

■ Auto Workers Strike

Date: 1933

Author: Walter Reuther

Genre: magazine article

Summary Overview

Walter Reuther is considered a significant figure in liberal and progressive thought, particularly within the context of labor rights and social justice. As a prominent union leader and president of the United Auto Workers (UAW), Reuther championed workers' rights, fair wages, improved working conditions, and social equality. His advocacy extended beyond labor issues to include civil rights, anti-poverty efforts, and peace initiatives.

The 1935 passage of the National Labor Relations Act, which established federal protections for labor organizing, and the subsequent sit-down strike and organization of General Motors workers in Flint, Michigan, is often the most visible and well-remembered example of automotive industry union activism during the era of the Great Depression. Attempts to unionize auto workers, however, had gone on for years and significant, if less well-remembered industrial actions paved the way for developments later in the decade.

In this 1933 article, Reuther tells the story of the long, difficult effort to unionize the workers of the American automotive industry and the results of their efforts, a 1933 strike against the Briggs Manufacturing company in early 1933. Reuther imbues his account with praise for the efforts of the left-wing Auto Workers Union who succeeded where the more staid, less radical American Federation of Labor had failed.

Reuther also uses this article to discuss the methods used by factory owners to break strikes and turn members of the working class against each other. Despite these attempts, Reuther details the way in which the effects of the strike at the Briggs corporation spread throughout the automotive industry in the Detroit area. Reuther's account of the strike also notes the important role played in the picketing by leftist students from the local university, illustrating the broad appeal of the labor movement.

Defining Moment

This history of modern, industrial labor organization in the United States dates back to the formation of the Knights of Labor following the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. The notion of a labor union for all workers, skilled and unskilled proved unwieldy and less radical labor organizations like Samuel Gompers's American Federation of Labor focused on organizing workers who were employed in the skilled trades. Throughout the early twentieth century, the American labor movement had its ups and downs, but the 1920s were a particularly dark time for labor organiz-



Walter Reuther. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

ing. Three successive Republican presidential administrations, along with a Congress that was dominated by Republicans for most of the decade ensured that labor organizers had an uphill struggle. The onset of the Great Depression in 1929 led to a resurgence in attempts to widely organize American workers. the automotive industry, which employed millions of Americans had been a target of unionization attempts since the 1920s. As Reuther described in his article, those efforts were difficult.

The target of the strike discussed by Reuther in this article, the Briggs Manufacturing Company, was a coachwork company, which meant that they designed and built the bodies that automobile manufacturers would turn into complete cars. During the 1920s and 1930s, carmakers did not always make every part of the car in their own factories and would purchase vital components—even the entire car or truck body—from other manufacturers. At the time of the strike Reuther discusses in the article, Briggs was experiencing profitable business even during the Great Depression. In fact, 1932 was the only year during the Depression where the company lost money. Despite profits in the millions of dollars nearly every year, Briggs's employees were among the worst compensated in the industry. In the early 1930s, for example, Ford's assembly line workers earned a dollar an hour (\$18-19 in 2016 dollars), Briggs paid their assembly workers ten cents per hour (\$1-2 in 2016 dollars). These were conditions that made the Briggs Company ripe for labor unrest.

Author Biography

Born in Wheeling, West Virginia in 1907, Walter Reuther was raised by a socialist father, a brewery worker who had come to the United States from Germany and Reuther absorbed his father's ideas about union activism and socialism from a young age. Training as a tool-and-die worker, in 1927 Reuther moved to Detroit, Michigan and began working for the Ford Motor Company. He and his brothers were becoming known as socialist activists at the City College of Detroit (which, in 1933, became part of Wayne State University). As the economic decline of the Great Depression deepened, Reuther was laid off from Ford in 1932. Reuther would maintain later that he was laid off because of his socialist activism.

It was while he was laid off from Ford that he wrote this 1933 article for *The Student Outlook*. The Outlook was the magazine of the Student League for Industrial Democracy, an organization which at the time served as an unofficial student branch of the Socialist Party of America in the early 1930s. Reuther's interest in socialism and industrialization let him on an extensive overseas trip from 1933 to 1935, during which time he worked in an automotive plant in the Soviet Union. Upon his return to the United States, Reuther began working at General Motors and became an active part of the United Automobile Workers union. Reuther would leave the socialist party and, eventually, become part of the Democratic party. He would become one of the most significant figures in American labor history. Reuther died in a plane crash on May 9, 1970.



