

# Walter Reuther

The man who eventually became the firebrand leader of the United Auto Workers was born in Wheeling, West Virginia in 1907. Walter Reuther was a first-generation German-American and learned socialist ideals and union politics from his father.

Arriving in Detroit at the age of 19, Reuther became a skilled tool and die maker. He enrolled at the College of the City of Detroit (now Wayne State University) and became active in various socialist organizations. During this period, Reuther toured Germany and Russia, experiencing life in European factories firsthand. Upon returning, he married May Wolf, a teacher and activist; together they had two daughters.

Reuther was a natural speaker and his talent for organizing laborers and confronting corporations vaulted him to the highest leadership positions. After spurring change in the automobile business, he turned to other industries, including agriculture and health care, and the issues of civil rights, poverty and education.

Reuther and his wife were killed in a plane crash at Pellston, Michigan in 1970.



# Walter Reuther's Detroit

As America recovered from the Great Depression, Detroit factories went back to work. Desperate job seekers found conditions of employment increasingly harsh. The prospect of union intervention was attractive and over time Detroit transformed from America's least unionized industrial city to one of the most unionized.

Despite heavy – often violent – resistance from corporations, union organizers convinced workers in many industries – restaurant, laundry, manufacturing, printing and trucking – to join. Membership grew into the hundreds of thousands. Walkouts and strikes became headline news. The Detroit papers reported these events in detail, often taking sides.

With the coming of World War II, labor was at a premium and unions helped keep production flowing. After the war, organized labor fought for worker safety, job security and an increased standard of living, including better wages and support for education.

Over the years, Detroit unions matured. Communist influences were rejected. Socialist rhetoric was adapted to fight poverty and segregation. The radicalism of the early years evolved into a middle-class conservatism.



# Hero?

Walter Reuther was one of the most influential labor leaders in American history. To members of the United Automobile Workers (UAW) union and to working people in Detroit and around the nation, Reuther was a genuine hero.

As UAW president, Reuther was the chosen leader for more than 1.5 million workers, negotiating contracts that made them the industrial elite of the working world in terms of wages, benefits and workplace democracy. Under his leadership, the union also became a force in local and national politics. Reuther endeared himself to UAW members with his toughness at the bargaining table and his willingness to fight for dignity in the workplace.

Reuther was also admired for his social vision and political clout, which went far beyond his success in the labor movement. He was a close associate and supporter of many prominent leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez and Eleanor Roosevelt. Reuther was also an advisor to President Lyndon Johnson and he helped shape national urban policy.

Many Americans believed that Walter Reuther made a positive difference in their lives and felt that he sincerely worked for social and economic justice for all.



# Villain?

Despite Walter Reuther's successes in advancing the cause of the American worker, many Americans opposed his efforts with the United Auto Workers (UAW) and rejected his ideas regarding national social and economic policies.

Automotive executives and some political leaders believed Reuther was a severe threat to their authority. Within the auto industry, Reuther advocated allowing workers to have a voice in decisions regarding production methods and goals. This was heresy to automotive executives who believed it was their right to control all decisions on the shop floor.

To some people, Reuther's ideas and tactics indicated that he had a hidden socialist agenda for the nation. George Romney, CEO of American Motors and future governor of Michigan, called Reuther "The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit" because Reuther was "bringing about the revolution without seeming to disturb the existing forms of society."

Some opponents took drastic measures to express their dislike for Reuther. In 1948 he survived an assassination attempt in his home. Although the case was never solved, it was believed to be an act of local crime lord who wished to keep Reuther and the UAW away from his business in Detroit.

