A More Perfect Union

THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN IN DETROIT
Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor
By Nelson Lichtenstein
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By Jeffrey E. Garten

WHEN JOHN J. SWEENEY unseat ed interim President Thomas R. Donahue as the new head of the AFL-CIO just a few weeks ago, the rank and file of a tired, demoralized and thinning union came to life. A table-thumping Sweeney promised a new militancy to defend American workers; he committed to dramatically stepped up spending to recruit new membership; and he said he would bring back the tactics of civil disobedience last seen in protest movements of the 1960s. The big question: Can he succeed?

There could be no better context for evaluating where the labor movement has been and the challenges it faces ahead than The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit, a historical biography of Walter Reuther, president of the United Autoworkers (UAW) for over two decades. Nelson Lichtenstein, a history professor at the University of Virginia, has produced a meticulously researched, clearly written and quickly paced story. It begins with Reuther’s teenage years in the 1920s as a toolmaker in Wheeling, W. Va., and follows him through his first job at Ford in Detroit; his travels to the Soviet Union where he worked on a production line; his rise to political consciousness in the budding union movements of the 1930s; his first victories against corporate management, including the early sit-down strikes; his subsequent high-profile confrontations with General Motors and Ford Motor Company; his rise to national prominence and his relationships with FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, JFK and LBJ; his deep involvement in the civil rights movement; his self-torture over what position to take on the Vietnam War; and, finally, his death in a plane crash in 1970.

But this is not just a biography of a major 20th-century personality. In fact, while the book comprehensively covers Reuther’s activities and achievements, it is less impressive in describing his personal life. There are few clues, anecdotal or otherwise, about his relationships with family and friends or his inner emotions or conflicts. No matter, however, for these shortcomings are more than offset by Lichtenstein’s masterful portrayal of the social and political stage on which the labor leader performed.

THE MOST Dangerous Man in Detroit is a story about the struggle over the shape of American capitalism in this century, a story about the debate over who should be responsible for ensuring that millions of men and women—many of them immigrants, many minorities—receive a decent wage, worked in a healthy and safe environment, and had the means to participate in corporate management decisions that directly affected their lives. Reuther longed for a European-type system where governments played a dominant role in protecting workers. When he failed, he pushed hard for a private welfare state in which the Big Three autoworkers and their corporate brethren in steel and other industries operated in tandem with labor to provide better wages and social benefits.

Reuther’s life, as portrayed by Lichtenstein, is also a story about the rise of the middle class in America as both an economic reality and a political force, and its symbiotic relationship with the growth of labor unions. Linked to such class consciousness on the part of workers was pressure on Washington to follow Keynesian economic theories, including efforts to pump up economic demand to support mass production and mass

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consumption—policies that Reuther enthusiastically championed.

On a third level, the book chronicles the almost impossible challenge confronting Reuther: how to win the support of Washington and the broader American public, on the one hand, while on the other retaining credibility with union members, with their rising expectations of higher wages and greater economic security. Reuther tried to avoid open criticism of the White House on issues ranging from World War II policies that gave preference to corporate management over workers, to the Vietnam war, which bitterly divided the union membership. He was afraid of being seen as unpatriotic and, besides, he constantly needed federal help. But he never received what he sought from any president, and his links to Washington contributed to the perception and the reality that the UAW had become so much a part of the establishment that it could no longer deliver what its members wanted.

In promising a return to aggressive tactics on behalf of union members, AFL-CIO President Sweeney seems to be harkening back to another era. Yet he faces challenges even more daunting than Reuther did, as well as many new ones.

The argument about American capitalism is over; for as long as anyone can foresee, there will be no welfare state, public or private.

Even most Europeans are dismantling large social programs and taking a tougher stance towards bargaining with unions. In addition, while there is no lack of deep grievances among American workers—concerns over stagnant wages, anxiety about job security—the notion of middle-class solidarity, which Reuther used to enhance his political leverage, seems to have disappeared, replaced by a more fragmented environment caused by corporate downsizing and outsourcing, not to mention generational or ethnic conflicts.

Finally, Sweeney, unlike Reuther, has to face a competitive global economy in which soaring imports put a lid on prices, and hence on wages and other benefits. As more production moves offshore, what industry remains will demand a level of sophisticated skills requiring efforts far greater than anything so far contemplated by government, industry or labor.

Reuther, as Lichtenstein so ably documents, was a man who combined big strategic ideas with great tactical flexibility. He dreamed about social democracy, but he knew when to declare victory even as he fell far short of his goals. He had a keen sense of where he was on the national political terrain, and he understood how the workplace and broader society fit together at a time when both were in the throes of dramatic change. If Sweeney is to succeed, he will need all those traits—and much more.