Historical Document

Auto Workers Strike

One year ago a complacent public was shocked by the news of the Ford Riot in which four workers were killed and forty wounded. Added to this tragic method of education comes the latest Briggs' strike and the other related strikes which have all slowly and painfully had their effect in educating the public as to the true conditions in the auto industry.

The American Federation of Labor once made an effort to organize the auto workers through the Machinist's Union, but because of craft limitations in a craftless industry, the Machinist's Union did not scratch the surface of the nut it hoped to crack. Not until 1926 at their convention in Detroit did the A.F. of L. seriously consider the organization of the production workers of the industry. The hope that a militant and constructive program of unionization would grow out of the convention was shattered when the A.F. of L. strategists permitted their plans to degenerate into a plea to the "enlightened" capitalists to accept the leadership of a responsible labor group rather than be exposed to the dangers of radicals and agitators. The complete failure of the A.F. of L.'s attempt to organize the production workers resulted in its leadership voicing the attitude that the task of unionizing the auto workers was impossible.

The challenge to organize the production workers was taken up by the Auto Workers Union, which is organized on a broad industrial basis and is founded on the principle of the class struggle. At one time the union was affiliated with the A.F. of L., but its charter was revoked over a question of jurisdiction. During the years 1919 and 1920, when the auto industry was going through a period of rapid expansion, the membership in the union grew to 45,000 and many successful strikes were staged in some of the plants.

The success of the union, however, was short-lived, for the depression of 1921 so paralyzed the auto industry that the union was broken and it declined until in 1924 the membership numbered only about 1500. As the power of the union declined, the employers became more aggressive and wage cuts, speedups, and excessive hours were thrust upon the workers. The corporations, realizing that the union might come to life at some future date, inaugurated a period of personnel management and sham industrial democracy. The Chrysler Industrial Corporation, the welfare scheme of the Chrysler Corporation, in which the workers have a voice only in the management of the baseball team typifies the extent of industrial democracy afforded by this plan.

In the face of overwhelming odds, the remnants of the Auto Workers Union, under left wing leadership kept up an unceasing struggle to unionize the auto workers into a militant, class conscious industrial organization.

After years of constant and untiring propaganda work and agitation through the departmental committees, working secretly and under great pressure, and by selling and distributing small shop papers, such as the *Ford Worker* and the *Briggs Worker*, at the gates of the plants, the Auto Workers Union finally felt that it had sufficient strength and that the time was ripe for action. It called a strike at the Briggs Waterloo Plant. The strike, while it was consciously planned by the union was nevertheless the expression of the Briggs' workers en masse against the starvation wages, long hours and further wage cuts which have given the Briggs Corporation the reputation of being the most vicious sweat shop and hellhole in Detroit.

Threatened with a twenty percent wage cut, 600 tool-and-die makers of the Waterloo plant struck 100 percent strong against the Briggs industrial aristocracy.

A strategic moment had been selected for this first strike as the tools and dies for the new Ford car were about seventy-five percent complete and production could not begin on schedule without their completion.

The strike so completely paralyzed the Briggs Corporation that after three days of picketing, the company was compelled to withdraw the wage cut, recognize the union shop committees and furthermore, to reinstate the former wage rate in the other three Briggs plants where the cut had already gone into effect. The solidarity of the Briggs' workers in their successful strike caused the Hudson Motor Company to remove the signs in their factories announcing a ten percent wage cut and replacing them by notices announcing the withdrawal of the wage cut.

Instilled with confidence by the activities of the Briggs' workers, fifteen hundred men from the Motor Products Co. went out on strike against a fifteen percent wage cut levied several weeks before. As a result the Motor Products Co. was also forced, after three days of strike activity, to rescind the wage slash, to recognize shop committees, to establish a minimum wage rate of thirty cents for women and forty cents for men on production. In many cases this meant an actual increase of fifty percent in wages.

Two successful and well-organized strikes within one week filled the workers of Detroit with a spirit of revolt against capitalist feudalism and paved the way for a rapid succession of strikes unparalleled in the history of the auto industry.

Fired with enthusiasm by the success of the strike at the Briggs' Waterloo plant, and encouraged by the splendid display of solidarity among the ranks of the employed and unemployed, 10,000 Briggs' workers from the Highland Park and Mack Avenue plants walked out on strike on January 23rd against starvation wages and the "dead time" policy. So low were the wages at Briggs that some of the woman workers claimed that their pay ranged from five cents per hour upwards, while men on production were getting from thirteen cents upward per hour. The "dead time" policy of the company was the source of much grievance as some employees were compelled to wait as long as three hours for material without compensation for "dead time," the period they had to wait.

