

IMPERIAL GERMAN SOCIALISM IN THE LIFE AND WORK OF UAW PRESIDENT WALTER PHILIP REUTHER

In the minds of many Americans socialism and communism are doubtless almost synonymous, and for not a few Americans both were long associated with what used to be called the "Red Scare."¹ To Germans, on the other hand, socialism has been a clearly identifiable mode of thought which has seldom been confused with communism and Marxism. Most Germans are aware that Marx and Engels, by applying to practical social problems the Hegelian idea of dialectics, arrived at a concept of economic socialism which advocated the destruction of capitalism and the take-over of production by the proletariat. According to Marx, class struggle was inevitable. The proletariat had acquired an awareness that the bourgeoisie together with the state had to be eliminated so that a "dictatorship of the proletariat" could advance classless communism in which the exploitation of man would cease. Although many Americans would not be, most Germans are also aware that it was this brand of socialism which German governments vigorously, and at times violently opposed from the time of Kaiser Wilhelm I through the period of National Socialism and still reject today.

As H. Grebling observes, the German labor movement in the second half of the nineteenth century was divided between two streams of thought: "Lassalle's ideas of social-democratic reforms advocating the nation-state, and the international revolutionary socialism of Marx and Engels."² Like Marx and Engels, Ferdinand Lassalle, born in Breslau on April 11, 1825, had also been a student of Hegel, from whose teachings he had distilled his notion of the state, as a "unity of the individuals committed to a moral objective."³ He further defined his purpose as the education and development of mankind for a life of freedom. Lassalle's primary published work

appeared in 1861 under the title *Das System der erworbenen Rechte* in which he proposed a "scientific legal system for revolution and socialism." In various drafts he also aligned himself with the proponents of a national state without Austria in the ongoing "Großdeutsch-Kleindeutsch" debate.

In 1848/49 Lassalle joined the circles of Marx and Engels with their rallying organ, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. For a time not only did he recommend with them the foundation of a political party of socialists but he also condoned overthrowing the state, although only through the peaceful means of granting suffrage to the working classes. Strange as it may seem in the light of later developments, the goals of Lassalle and Marx were at the time not greatly divergent. Nor were the two men ever at odds about their Utopian goals. The means, of course, were very different! Instead of violence, Lassalle proposed a method of state supports and credits to establish production associations which the workers would eventually own as their share of the process. Lassalle's ideas later became the theoretical basis for the American cooperative movement, which was in part derived from late 19th century immigrants to the United States, principally those from the Scandinavian countries.⁴ Lassalle rejected class struggle and similar ideologies as devices concocted by the workers merely to help themselves. With faith in what was to become unionism, Lassalle founded the *Allgemeiner deutscher Arbeiterverein* and became its first president in May, 1863. Through his writings, he supplied the theoretical basis which ever since has served as the foundation on which German state social politics has been grounded.

The first paragraph of the new workers' union reads: "...the undersigned establish a union which, based on the conviction that

only a universal, equal, and direct franchise can secure adequate representation of the social interests of the German working class and genuine abolition of class differences in society, aims at effecting, by peaceful and lawful means... the establishment of a universal, equal, and direct franchise."⁵ Because Lassalle opposed liberalism *per se* but supported suffrage for all people, he was invited as early as 1863 for talks with Bismarck, who had been Prime Minister of Prussia since 1862. At this time, Bismarck was in a position to prevent the abdication of the Prussian king and to obstruct the constitution, even to govern against it and the diet of Prussia, whenever he chose. Although the visits between Lassalle and Bismarck remained indecisive as far as the history of state-directed socialism is concerned, there is little doubt that Lassalle's ideas eventually exerted strong influence on the social legislation which Bismarck initiated in the early 1880's.

At the inauguration of the German Reichstag in 1881, Kaiser Wilhelm I instructed Bismarck to read an imperial proclamation setting forth the principles of future German social legislation: "To find the proper ways and means for this welfare is a difficult but a leading task for any community that is based on the moral foundations of Christian existence. We hope that closer conjunction with the real forces inherent in this social life and their combination in the form of cooperatives under state protection and state assistance will also make it possible to solve tasks which the state would be unable to accomplish to the same extent by itself. It will not, however, be possible to attain this objective without substantial expenditure."⁶

Drawing upon the legacy of Lassalle, who had died in 1864, the Kaiser proposed almost verbatim the kind of socialism that would result in the world's first social security system. It was, thus, Lassalle's version of socialism that would influence the policies and actions of the German immigrant worker groups in the United States, from New York to Chicago with its Haymarket Riots, and to Detroit with its immense number of German industrial workers. Until the outbreak of World War I, many theoretical writers on socialism con-

tinued to give credit for democratic socialism to the Lassallean Imperial German model. For example, G. A. Kleene writing in 1901 in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* said:

In the same decade, Liebknecht and his young disciple, Bebel, began to preach to the German laborer the ideas of Karl Marx, ideas differing in important respects from those of Lassalle. The latter's aims were idealistic, national and state socialistic; the socialism of Karl Marx was based on materialism, was international or cosmopolitan, and hostile to the existing state and to state socialism. In the seventies, followers of Marx and Lassalle united to form the "Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei" as the German Social Democratic Party was then called, and the first platform of the party, the so-called Gotha program, which contains indications of a compromise between the two groups. As time passed, the doctrine of Marx became predominant.⁷

Because Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm I falsely concluded that an assassination attempt on the 81-year-old emperor had been perpetrated by members of the Social Democratic Party, the SPD was outlawed by the Reichstag in October, 1878, and remained under interdiction for twelve years until 1890. Partly because of the martyr image this action inspired for the delegates remaining in the Reichstag and partly because Bismarck was driven by the ideology of Lassalle as untainted by Marx, Bebel and Liebknecht, in 1883 Imperial Germany passed the program for national health insurance. In 1884 accident insurance, and in 1889 invalid and old age insurance also became law. Thereafter the German Imperial package became the model for the progressive nations of the world.

Lassallean socialism arrived in the United States in various stages and forms and at different times. Sometimes it came with the heavy overtones of Marx, especially as couched in the doctrines of Lassalle's two pupils, August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht.

