longer acquiesce to the policies and practices of the AFL-CIO. Thus in 1968, Walter joined with the Teamsters Union in creating the Alliance for Labor Action (ALA), which would be "a new concept of union organization."

It is intent, which Walter stated in 1967, was to "spread across the face of the nation, changing the social character of the inner city structure and uplifting the lives of millions of slum dwellers.

It also provided the poor with their own self-sufficient economic organization, and many areas of social and economic need.

These and many other facets of community life become integrated in the work and effort of "community unionism," he said.

It came to represent four million trade unionists and provided money and manpower to Chicago's United Farm Workers, Chicano in East Los Angeles were organized in the Newark, "Telego," while projects were implemented in the ghettos of Newark, Chicago, the St. Louis-Tanday area and Daytona Beach, Florida.

The ALA opposed Nixon's program to enlarge our anti-ballistic missile arsenal and to escalate the war in Vietnam. With Walter's death, the ALA also died, and the liberal programs that flourished under him were lost to the Teamsters mad shuffle to reestablish their close alliance with Nixon.

In his closing chapter, Victor points out that "there was virtually nothing constructive under our current President Richard M. Nixon." Recession and inflation brought unemployment and discord.

There, Victor devoted his energies to the building of a Workers' Woodland retreat, in expression of his vision for all men to have a place to "study, play, bring their families and train to be leaders in the trade union movement."

It was returning from there, that his plan crashed.

In "The Brothers Reuther" Victor Reuther presents a man charged by humanism and good-will. Walter Reuther was a human being of vision and courage. High-strung, aggressive, strong in body and high in morale, he had incredible energy which he expressed in love for his fellow man.

Thus, "The Brothers Reuther" proves fascinating reading for how rare it is to have someone like this man pass our way. Too few men have had the vision as well as the power to see a new world.

Victor Reuther offers fresh and touching insights into this courageous man who could believe that, "Together we shall build that better tomorrow in the image of peace, in the image of freedom, in the image of social justice, and in the image of human brotherhood."

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