

The Battle of the Overpass



An article from *The Detroit News* describing a 1937 incident in which UAW organizers, in their attempts to leaflet at a factory in the Detroit area, were beat by Ford guards.

The labor movement was gaining momentum in the mid-1930s, but had had little success in the industrial heart of the country, Detroit. Three brothers were instrumental in turning this around: Victor, Roy and Walter Reuther. Inspired by European sit-down strikes, they sought to bring the method to bear on the automotive giants.

After a successful strike at Kelsey-Hayes, an automotive supplier, the tide seemed to turn against the UAW and it was decided to launch a major operation. On Jan. 11, 1937, the Reuther brothers organized a sit-down strike at the GM Fisher 2 plant in Flint. After a pitched three-hour battle with police, in which strikers were gassed and shot with buckshot, the workers routed the police with water hoses and makeshift industrial-sized slingshots, hurling two-pound metal hinges. In what became known as the Battle of the Running Bulls, the UAW began an offensive that snowballed.

In February, they staged an attack on the Flint Chevy Plant No. 4 after a diversionary pass at Chevy No. 9. That successful operation was the final blow to GM, which signed a contract with the UAW. In March of that year, 192,642 workers staged sit-down strikes at their jobs. Chrysler capitulated, then Studebaker and Cadillac. By early summer, Walter Reuther's West Side Local 174 had grown from 78 to 30,000 members. They had won an hourly minimum wage, abolition of piecework pay, grievance committees, seniority, and most importantly, a voice.

Parts plants, hotels, laundries, department stores, lumberyards, meat packing plants and cigar factories were all joining in sympathy strikes. When the UAW called for a general strike and mass rally in downtown Detroit, the city came to a halt. A flatbed truck carried Walter Reuther and a huge American flag from City Hall to Cadillac Square, followed by 150,000

supporters, who heard speeches calling for election of Labor party candidates and the ouster of corrupt city and police officials who he alleged were the pawns of industrialists.

With this peaceful rally, and the success at the other auto companies, the union was gaining respectability and Walter Reuther thought the time was right to go after the hardest case of them all, Ford Motor Company.

Henry Ford had said he would never cave in to the unions. He didn't like their politics and he wanted total control over his company and his workers. He had run the company paternalistically and many workers still had his picture over their mantles. He also ruled by fear: Harry Bennett, his right hand man, hired spies and thugs (many were ex-cons), 2,000 of them, to man his "Service Department." He ran the Rouge Plant like a Central European police state. Anti-union groups were encouraged, workers were urged to spy on each other and feared losing their jobs if they participated in any union discussions.

The UAW began its campaign by putting up billboards saying "Fordism is Fascism" and "Unionism is Americanism". Small clandestine union meetings were held throughout the Rouge plant in order to develop leaders. But Walter Reuther decided that the UAW had to make a bold move to show the workers that the union was as strong and powerful as the Ford regime. An initial attempt involving flying low over the plant in a plane with a loudspeaker was ineffectual. Reuther decided to make a stand, and scheduled a massive leaflet campaign at the Rouge plant for May 26, 1937. He got a license from the city of Dearborn, opened two union halls nearby, and made two reconnaissance trips to the Miller Road Overpass at Gate 4.

Knowing that it would be dangerous and foolish to go alone, he invited clergymen, reporters, photographers, and staffers of a Senate Committee on Civil Liberties to join the organizers. That morning he addressed 100 women from the women's auxiliary of Local 174 who were supposed to hand out the leaflets to arriving and departing workers on Miller Road.

Two hours before the scheduled time, newspapermen arrived at the site and saw 25 cars filled with men in sunglasses who warned them to get out of the area, and threatened photographers.

An hour before shift change, just before 2 p.m., Walter Reuther, Richard T. Frankenstein, in charge of the overall Ford drive, Robert Kanter, and J.J. Kennedy, the UAW's East Side regional director arrived. The Detroit News photographer, James E. (Scotty) Kilpatrick, thought the backdrop of the Ford sign would make a great picture, and obligingly, the union men walked up the two flights of iron stairs to the overpass.

Facing the photographers, Reuther and his partners had their backs to the thugs that were approaching them. The newsmen's warnings were too late. They were attacked brutally: punched and kicked repeatedly. Frankenstein recounted how two men held his legs apart while another kicked him repeatedly in the groin. One man placed his heel in his abdomen, grinding it, then put his full weight on it. Reuther was punched in the face, abdomen and back and kicked down the stairs. Kanter was pushed off the bridge and fell 30 feet.

The women who were to hand out the leaflets were arriving on trolley cars and were brutally shoved back into the cars, or pulled out and beaten. A lone police officer, appalled at the scene, pleaded with the "service" men to stop beating one woman: "You'll kill her..." The Dearborn police did nothing else. They stood by and said the Ford men were protecting their private property.

Reuther described some of the treatment he received:

"Seven times they raised me off the concrete and slammed me down on it. They pinned my arms . . . and I was punched and kicked and dragged by my feet to the stairway, thrown down

the first flight of steps, picked up, slammed down on the platform and kicked down the second flight. On the ground they beat and kicked me some more. . . "

A union man walking on the street two blocks away was so badly beaten he spent months in the hospital with a broken back.

Bennett's crew went after the reporters and photographers next, ripping out notebook pages, and destroying photographic plates. The News' Kilpatrick hid his plates in the back seat and gave up useless ones that were sitting on his front seat.

The newspaper plastered the photos over the front page and, through the wire services, spread them across the world. The men doing the beating were identified from Kilpatrick's photo as Bennett's "service" men. Ford goons had pulled Frankenstein's coat over his arms to incapacitate him while they pummeled him.

Although there was at that time no Pulitzer prize for photography, Kilpatrick's photo of the Battle of the Overpass inspired the committee to institute one; in 1942 the first Pulitzer for photography was awarded to a Detroit News photographer. Ironically, it was for a photo of UAW picketers beating a Ford security man in 1941.

The Battle of the Overpass was a turning point. Ford won the battle but lost the war for public opinion. The NLRB castigated Ford and Bennett for their actions. In the next election the Labor candidates in Detroit won more than twice as many votes as they had ever gotten. Three years later Ford signed a contract with the UAW.

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