In this intellectual climate on both sides of the Atlantic lived the extended family of Walter Philip Reuther. Born on September 1, 1907, in Wheeling, West Virginia, on the eve of Labor Day, Walter was raised in a plain-living but high-minded German-American family.⁸ Walter was the second of four sons and a



*A group of Reuther relatives in Ruit or Schamhausen, 1933.
Courtesy The Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University*

considerably younger daughter of Valentine Reuther, who had come to the United States as an eleven-year-old boy with his father, Jacob Reuther, and his mother, Christine Fuchs Reuther, in 1892. The family first settled in the small village of Effingham, Illinois.

Jacob Reuther was always non-conformist. He stood against the local Lutheran church and against Prussian militarism. But Jacob was also very Christian — the Reuthers were Christian Socialists by their own designation. Rather than attending church, Jacob usually conducted services at home every Sunday morning. Later Lutheran pastors in Illinois tried to recruit Jacob's son Valentine (Walter's father) for the ministry because he was well versed in the Bible and Christian ethics, but without success. Instead, caught in a seeming dead-end job working on the farm in Illinois, Valentine joined his older brother, Jacob, who had already gone to live in Wheeling, West Virginia, where steel industries were mushrooming in the Ohio Valley.

In Wheeling, Valentine met and eventually married Anna Stocker, the daughter of Jacob

Stocker, a German wagon maker who had left Germany. In a grimy, soot-laden section of Wheeling which was sandwiched between the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad tracks on one side, and factories intermingled with dirty coal mines on the other, Walter, like his siblings Theodore (1905), Walter (1907), Roy (1909), Victor (1912), and finally Christine (1923),⁹ was born.

In addition to the hardships typical of the times for an immigrant family, the Reuther family has been characterized by biographer Victor as one in which "the Old World persisted... prayer before every meal; music that goes wherever Germans go. Mother loved to sing Swabian folk songs and my father enjoyed both his Rhineland songs and the classical music he had learned in the formal male chorus of the Beethoven *Gesangverein*. ...According to my mother, some of their most pleasant hours in those early days were spent sitting on the stoop, making music while the neighbors either joined in or expressed their appreciation" (16). Victor also recounts the outings with the Turnverein in Mozart Park.

The Reuther family was especially taken with Philip Reuther, whom Valentine had helped bring over from Germany and who "introduced my father to the Socialist movement" (17). Although Valentine had been active in the steel mill union, he had not formally known Socialist literature and it was Philip who brought it with him from Imperial Germany. Valentine had formed his ideas by reading avidly the materials he got from the Eugene Debs organization and from the Kansas Socialist publishing houses.¹⁰

In the process the Reuthers became avid unionists. Valentine already had established a chapter of the International Brewery Workers Federation, though subsequently he ran into conflict with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters because the latter claimed jurisdiction for the drivers of beer wagons. Valentine fought against separating skilled from menial laborers. When the Schmulbach brewery later organized, Val Reuther was elected the union's delegate to the Ohio Valley Assembly where he soon learned the ideas

of other union representatives. Weak in language skills, be it English or German, Val immediately afterwards (in 1909) enrolled in correspondence courses to expand his speaking and writing skills in both languages. He also read extensively the works of Goethe, Schiller and other classicists and in time became an expert union organizer who was called to all parts of the state to assist the fledgling movement.

When Eugene V. Debs became a candidate for the presidency, Val often travelled with him on the famous "Red Special," going to workers' rallies and to meetings of ethnic Germans to make speeches and elicit their support for Debs as President on the Socialist ticket. Three times he campaigned all over West Virginia for Debs, in 1904, 1908, and 1912.¹¹ So vigorous was the elder Reuther's support for Debs, the Socialist candidate, that when Debs was imprisoned during World War I for violation of the Espionage Act, Val Reuther visited him often in the Moundsville penitentiary south of Wheeling. Walter and



*A home in the village of Ruit or Schamhausen, 1933.
Courtesy The Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne
State University*

Victor accompanied their father on one such visit in 1919, just before Debs was transferred to Atlanta penitentiary, and prior to his run for the presidency from prison in 1920. Victor Reuther describes the encounter in his biography:

When the heavy iron gate slammed shut with a clang, I saw tears running down my father's cheeks. I had never seen him weep before. On the way back to Wheeling there was no conversation, until my father broke the silence, shaking his head and saying over and over again, "How can they imprison so kind and gentle a man!"¹²

More than from any other direct source, it was from his father that Walter Reuther was conditioned to be a mediator of Imperial German Socialism to the American labor movement. Summarizing the career of Valentine Reuther, Evelyn Harris and Frank J. Krebs in their history of the West Virginia State Federation of Labor, *From Humble Beginnings*, write:

Valentine Reuther, whose son Walter P. Reuther became president of the United Automobile Workers and vice-president of the AFL-CIO, was a leader of the labor movement in Wheeling__ Val Reuther lived in the days when it took courage to act publicly as a labor leader. It took double courage in Valentine's case because in politics he was linked with Debs and the Socialists. Val Reuther had run unsuccessfully for the State Legislature, from the Wheeling district, on the Socialist ticket. "Socialism in American politics has been most thoroughly under German influence," according to one writer. Wheeling had a strong German element. This German influence reached back to the founding of the state of West Virginia.... Sixteen delegates at the 1912 State Federation had German names, including the three delegates Reuther, Reiber and Seidler, who introduced the "unity of workers" resolution."