The workers of the Waterloo and Meldrum Avenue plants soon followed the action of the other plants and pledged their solidarity and agreed among themselves to go back to work only after their rights were recognized and their grievances settled. The strikers met, endorsed the leadership of the Auto Workers Union, outlined their demands, elected their department representatives to the general strike committee and immediately began the picketing of the various plants.

Insofar as the strike paralyzed all four Briggs' plants, the strike was one hundred percent successful. The workers instead of returning to their jobs, joined the others in the fast growing picket line, despite the fact that the press carried headlines to the effect that the strike was settled and urged the strikers to return to their jobs.

As a whole the strike was most orderly except for a few instances where strikers molested scabs who were leaving the plant and sent several of them to the hospital. In one case when bodies from Briggs were being transported on trucks, a group of strikers demolished the bodies. Further shipments ceased.

All day and all night the picketers marched in front of cold winds, disregarding their empty stomachs. The sight of these thousands of hungry and poorly clothed industrial workers carrying their protest banners; the inspired sound of their chants, urging the workers to "organize, unite and fight" had the usual effect upon the already frightened owners of industry who feared greatly this latest revolt of their machine-tenders. The police were there in full force. Dearborn's mounted of Ford Riot fame, Detroit's riot squads, Highland Park's police, Wayne County scout cars, and Governor Comstock's state troopers were all on the spot, equipped with guns, tear gas and clubs. As many as 250 of them were stationed at one plant. Aside from arresting a few picketers, the police were very conservative in their activities. They did not seem eager to become violent with a crowd of desperate strikers. Perhaps they had learned their lesson from the Ford Riot.

At first the strikers were quite hostile toward the police, but soon became quite friendly with them (for they didn't desire violence either), and the picketers began singing to the effect that after they had won their own strike, they would organize the cops. Many of the "workers" in uniform stated they had already had too many salary cuts and would welcome a union that could secure for them a decent living.

Production at the Ford River Rouge plant, crippled by the Briggs' strike, was shut down completely. Workers were notified that they could not return until the strike at Briggs was over. Ford's strike-breaking role was one more demonstrated when he shut down his tool and die rooms which were not dependent upon production at Briggs. Ford's giving notice to his workers that it was the Briggs' strike that was responsible for their layoff was but another attempt by Ford to break the strike by making his workers and public antagonistic to the strikers. So interested was Ford in breaking the strike that he even closed his Highland Park Store.

The Murray Corporation using tactics similar to Ford's, and demonstrating along with Ford, capitalist solidarity with the Briggs' concern, locked out approximately 4,000 production workers in an attempt to break the strike, but to their surprise the tool and die division went out on a strike in support of the Briggs' strikers and the locked out workers.

In the meantime the Auto Workers Union had been carrying on a great deal of propaganda in the other auto plants in an attempt to secure the support of all auto workers. Through the formation of inside groups, 3,000 body workers of the Hudson Motor Body plant at Connors and Gratiot Avenues walked out on strike "against wage cuts and working conditions" as one of the workers' committee expressed it. While this committee which represents the Hudson strikers claims that their strike is independent of the Briggs' strike, it is quite evident that their strike was planned by the same union that called the one at Briggs. As a result of the Hudson walkout, both of the Hudson plants are shut down completely.

At the Mack Avenue plant of Briggs', one of the most encouraging features of the entire strike occurred when several thousand unemployed formed a picket line across the street from the picketing strikers and demonstrated their solidarity with their fellow workers.

As in many other present day strikes, the students also played their part. About twenty students from the College of the City of Detroit (both Communists and Socialists) marched in line with the Briggs' picketers, singing and carrying signs reading "City College Students Unite with Strikers."

The tremendous effect this cooperation from the "respectable young intellectuals" had in breaking down the antipathy of the bystanders and minimizing

the “red scare” can best be illustrated by the fact that during the first few critical hours of the strike when it was most difficult to get the workers to fall in line with the picketers, this group of students through their songs and general militant activity aided in swelling the numbers of the picket line from fifty to four hundred in but a few hours. So effective was the work of the student group that it was not long before the company ordered the police to take the students off the picket line. The police surrounded the group and took them inside the plant for questioning. The school authorities were notified and a general attempt was made to intimidate the students. But the reply was a larger group of students on the line the next morning.

The present strikes in the automobile field are the most significant and encouraging developments in the history of the industry. The union claims it has the key men in the body plants organized 100 percent and production cannot be resumed without them. If the workers win it will be the beginning of a new era in the struggle of labor to emancipate itself.



