

Walter Reuther

the limits of social democracy!

Jim Jacobs

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Jim Jacobs is a member of the Detroit Organizing Committee.

The death of Walter Reuther ends the reign of the foremost social democratic unionist in American history. Since 1947, when Reuther took control over the UAW international, he has built a massive union organization behind his politics. It is tradition in Detroit left wing trade union circles to picture Reuther as a “sellout,” “opportunist” or “bureaucrat,” but these epithets hardly explain the actions of the man or his union. Reuther was guided by a political ideology of social democracy, an important one for revolutionaries to understand.

Despite all attempts on the part of the UAW public relations department, or the press, to cover up the past, much of Reuther’s early life was rebellious. In the late 1920s while attending Wayne State, he led a successful fight to oppose a proposed ROTC plan. After being fired from Ford in 1933, Walter and his brother Victor toured the world, stopping for 16 months to work in the shops of the Soviet Union. In the new worker’s state he won medals for outstanding production and was appointed leader of a labor brigade. In 1937, Reuther ran for Detroit Common Council as a socialist.

Yet despite these dabblings with anti-capitalist politics, Reuther was not a radical. He saw the evils of capitalism quite clearly, but his solutions never got to the heart of the matter—the abolition of the system of monopoly capitalism or imperialism. For Reuther believed that the shortcomings of America could be corrected through influence and control over the government.

Instead of viewing the state as the “formal” authority or apparatus of the capitalist class (particularly important in promoting and guaranteeing imperialist expansion), Reuther believed it a neutral body up for grabs for anyone with electoral support. If labor could organize its supporters, then the state would swing in the direction of the workers. The end of exploitation would come gradually through planning and government control.

Within the UAW, the Reuther approach was to build strong disciplined organization that would insure social-economic benefits-for the rank and file. Foregoing any attempts to take on management at the point of production (on working conditions issues, where the labor-capital struggle emerges in its clearest form), Reuther wrested concessions for workers in terms of lay-off benefits (but not protection from automation) and retirement benefits. If the UAW could not do much about conditions in the shops, it attempted to better the lives of the workers outside the factories.

Through the years Reuther’s base within the union was built upon the older and retired workers (who can vote and often hold the decisive power in many large locals) desiring better pensions and medical plans. If you remained in the shop you were faced with speed-up, compulsory overtime and racism.

More than any other unionist, Reuther was able to win job stability for UAW members who were not touched by automation. The Cost of Living Clause (won from GM in 1948) gave workers a buffer against inflation. Supplemental Unemployment Benefits (SUB) in 1955 gave lay-off protection for seniority workers. Today, medical, dental and college plans are open to UAW members, along with a very valuable pension plan (negotiated from Ford in 1949).

In order to achieve these and other benefits, Reuther attempted to guarantee the auto-makers industrial discipline for uninterrupted production.

He recognized that the company will give benefits as long as it maintains control over the production process to extract its profits. Thus, when taking over the UAW presidency in 1946, Reuther proceeded to centralize his power at the top. He viciously smashed all communist elements in the UAW. He broke the power of the more traditionally independent locals. He made sure that wildcats were broken and the rebellious local leadership squelched. By the early 1950s there was virtually no organized opposition of any importance in the once faction-ridden UAW.

In the interest of the workers, the social-democratic union strategy is structured at the top. The local leadership, let alone the rank and file, is kept in the dark concerning the movements of the international. Except for contract ratification, and perhaps in a few union elections, the UAW rank and file is never engaged in political struggle. The result is a docile membership, which despite all the democratic procedures and educational materials available through the UAW, remains largely apolitical or brainwashed into reactionary positions.

This provides the cop-out for the UAW when its liberal friends ask for support on anti-war, anti-racist issues. The traditional response of the social democrat UAW is to assume that either "we are too successful in winning material things and the guys, don't care about social issues any more," and/or "the auto-workers are turning to the right, the leaders are far ahead of them, and we must go slow."

The problem of the UAW, however, lies not with the workers, but with the political philosophy of social democracy. By refusing to ideologically attack capitalism as a system, the UAW remains with a piecemeal approach, attempting to reduce issues to technical considerations thereby confusing its membership not educating them.

By accepting the need for harmony and stability for this system to function, the UAW promotes compromise for its own sake, unable to see that it is impossible to compromise about racism and exploitation. By accepting the harmony of labor and capital interests, the UAW is faced with the irresolvable problem of supporting the integration struggles of black moderates and working with the leaders of the same corporations which, at contract time, it denounces as profit-hungry operations.

Finally, by believing that political change is possible from within, the UAW remains lost in the machinations of pressure politics with the Democratic Party, not wishing to recognize that the power of workers in this country is not at the ballot box, but at the point of production.

The politics of social democracy create some of the particular problems facing Reuther at his death. By believing the Johnson administration would control inflation by ending the Vietnamese war in 1967, Reuther allowed a ceiling to be placed on the cost of living clause during the Ford talks. As a result, with rapid inflation all auto workers are losing \$400 to \$750 a year in wages.

By refusing to fight racism at the workplace, the UAW is now faced with strong challenges from independent black worker groups, most importantly the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. By not making it clear to the white workers of the union who the enemy is, the UAW is finding it increasingly difficult to cultivate the "labor vote" for its liberal politicians. The most notable recent defeat was Texas Senator Ralph Yarborough.

All these difficulties of social democracy appear full-blown as the American dream begins to fall apart. The social democratic ideology looks for order where there is none. It attempts to explain repression as shocking accidents of irrationality, instead of systematic attempts of the old order to continue in power. It is afraid of the actions of blacks and young people because they upset things _ and ruin all chances of reform, instead of seeing the trend to the right caused by Nixon not the Panthers. It looks for compromise solutions when lines are drawn more clearly than ever before.

At his death, Walter Reuther recognized these problems. He was especially terrified of the threat posed by black workers to the UAW, yet he never moved openly to correct some of the obvious racist practices of the UAW, let alone management. Reuther was also concerned about young people, and he held a few youth conferences to cultivate young black and white new labor leaders. Yet, he never pushed for even minor reforms within the UAW, such as draft counseling, child day-care centers for young women, increased SUB benefits for young workers, elimination of 89-day wonder syndrome, that would win support of the young workers.

Reuther was also concerned with the-war in Vietnam and the black liberation struggle. Yet, again all he could offer was support for liberal Democrats, the American Labor Alliance, and some national programs which were feebly lobbied for in Congress. The bankruptcy of social democratic politics is never more obvious than today.

For us in Detroit, Reuther was an important political figure. The UAW has clout in this town. But more broadly, his life teaches us an important lesson. No one can deny Reuther was concerned about the workers. He struggled on their behalf continuously. No one would deny he was an activist. Reuther sacrificed, worked and fought for a better society. Compared to other American labor unions, the UAW is in the vanguard on social issues.

But for all its activity the UAW never turned the government into working for the laboring people of America. It has little understanding of racism and imperialism. It does not understand the role of the government today. More and more as the society begins to tear apart, the UAW plays a reactionary role attempting to preserve order amidst growing chaos.

The lesson we can learn from Reuther's career is that activism is not enough to insure change. We must recognize that "politics in command" is real. As revolutionaries we must never divorce strategy and tactics from politics in our struggles.

If we base our actions on the understanding of imperialism, our struggle for the end of exploitation of all the working people will be rewarded in a way Walter Reuther never dreamed would be possible.

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