During World War I, there was no question whatever about the loyalty of the Reuther family to the United States, but whether for unjustified suspicions .or for his pro-Socialist stance, Val Reuther suffered many personal and political attacks. At one point vigilantes painted the front door of the family home yellow. Others sent anonymous diatribes through the mail. Following the example of the rest of the country, the citizens of Wheeling discontinued teaching German in the

schools, closed down the Beethoven *Gesangverein* along with other German organizations, and heaped opprobrium on the German newspapers published in the area.¹⁴

Meanwhile far out west in Detroit, Henry Ford had since 1908 been building his famous "Tin Lizzie" Model T, a horseless carriage that almost any American could afford. Before the T, an automobile had been a rich man's toy, prompting Woodrow Wilson to remark ironically that it was the most important single thing that was turning the resentful common people to Socialism.¹⁵ Until the 1920s, when competitors began gaining on him, Henry Ford was synonymous with car-making. As a result of the competition, Ford reluctantly decided, in 1927, to stop producing the Model T, still virtually unchanged from the 1908 model, and to bring out a new series, the Model A. The Ford Motor Company had been shut down for months for retooling, when in February, 1927 Walter Reuther arrived in Detroit to find work.¹⁶

To everyone's surprise given his youthful age, Walter was quickly hired at the Briggs Manufacturing Company, a major supplier of bodies to Ford. Briggs was, however, the industry's worst employer. Long hours and the rapid pace of machines left workers exhausted and suffering from so many accidents that the factory had become known as "the butcher shop." Dissatisfied with the working conditions, Reuther quit and after a short time succeeded in persuading a foreman at Ford to hire him as a skilled tool and tie maker for \$1.05 an hour in an industry where the average was 50 cents.

During those early years in Detroit, Walter pursued a course of self-improvement. He was now past his twenty-first birthday and had not yet finished high school.¹⁷ When joining the YMCA he had filled out a questionnaire about his career ambitions stating that he wanted to be either a labor organizer or a chicken farmer. (Many years later automobile industry negotiators told him he would have made an excellent chicken farmer.)¹⁸ He also enrolled in Fordson High School where he could attend classes because his daytime shift at Ford did not begin until late in the afternoon.

After earning his diploma at age 22, Walter enrolled in Detroit's municipal university — now Wayne State University — where he helped organize the Social Problems Club, then affiliated with the League for Industrial Democracy. This organization included charter members like Upton Sinclair, Clarence Darrow, Jack London, Walter Lippmann and Ralph Bunche.¹⁹ In reality, the Social Club was little more than a campus front for the Socialist Party which previously had been known as the Intercollegiate Socialist League and which in the 1960s would spawn the Students for a Democratic Society. As a true activist in the Social Problems Club, Walter organized a protest over the exclusion of Negro students from a local hotel swimming pool and led the fight to remove ROTC from the University. With other members, he also plunged into the 1932 presidential campaign, not in support of Franklin D. Roosevelt to be sure, but of Norman Thomas, the new candidate on the Socialist Party ticket. In spite of all their efforts, including the support generated by the depression then raging in American cities, Thomas polled fewer than 40,000 votes from Michigan.

During the same period Walter and Victor also exhibited skills as photographers by juxtaposing pictures of homes in impoverished Hooverville with mansions of corporation members and auto industry executives in Grosse Pointe. They took their text for a brochure from Lincoln's Gettysburg address:

Fourscore and seven years ago our forefathers brought forth on this continent a new economic system, conceived in the policies of "laissez faire" and dedicated to the proposition that private profit is the sole incentive to progress. Now we are engaged in a great economic struggle testing whether this nation or any nation so deceived and so dedicated to rugged individualism can long endure.²⁰

Next to the pictures were equally clever captions "Where wealth accumulates and men decay" for the Grosse Pointe houses; and for the Hooverville hovels "Homes that a dying social order is providing for its unemployed workers." At the time Detroit's unemployed were living in dugouts in the city dump where they were using discarded dump truck bodies for shelter, lard cans for stoves, rags

and newspapers for beds. The garbage itself was their only food. The Reuthers commented further about the barracks furnished workers in the American mines of West Virginia:

The American coal fields have been the scene of capitalism's most vicious exploitation. The coal barons own the shacks the miners live in. The barons own the schools their children attend. They own the church they worship in, the store they must buy from, the roads and railroads over which they must travel. The barons own the judge, the sheriff and the courtroom where the miners seek justice, and last of all the coal barons own the miners because they own the only jobs upon which the miners depend for their existence. The miners and their families are forged to these hovels and the exploitation they symbolize. They cannot leave because the company pays them in scrip. That is only good at the company store and the company always sees to it that the grocery bill and the rent are higher than the paycheck....²¹

All of this activity on the part of Reuther took place in the name of the Socialist Problems Club which attracted ever larger public audiences. Soon Walter built the rumble-seat section of his Model A into a platform that could be unfolded for speech making. During this period, too, there were Soviet technicians at the Ford River Rouge plant learning how to transfer Ford's technology to the Gorky plant in Russia where Walter and Victor would eventually work. It puzzled these Soviets when, periodically, workers would fire rocks through the windows. Wary of all union organizers during the 1932 campaign, the Detroit police watched for their chance to rid the city of both the Soviets and the Reuthers, but without success.

As the 1932 electioneering came to a close, the tired boys on the campaign trail received the following letter from their father:

Your decision to join and work for the establishment of the socialist society does not surprise me. On the contrary, unless all of you boys would at least by the time you reach maturity recognize the existence of a class struggle and take your place on the side of labor politically, I should be keenly disappointed. To me socialism is the star of hope that lights the way, leading the workers from wage slavery to social justice and to know that you boys have joined the movement and are

doing all in your power to spread a doctrine of equal opportunities for all mankind, only tends to increase my love....²²

Socialism was the Reuther ideal, an alternative to a government dominated by large financial interests. Communism, though still masked during the 1930s, was never touted by the Reuther family. They understood clearly the devastating difference between Marxism and Socialism as few living Americans did, then or now. Of course the Reuthers rethought their attitude towards Franklin Roosevelt when, as president, he pushed through the very reforms that Norman Thomas had stood for —Social Security, child labor laws and unemployment compensation among them. This teamwork between government and capitalism along the model implemented by Economics Minister Ludwig Erhard in the Federal Republic Germany beginning in 1948 was conceived already in the Bismarckian era and was proposed by Walter Reuther in his 1941 "Reuther Plan."²³

