

From the director

Honor Reuther, fight for national health care

Beginning Sept. 1, the 100th anniversary of the birth of Walter Reuther will be observed. The Reuther Centennial is of particular importance to Region 8 members, due to the fact that his birthplace of Wheeling, W.V., falls within our boundaries

Last year we dedicated a statue and



monument to the memory of Walter Reuther in Wheeling along the Ohio River. There are observances and celebrations planned throughout the UAW in honor of this milestone.

It is fitting to mark this occasion

by educating others about the Reuther legacy. However, the best way to celebrate the life of Walter Reuther is to continue the work he began. Walter was a tireless advocate, not only for UAW members but for all working people. His endless dedication and social activism serves as an inspiration for us all.

Media pundits have been writing about the demise of organized labor — particularly the UAW — for some time now. They talk about the good old days of Walter Reuther and how labor has lost its power.

These remarks show how little they know of our history and the struggle it has taken to get to where we are. Yes, times are hard and we have taken our share of lumps as the current government and courts spend all their efforts protecting the wealthy and powerful.

Organizing has become more difficult today as union-busting groups funded by big business have run interference to make certain workers are denied the freedom to choose a union. Groups, such as the National Right to Work Legal Defense Fund, have used the courts to prevent workers from organizing. The Bush administration has turned the National Labor relations Board into an anti-union force looking out for the best interests of corporations. These are trying times, but they are not new.

Walter faced fierce opposition in his efforts to enact an agenda for working families. He was kidnapped, beaten, jailed and was the target of a number



1949 UAW convention

UAW Public Relations Dept.

of assignation attempts. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover waged a war against Reuther that lasted decades, using every tool at his disposal to try and bring Reuther down.

He was slandered and plotted against. His office was bugged and his family terrorized, but he stayed the course. He never quit — even when the way seemed hopeless. I am certain he had days that must have been discouraging, but he kept on keeping on and, along the way, he helped build the middle class of this country. Employer-provided health care, cost of living raises, vested pension plans, the Peace Core, the Five Planes a Day Plan and many other well-known programs reflect Reuther's vision.

Today we are in a fight to protect the working class Reuther championed. He died devoted to the cause in which he had lived his life. While programs and memorials to this great man are fitting, it is the continuation of his work that honors him best.

Until he died in 1970 Reuther continued to advocate for a national health care program for all. This is an item of unfinished business we can pick up to honor Walter. He also worked for equal

rights, minimum wage and fair treatment for all workers. These issues still need our activism and leadership.

So the next time you read a newspaper piece about how labor's days are over, remember Walter Reuther and his accomplishments. Let's honor this great man by carrying on his fight for all working class Americans.

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