Glossary

craft limitations: rules within a skilled trades union that restrict who can be a member

“in so far as”: to the degree that

rescind: to undo or withdraw a policy

scabs: workers who defy a strike in order to work for the business being struck against

speedups: increased production demands on workers

Document Analysis

Reuther begins his account by recalling the Ford Riot of a year before, characterizing that incident and the Briggs's strike as events that will educate the public about "the true conditions in the auto industry." He then provides an overview of attempts to unionize the automotive industry during the 1920s. The AFL's efforts (through the Machinists' union) failed because the organization focused on skilled labor and the automotive industry was largely made up of unskilled workers. In 1926, the AFL made another attempt however this attempt failed because, according to Reuther, the union did not maintain a radical enough attitude. The attempt to organize the auto industry was continued by the Auto Workers Union which was "founded on the principle of class struggle"—an indicator that they were much more politically radical than the AFL. This union grew rapidly and organized several successful strikes. An economic downturn in 1921, however, led to a drastic decline in union membership and power. Despite this, the union has continued on. Here, Reuther emphasizes the importance of "left wing leadership" to the union's continued work.

After laying groundwork for years, the union made the decision to call a strike at the Briggs Waterloo plant against "starvation wages" and miserable working conditions and the threat of further wage cuts. The strike shut down production across the corporation and management withdrew the wage cut. Reuther reported that the success of the strike convinced other companies and plants to restore wages or to cancel plans for wage cuts. Strikes occurred at other plants, inspired by the Briggs action. These successful efforts, according to Reuther "filled the workers of Detroit with a spirit of revolt against capitalist feudalism."

Strikes continued at other Briggs plants around Detroit, with women joining the strike effort. Violence, according to Reuther was confined to attacking scab workers and some damage to products. Reuther then continues to characterize the striking workers as self-sacrificial, facing bitterly cold weather and hunger in order to march on the picket lines. This frightened the factory owners who "feared greatly this latest

revolt of their machine-tenders." Police—including mounted units, riot squads, and state troopers were stationed at plants. The police, however, did not initiate violence toward the strikers. In fact, the workers—despite initial hostilities—offered to organize the police. Reuther claims that many of the police said they would welcome unionization, but whether or not that was actually the case is unknown.

The strike affected more than just the Briggs factories. Ford's production was halted by the lack of product coming from Briggs plants. Ford, however, went further and—in what Reuther calls a "strike-breaking" attempt, shut down production even of those areas that were not idled by the Briggs strike, attempting to turn his workers against the labor movement by convincing them that the strike was the reason he had laid them off. The Murray corporation locked out 4000 workers, but found itself the victim of a strike by its own tool and die workers.

Reuther next discusses the work of the Auto Workers Union during the strike, spreading propaganda in plants, attempting to increase the number of organized workers. These attempts led to thousands more auto workers coming out on strike, shutting down, for example, the Hudson auto plant. The strike even extended to the unemployed who joined the picket line at the Briggs plant. College students also joined the picket lines, with Reuther identifying them as Communists and Socialists. Reuther credits the presence of the "respectable" students as easing public concerns about the radical politics of the labor uprising.

Reuther concludes by arguing that the Briggs strike was "the most significant and encouraging developments in the history of the industry" and would lead to the full unionization of auto workers in the United States, a crucial step toward the ultimate goal of the "emancipation" of labor.

Essential Themes

Walter Reuther's account of the Briggs strike is not merely a piece of thorough reporting on a significant industrial action. It is also a carefully presentation that Reuther uses to make a number of important arguments about the nature of the labor movement in

the United States in the early 1930s. Reuther makes the case that the more traditional, craft-based skilled trades unionism of the AFL was not effective in organizing the auto industry. Rather, it was the broad-based union that was “organized on a broad industrial basis” and “founded on the principle of the class struggle” is the type of labor organization that was able to not only organize auto workers but also coordinate a number of effective strikes. Reuther is sure to note the Auto Workers Union had undertaken an “unceasing struggle to unionize the auto workers into a militant, class conscious industrial organization.” Reuther’s socialist/communist viewpoint comes through clearly in this article. Reuther is also very careful to explain how the actions of striking workers at one plant had cumulative effects of factories that may not even have been unionized at the time. The narrative he develops tells the story of factory owners attempting to play workers against each other but, in Reuther’s telling, this is unsuccessful. Even the police brought into intimidate the striking workers are

persuaded by the rhetoric of the auto industry’s class warriors.

—Aaron John Gulyas, MA

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