Most scholars acknowledge that, up to the October Revolution in 1917, international socialism was decidedly a German movement. The German Social Democratic Party was the largest in the world. By the time of the First World War, however, the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels predominated, and their successors had largely assumed control of the entire movement, especially following the success of Bismarck in incorporating Lassallean tenets into his 1880s legislation. Wilhelm Liebknecht, Paul Singer, August Bebel, and later Wilhelm Liebknecht's son Karl, along with Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Kautsky, Eduard Bernstein and others were among the Germans promoting Soviet-style revolution and the socialism it promised. In the early Weimar period from 1919 to about 1925, there were various factions of the Socialist party in Germany, the "Mehrheits Sozialistische Partei Deutschlands" which was home to the likes of Philip Scheidemann and Friedrich Ebert. In the critical early years of the Weimar Republic, the Socialist Party of Germany was opposed by the "Unabhängige Sozialistische Partei Deutschlands," the faction supported by those of the Liebknecht and Luxemburg variety. The important point to remember is

that during these years of European, especially German, crisis, the leadership, whether moderate or extreme, was dominated entirely by the socialist party.²⁴

The socialist party in the United States was a German movement too. It was launched exclusively by and for German immigrants in the 1870s and was essentially a foreign language organization.²⁵ One need only think of Viktor Berger in Wisconsin and many others in the German-American labor movement.²⁶ During the early years of the twentieth century the socialist movement in the United States was gradually Americanized but it flourished only in those areas where densely ethnic German enclaves persisted, such as Milwaukee, Detroit and Cincinnati. Until the First World War, the American socialist movement was authentically German and a phenomenon with which the German-American worker was extremely comfortable. Rather than posing some kind of threat to democracy in the United States, the Second International was but a loose organization of socialist parties of the world whose members met dutifully for May Day parades, picnics with beer, Wurst and potato salad, all accompanied by some labor hymns and perhaps a few theoretical political resolutions.²⁷

Rather than promoting open rebellion and struggle between the bourgeois and the proletariat, the socialist movement before World War I had in fact rejected war and militarism, as articulated by the resolutions passed at the socialist international meeting in Stuttgart in 1907. In the view of German socialists, wars were brought on by the rivalries of capitalists for markets and raw materials as well as the investment opportunities they presented. The proletariat had neither fatherland nor business, and therefore no need for wars to gain or protect their property and interests. If war broke out, then it was the duty of all socialists to withhold support of the war and to counter the efforts of the countries engaging in war. This approach was followed deliberately by German-American socialists even though the United States decided to remain neutral when the First World War broke out. Within two weeks after the August 1914 outbreak, the socialists had already organized their Inter-

national Anti-War and Peace Demonstration in America. Two days following the American declaration of war against Germany in April 1917, the German-American socialists once more took up the cudgel, this time more deliberately, with their militant anti-war statement, which pledged "continuous action and public opposition to the war through demonstrations, mass petitions and all other means within our power." It was written at the St. Louis convention and remained the official position of the American socialists throughout the war.²⁸ So essentially German and Bismarckian was the notion of the Socialist movement that Samuel Gompers, the practical leader of the American Federation of Labor, claimed during the First World War that the whole international socialist movement had been invented by Chancellor Bismarck of Imperial Germany as a device for softening up the world for German conquest.²⁹

Following the October Revolution, it was the Bolsheviks, that is, the Communists of Soviet Russia, rather than the German Social Democratic Party which provided leadership for the world socialist movement. Following World War I, the Soviet Communist party was in charge rather than the ideologues of Germany. When Walter Reuther was developing his leadership skills in the 1930s, as a matter of fact, the Communists referred to his brand of socialism as "Social Fascism," led by men who had betrayed the workers. There is little evidence, however, that Walter was ever really called upon to defend his socialist tradition either from the Communists or the Fascists.

Rather, Reuther was a product of the United States Depression, and more specifically of the year 1933. In that year Paul von Hindenburg appointed Hitler Chancellor. On March 4 of this same year, Franklin D. Roosevelt took the oath of office. And in the Soviet Union during that year, Joseph Stalin finished consolidating his power over arch rivals, completed his first Five Year Plan, and launched a second. Finally, in January, 1933, Walter Reuther at the age of 25 was fired from his job at the Ford Motor Company.³⁰

Almost immediately Walter and Victor decided that this presented the opportunity of their lifetimes. They therefore used their

connections with a Communist Party member and fellow automobile worker in Detroit, John Rushton, to get a job promise in the Soviet Union at the new Molotov Automobile Works in Gorki, which Henry Ford had helped establish through a Russian trading company called Amtorg. On February 16, 1933 the boys set sail on a German ship from New York to Hamburg and arrived in Berlin in time to tour the smoldering ruins of the Reichstag. Here they found out that Amtorg was delaying them because construction of its barracks to house foreign workers had been hopelessly retarded. For nearly a year, therefore, the boys travelled about Germany, visiting their cousins and becoming especially impressed by their uncles, Ernst in Ruit and Adolph in Scharnhausen near Stuttgart. Incidents provoked by brown shirts happened with some frequency to the brothers' uncle Peter, who on several occasions was nearly arrested for his socialist stance on local politics.

Having given their uncle Ernst the headquarters of the Social Democratic Party as their forwarding address in Vienna, the boys experienced first hand the sense of high emotion in Austria when the brown shirts paraded and bullied outside the entrance.³¹ Here as well as in Germany the boys were impressed with the pluralities the socialists could acquire in elections, around the 70% mark, which they found logical given the fact that costs for cooperative housing programs, health centers, libraries, laundries, kindergartens, day care facilities and other services were all scaled to a worker's wage. If only they could duplicate something similar for the United States! In England later that year they met Oswald Moseley, the black-shirt fascist leader of the Nazi party in England.

Finally in December, 1933, they returned to Berlin where they were able to get their visas for their trip east to the city of Gorki, Nizhny-Novgorod. Here they resided in a two-story army-style building named Commune Ruthenberg after an early leader of the American Communist Party, which was unofficially known as "the American village" because of the many workers from the United States who were housed there. Both young men received



*Victor Reuther (back, second from left) and Walter Reuther (front, second from right) with relatives in Ruit or Schamhausen, Germany, 1933.
Courtesy The Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University*

regular awards for their efficiency and productivity because they repeatedly surpassed the standards established in the first Five Year Plan, not always an easy feat in a plant that was completely unheated, even in temperatures of minus twenty-five Celsius.

Most Americans enjoyed respect in the Soviet Union at that time, not because they were thought to be sympathetic to socialism or Soviet Communism, but because of their skills and capabilities as industrial workers. The 150 or so Soviet technicians, who had been trained at the River Rouge plant in Detroit to produce the equivalent of the Model A during the time when Walter was working there, were so enamored of American mass-production techniques that at the time in the Soviet Union Henry Ford was regarded perhaps more highly than Marx or Lenin.³² To be sure the Ford company was not the sole American enterprise in the Soviet Union. By the end of 1930 the Radio Corporation of America, DuPont, Bethlehem Steel, General Electric, Westinghouse and many other large corporations operated factories there. Germans and Austrians (with their factories) were in the

Soviet Union at this time too, some 6,000 Austrian socialist workers at the Gorki plant alone.

When Walter learned about an English language newspaper being printed in Moscow, he began contributing articles, in one of which he criticized the inefficiency of management in the Molotov works at Gorki. For this he and his foreman were sternly reprimanded. The boys also met Russian girls, and Walter for a time was serious about a girl named Lucy.³³ He did not, however, end up marrying her. Before leaving home the boys had made a mutual promise that they would not become emotionally entangled and marry abroad! Filled with idealism, they were anticipating a tough struggle within the labor union movement they intended to lead upon their return. Nevertheless stir was created in 1959 when Nikita Khrushchev, visiting the United States met Walter Reuther at a dinner party and charged the labor leader with bigamy involving a woman known in the Russian press as "N". Of course Walter denied it. However, Lucy, the young woman, had confided to the Soviet Trade Union newspaper

Trud that she and Walter had been married. But after Walter's departure, she never heard from him again, typical of the Social Democrats, she said, all of whom were unreliable. During the 1959 Khrushchev visit, even the *Detroit News* (not exactly a Reuther enthusiast) came to his defense.³⁴

During his contract work-year in Gorki, Walter had also written a fateful letter to his friend Merlin Bishop in Detroit. Later the letter went through various versions as detractors published differing versions inside and outside the United Automobile Workers Union. Allegedly the letter ends with a salute, "Carry on the fight for a Soviet America. Vic and Wal." Walter never quite shook the scandal as the opprobrious letter, from 1937 onward, kept sweeping the country during sit-down strikes, then appeared in the records of the National Labor Relations Board hearings, and in 1941 in the *Detroit Press*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and in reports of the Committee on Un-American Activities under Martin Dies. During the McCarthy era of the 1950s, of course, the phrase "a Soviet America" was politically extremely dangerous, but from the perspective of the 1930s, such words from an ecumenical socialist visiting and working in the land of radical socialism, even if true, seem less than shocking.

After having left the Soviet Union, the boys travelled eastward across the Soviet Union to Japan. Here they boarded as deck hands the *S.S. Hoover* for Los Angeles where they arrived late in 1935, almost three years after their departure. Back in Detroit in 1936 and without work, they attended a socialist party meeting in Flint where Walter met a physical education teacher named May Wolf. She had been an organizer for the American Federation of Teachers and was active in the Proletarian Party of Michigan. The daughter of Jewish immigrants from Russia, the red-haired May had many suitors, and therefore baffled her parents when, after a brief courtship, she chose to marry the penniless Walter in a civil ceremony on March 13, 1936.³⁵

During this time in particular, Walter Reuther was anathema in Detroit automobile circles. Yet he was now better armed because of new Roosevelt legislation which was incor-

porated in the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), of which Section A reads:

Employees shall have the right to organize and bargain collectively, through representatives of their own choosing, and shall be free from the interference, restraint or coercion of employers of labor, or their agents, in the designation of such representatives or in self-organization or in other concerted activities.³⁶

Even though the NIRA was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1935, John L. Lewis had already begun his massive organizational drive for the United Mine Workers under the hyperbolic slogan, "The President wants you to join the Union." More importantly, Senator Robert Wagner of New York, another German-born American in the Bismarckian socialist tradition, chose to rescue the Supreme Court defeat by introducing a bill calling for a National Labor Relations Act, commonly called the Wagner Act, to prohibit "unfair labor practices."³⁷ This new law expressly forbade the use of retaliatory measures against employees and provided for a national committee, the National Labor Relations Board, to arbitrate disputes. Although most industries believed the Supreme Court would once again strike down such a law, in 1937 the court supported it, causing opposition in Congress to collapse.

Robert Ferdinand Wagner was born in Hessian Nastätten in 1877. In 1886, as the youngest of seven children, he immigrated with his parents to America and grew up in New York City. Disappointed with the citadel of capitalism as they had experienced it, his parents in 1896 returned to Germany but Robert stayed to study law, and at the age of 23 was admitted to the bar. Four years later his gift of rhetoric led to a seat in the state legislature. Ten years thereafter he became a judge of the Supreme Court of New York and after seven years on the bench was elected to the United States Senate, where he served for the next 21 years as a Democrat.

In his own words, Wagner claimed his career was "fulfilling our social obligations" in the German tradition. Probably due to his efforts, the state of New York well before World War I had the best laws in the nation for the protection of the working people. In the U. S. Senate, Wagner year after year



Walter Reuther (center, front) and Victor Reuther (standing, far right) with other workers at the automobile factory at Gorky in the Soviet Union, 1934.

Courtesy The Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University

offered legislative proposals for security in the job place, unemployment compensation, and social security for the aged along the German Imperial model. Already in 1932 he was instrumental in passing the Relief Construction Act. Frequently Roosevelt referred to Wagner as his legislative captain of the New Deal. In 1939 Wagner offered the nation's first solid proposal for a national health care plan, which, however, did not pass and in fact is still being debated. Most of the social laws dealing with child labor, the Social Security Act, and laws establishing standards for fair performance — all derive from the initiatives of Robert Wagner, of whom President Roosevelt said in 1944, "Your name is indelibly associated with America's second Bill of Rights."³⁸ Not able to assume direct leadership in the 1937 Flint sit-in strike at General Motors because he was not officially employed in the automobile industry, Reuther and his brothers nevertheless did provide the primary initiative during that encounter which led to vic-

tory. Flushed with triumph, the United Auto Workers took on Ford in the same year. However, suspecting the worst, Ford had hired Harry Bennett, a former boxer, to head up his Ford Service Bureau, a private army composed of some 3,000 armed security guards, spies, undercover agents and strikebreakers.³⁹ Within the feudal organization that was the Ford Motor Company, only Henry Ford himself could question actions taken by Bennett and his thugs.

Reuther was catapulted to fame therefore, not from his General Motors victory but from the so-called "Battle of the Overpass" at Ford. The UAW wanted to hand out leaflets at the River Rouge plant and to do so stationed sixty UAW organizers, forty of them women auxiliaries, on the pedestrian overpass that led from the parking lot to the gates of the huge plant. Most of the women were wives whose husbands were sympathetic to the union but were too afraid to be publicly identified for fear of losing their jobs. Refusing to be intim-

idated because he held a permit to distribute leaflets from the Dearborn City Council, Walter Reuther and Richard Frankenstein led the contingent of petitioners to the bridge. Almost immediately, the Ford Service Bureau led by Bennett turned Reuther's efforts into a bloody rout. Both men and women suffered bruised heads, broken bones and mangled bodies. Luckily for them and the labor movement, cameramen and reporters, in spite of belligerent warnings from Ford, did come out to cover the melee. Even though many cameras were smashed, notes seized and the truth badly tarnished, *Time* and newspapers across the country managed to publish the appalling pictures. Outraged at Henry Luce's UAW-favorable editorial, Henry Ford withheld advertisements from *Time*, *Life* and *Fortune* for the next seventy weeks.⁴⁰

The walkway was at Gate 4 through which most of the workers entered River Rouge but the bridge over Miller Road enabled not just workers coming in by street cars to cross the highway, but also provided other pedestrians a viaduct over the highway even if they had no connection with Ford. It is true that Ford had built the walkway but then had leased it to the Detroit Railway Commission for public use. About this violent incident of May 26, 1937 Walter has written:

I got out of the car on the public highway, Miller Road, near Gate 4. Dick Frankenstein and I walked together over to the stairs. I got up the stairs and walked over near the center of the bridge. I was there a couple of minutes and then all of a sudden about 35 or 40 men surrounded us and started to beat us up. I didn't fight back. I merely tried to guard my face. The men...picked me up about eight different times and threw me down on my back on the concrete and while I was on the ground, they kicked me in the face, head and other parts of my body. After they kicked me a while, one fellow would yell "All right, let him go now." Then they would raise me up, hold my arms behind me and begin to hit me some more. They picked my feet up and my shoulders and slammed me down on the concrete and while I was on the ground, they kicked me again in the face, head and other parts of my body.... Finally they got me next to Dick who was lying on the bridge and with both of us together they kicked me again and then picked me up and threw me down the first flight of stairs. I lay there and they picked

me up and began to kick me down the total flight of steps...

There were about 150 men standing around—They started to hit me again at the bottom of the stairs, slugging me, driving me before them, never letting me get away. ...While I was being driven down I had glimpses of women being kicked and other men being kicked and when I got to the end of the fence, I found Dick

In the meantime some newspaper photographers came along and they picked us up and we managed to get away from the thugs by getting into the car—It is the only way we could have escaped. Bob Kanter was also with us. And all the time I had the permit to distribute the leaflets in my pocket, but no one would look at that. I might add, the police standing around did nothing to prevent the slugging.⁴²

Even before the brutality had stopped, Harry Bennett had issued a press release claiming innocence of any involvement, though at the hearing of the National Labor Relations Board, Reverend Raymond Sanford, chairman of the Committee for Church and Industry of the Chicago Church Federation, an observer of the affair, told board members that he saw Walter Reuther "crouched down with arms shielding his face. His face was bleached__ Blood was trickling all over his face— Eventually he was thrown down three flights of stairs with men attacking him from all sides." Walter Reuther also testified at the hearings of the NLRB. After it concluded, Ford was officially accused of unfair labor practices under terms of the Wagner Act. At the hearings Ford's lawyer, Louis J. Colombo, cross-examined Walter using the "Vic and Wal" letter to suggest that Walter was an un-American revolutionary. Among the 3,000 pages of testimony is the following exchange:

- Q. One of the purposes of going there [to Russia] was to study the Soviet system of government?
- A. We went to Russia to study conditions there the same as we did in Germany.
- Q. What conditions: political conditions and economic conditions?
- A. Social and economic conditions.

After hours of time-killing cross-examination, the NLRB found the Ford Motor Company at fault. Three months later the UAW

was once again ready to resume its attack. Reuther found himself in the middle of a factional fight in the UAW. Charges that various genuine Communists were vying for control of the union movement at that time were legitimate but Walter was never one of them.⁴¹ There were over 1,000 arrests for violations of various kinds. Intimidation by the automobile industry also continued unabated for months and years until finally in 1940 the tide gradually began to turn. The Supreme Court helped by refusing to hear the NLRB's 1937 rebuff of Ford.

Though not automatic, victory was eventually achieved when UAW campaigners openly proselytized at the gates of Ford. As a result, on April 10, 1941, Henry Ford finally approved an election allowing union representation at the bargaining table. The next month — five years after GM and Chrysler had been unionized — some 85,000 Ford workers in three Detroit plants voted by secret ballot: less than 3% wanted no union, 25% wanted the AFL and more than 70% voted for the UAW. Within the next year the UAW negotiated a \$52 million contract in additional wages for its workers.

In 1946 Walter Reuther rose to the presidency of the United Automobile Workers. A mere two years later he was severely wounded by an unknown assailant (as was his brother Victor in 1949). In 1952, Walter was elected president of the CIO following which he merged his organization into the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations).⁴² Because Reuther often clashed with the more conservative George Meany, he took the UAW out of the federation in 1968.⁴³

Walter has been credited for his important political advice to Democratic presidential candidates since 1937, including especially Roosevelt, Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy. Shortly after the fall of France in 1940, for instance, Reuther advised Roosevelt about the standardization of tank production that could be implemented in the automobile factories.⁴⁴ To avoid excess profits, Reuther also successfully persuaded Roosevelt to implement a policy that no individual in the automobile industry could be paid more than \$25,000 per year in exchange for a union

no-strike policy for the duration of the war.⁴⁵ Eleanor Roosevelt incorporated his proposal in her column "My Day."⁴⁶ Reuther is also credited for having persuaded Harry S. Truman to abandon the Henry Morgenthau Plan for the agriculturalization of Germany after the Second World War. Past UAW president Thomas had agreed with the policy of industrial demontage in Germany. On May 10, 1948, Walter sent the following letter to President Harry S. Truman spelling out how German industry should be rehabilitated:

Dear Mr. President:

I am writing you in hopes that through use of the great prestige and authority of your office and of the United States Government you will be able to avert the senseless destruction of industrial capacity in Germany.

I am writing specifically with regard to six steel and three chemical plants found by the ECA to be necessary for European recovery. I hope, however, that the proposal which I shall outline in relation to these plants can be extended to cover all the non-munitions plants now scheduled to be destroyed under the reparations program.

The six steel and three chemical plants referred to were recommended for retention by Mr. Paul Hoffman — Despite that recommendation, the Three Power agreement recently concluded in Washington earmarked those plants for reparations. In the normal course this would mean dismantlement. The nature of these plants, however, makes dismantlement equivalent to destruction — The destruction of these plants would, in my opinion, be in direct conflict with the domestic and foreign objectives of your administration.

You have called for expansion of steel capacity in the United States to relieve a shortage that is world-wide in scope. Dismantlement of German steel mills would intensify that shortage. . . . and deprive American workers in the automobile and other steel-consuming industries of opportunities for full and regular employment.... Destruction of German plants able to supply these needs thrusts an unnecessary additional burden on the American taxpayer and diminishes the effectiveness of the funds which we are spending in Europe's behalf.

A major goal of your foreign policy is to prevent the spread of Communist totalitarianism and to preserve and strengthen democracy throughout the world. Establishment of a vital democracy in Western Germany is crucial to that goal. Needless dismantlement of German plants will deprive German workers of employment and will drive them, out of desperation, into the arms of the Communists....



To my friend Walter Reuther - a great American;
a leader and crusader for Progress and freedom;
and a most remarkable man - With warm regards
and admiration Hubert H. Humphrey

*A photograph of Hubert Humphrey and Walter Reuther inscribed by Senator Humphrey, c.1965.
Courtesy The Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University*

We must recognize, of course, that fears still exist with respect to restoring German industrial power because of its military potential. But the security which Germany's neighbors desire can be assured by controls which will promote the purposes of the European Recovery Program rather than by destruction of Germany's productive capacity....

I suggest, in brief, that the plants in question be left intact at their present locations, operated under the Law 75 trusteeship of the Western occupying nations; and that nations entitled to reparations be assigned the output of these plants up to the value which they would have received through dismantling....⁴⁷

In his 1946 "un-mailed" letter to Walter P. Reuther, J. B. S. Hardman congratulates Reuther for coming to the head of the UAW. Given the misunderstanding of socialist ideology vs. the then threatening communist ideology, Hardman asserts "your socialist, or 'socialistic', or whatever else one may call your general philosophy has nothing to do with it. ...As I see it, in you emerges the social-engineering type of leader, whereas the established group represents the bargaining and political types.... Labor is divided into two rival, contending national centers. Can statesmanship bring about unity?...Can we perhaps develop something comparable to a United Nations, if not 'world government' for common action?...Government is in collective bargaining to stay. That 'Reuther Plan' of yours — you remember? — suggesting and telling how to bring about a rapid conversion of the auto industry to mass-production of war-essential aircraft, shocked a good many people back in 1941 but moved to action neither auto industrialists nor politicians, nor fellow-laborites... The 'Reuther Plan' was to me 'engineering' leadership and not because it dealt with an engineering problem but because it constructively emphasized and dramatized the link between labor's concern ...and the broad, national issues of defense and production."⁴⁸

Although it would take another paper of this length to present the arguments convincingly, the case should be made here that the Imperial German socialist ideas that Walter Reuther and his father brought to America were quite parallel to the ideology about the government-labor-industrial cooperation that emerged from the Freiburg School in Ger-

many following World War II, and which was implemented in the new Federal Republic of Germany under the leadership of Ludwig Erhard and others. Clearly, this concept of labor and industry teaming up with the silent but interested referee-partner of government to enact principles, e.g. of co-determination, has generated the Social Market Economy which in West Germany, and now in the United Germany, has become the envy of the world. By his letter to President Truman, Reuther in a significant way aided in giving the socialist market economy a chance to operate in West Germany beginning in 1948. Walter Reuther also played a major role in bringing a slice of that Lassallean socialist approach to the economy into the United States tradition.

—La Vern J.
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Notes

¹Marvin Wachmann, *History of the Social-Democratic Party of Milwaukee 1897-1910* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1945), Errol W. Stevens, "Heartland Socialism: The Socialist Party of America in Four Midwestern Communities unpublished," Ph.D. diss., 1978, Indiana University, esp. Chapter 2, pp. 26-59.

²Bertold Spangenberg, *German Cultural History from 1860 to the Present Day* (Munich: Nymphenburger Verlag, 1983), p. 13.

³Meyers Konversationslexikon "Lassalle," pp. 362-3. See also Hermann Oncken, *Lassalle. Zwischen Marx und Bismarck* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1966).

⁴Stuart Dean Brandes, "Nils Haugen and the Wisconsin Progressive Movement." M.A. Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1965.

⁵Spangenberg, *German Cultural History*, p. 39.

⁶Wolfgang Bethge, *Berlins Geschichte im Überblick* (Berlin: Gebrüder Holzapfel, 1987), p. 66.- but not the quote.

⁷Vol. 18 (November, 1901), p. 391.

⁸Among several good sources about the early life of Walter Reuther is the book by Victor G. Reuther, *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW: A Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), in German, *Die Brüder Reuther, eine Autobiographie sowie die Geschichte der amerikanischen Automobilarbeitergewerkschaft UAW* (Cologne: Bund, 1989). Also useful are R. L. Tyler, *Walter Reuther* (Grand Rapid, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1973), and John Barnard, *Walter Reuther and the Rise of the Auto Workers* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983). See also in general Lynn A. Bonfield, "Archival Collections for California Labor History," *California History*, 66 (1987) 286-299.

- ⁹Victor Reuther, p. 16.
- ¹⁰Sidney Lens, *The Crisis of American Labor* (New York: Barnes and Co., A Perpetual Book, 1961), pp. 158 ff. deals with this period in Walter Reuther's biography.
- ¹¹Victor Reuther, p. 20.
- ¹²Victor Reuther, p. 21. See also the biographical summary of Walter Reuther by Sidney Kelman, "Reuther. 'A Called' Labor Leader," *Michigan History*, 73 (1989), 12-19.
- ¹³Quoted in Victor Reuther, p. 22.
- ¹⁴Victor Reuther, p. 23.
- ¹⁵R. L. Tyler, *Reuther*, p. 11.
- ¹⁶For a historical sketch of the Detroit in which Reuther found himself during this period, see Irving Howe and B. J. Widick, *The UAW and Walter Reuther* (New York: Random House, 1949).
- ¹⁷In her small book, *A Political Biography of Walter Reuther; the Record of an Opportunist* (New York: Merit Publishers, 1969), Beatrice Hansen attempts to present a negative biography of Reuther by asserting his socialism which she says he denied. While he was careful about his Socialist Party affiliations during the McCarthyite 1950s, Walter, and especially Victor in his memoir, proudly admit to the beliefs Hansen accuses Walter of. Walter remained a member of the Socialist Party until at least 1940.
- ¹⁸Tyler, p. 13.
- ¹⁹Victor Reuther, p. 59.
- ²⁰Victor Reuther, p. 62.
- ²¹Victor Reuther, pp. 62-63.
- ²²Victor Reuther, p. 64. *John Barnard, Walter Reuther and the Rise of the Auto Workers* p. 9.
- ²³J. B. S. Hardman outlines this broad definition of socialistic, rather than communistic, leadership for the union movement in the United States in "Dear Walter: An Un-Mailed Letter to Walter P. Reuther," *Labor and Nation. Independent National Labor Magazine*, 1, No. 5 (April-May, 1946), 5-8. Two key figures in the development and implementation of this concept of socialism in the post-war Federal Republic of Germany were Joseph Alois Schumpeter and Alfred Müller-Armack, e. g. in the latter's book *Studien zur sozialen Marktwirtschaft* (1960).
- ²⁴Wolfgang Bethge, *Berlins Geschichte im Überblick* (Berlin: Gebrüder Holzapfel, 1987) pp. 90-112.
- ²⁵See Dirk Hoerder, ed., *Struggle a Hard Battle: Essays on Working-Class Immigrants* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), especially Hanmut Keil, "German Working-Class Radicalism in the United States from the 1870s to World War I." See also *German Workers in Chicago. A Documentary History of Working-Class Culture from 1850 to World War I*, ed., Hartmut Keil and John B. Jentz, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press 1988).
- ²⁶Sally M. Miller, *Victor Berger and the Promise of Constructive Socialism, 1910-1920* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), about the German press in the labor movement See also La Vern J. Rippley, *The Immigrant Experience in Wisconsin* (Boston: Twayne, 1985), pp. 101 ff., and Bayrd Still, *Milwaukee: The History of a City* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1948), pp. 289-295, 303.
- ²⁷Tyler, p. 15. See also David A. Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America. A History* (New York: MacMillan, 1955, Quadrangle paperbacks, 1967), esp. pp. 2,21 ff., 109 and, in general, Irving Howe, *Socialism and America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1985). Concerning socialism and social reformers in a specific community see Stanley Nadel, *Little Germany. Ethnicity, Religion, and Class in New York City, 1845-80* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), pp. 121 ff.
- ²⁸See Rippley, *Immigrant Wisconsin*, p. 100 and Robert C. Reinders, "Daniel W. Hoan and the Milwaukee Socialist Party during the First World War," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 36 (Autumn 1952), 48-55.
- ²⁹Tyler, p. 14.
- ³⁰Tyler, p. 19.
- ³¹Victor Reuther, p. 77.
- ³²Victor Reuther, p. 91.
- ³³Victor Reuther, p. 107; 113, ff.
- ³⁴Tyler, p. 24.
- ³⁵Victor Reuther, p. 127.
- ³⁶Tyler p. 26.
- ³⁷Tyler, p. 27.
- ³⁸Fritz Kurrek, *Die Geschichte der Deutschen in Michigan* (Detroit: Schenk Printing, 1981), p. 151. Robert F. Wagner died in 1953. His son, Robert F. Wagner Jr. served as Mayor of New York in the 1960s.
- ³⁹For a picture of the Harry Bennett psychology, see Irving Howe and B.J. Widick, *UAW and Reuther*, pp. 91 ff.
- ⁴⁰Tyler, pp. 39-40, Victor Reuther, pp. 200 ff. See also, in general, Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man. The Social Bases of Politics* (Garden City: Anchor Doubleday, 1963), esp. pp. 418 ff.
- ⁴¹See in general Sidney Lens, *The Crisis of American Labor*, pp. 160 ff.
- ⁴²Sympathetic throughout his lifetime with the socialist movement, Walter Reuther often backed third-party candidates beginning, with Norman Thomas. He supported the Farmer-Labor Party in 1936, and ran unsuccessfully on the Unity faction for the Detroit Common Council in 1937. See the study by Marvin Persky, "Walter Reuther, the UAW-CIO, and Third Party Politics," unpublished Ph.D. diss. Michigan State University, 1974.
- ⁴³See Cathy L. Hennen, "Campaigning Against Communism: The Rhetoric of Walter P. Reuther 1946-1948," unpublished Ph.D. diss. University of Pittsburgh, 1986.
- ⁴⁴C. Wright Mills, with Helen Schneider, *The New Men of Power. America's Labor Leaders* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1948), pp. 107 ff. 208 ff.
- ⁴⁵Irving Howe and Burdick, pp. 107 ff.
- ⁴⁶Tyler, p. 62.
- ⁴⁷Quoted in Victor Reuther, pp. 341-2.
- ⁴⁸Hardman, pp. 5, 7.