

# meatballs

“You get no bread with one meatball.”  
Depression era folk song

# 8

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Meatballs is put out in the belief that a strong union at SHAP depends on an informed and involved membership. Meatballs welcomes different points of view. Contact Mike Parker, electrician second shift, body shop, or you can email meatballs@rts-tech.com. Publication labor is volunteer and views are those of the writers.

## Victor Reuther Symbolized What Was Best in the Labor Movement



Jim West

One of the genuinely great leaders of the modern union movement has died.

Most of the Detroit media identify Victor Reuther as a key organizer of the great Flint sit-down strikes and battles, pivotal in the formation of the United Auto Workers. They describe him as the orator, leftwing, and intellectual of the Reuther brothers who lead the UAW in its decades of rapid growth.

But except for the *Oakland Press*, few reports explain why Victor found it necessary to come out of retirement in the 80s to help rebuild the union movement that he loved so much.

He was concerned about real democracy in the UAW. He saw that the leadership had circled the wagons around itself and had become stagnant. It

resisted the rise of new, dynamic leadership, especially those who did not come up the old way. He argued for recruiting women, people of color, and young activists into the leadership.

He saw that so-called new union strategies like “partnership with the corporations” were really a throwback to the 1920s and covers for giving up hard-won union victories. They would quickly cause the union movement to lose its way.

In a foreword to a 1988 book I co-authored, *Choosing Sides: Unions and the Team Concept*, Victor wrote:

The corporations are attempting to undermine the unity and solidarity of the workers on the plant floor and in the union to draw workers into a mythical partnership. They offer the enticing illusion that the worker will have a voice in management...

The team concept is more than a mere gimmick; it is an attempt by management to control not only the worker's behavior on the job, but also the worker's feelings and thoughts. The employer plays upon the worker's desire to use his or her creativity and intellect...

Today the unions are ill prepared to defend themselves from so subtle and insidious a management strategy. Our unions have grown more and more centralized and bureaucratic... The revitalization and democratization of the unions is essential.

He was a strong critic of the UAW-Saturn experiment, the growing UAW-corporation “Jointness”

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programs, and their appointee army that moved the union leadership closer to management while isolating it more from the membership.

Victor gave active support to *Labor Notes*, a cross union network of activists, to the Association for Union Democracy, and to the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) which won major changes in the Teamsters Union and remains a powerful force for rank and file power in the IBT. He stayed in close contact with the Canadian Auto Workers after they left the UAW. Most of all he supported and became an active leader of the New Directions Movement, a reform group in the UAW that peaked in the early 90s. He maintained direct contact with dozens of local UAW activists and officers and was always ready when they requested help. He was a regular speaker at conferences of activists and was always a source of excellent advice. He was a brilliant and inspirational speaker, who provided lessons from history and common sense.

He understood well the pressures on trade union leadership and the critical role of the rank and file. In 1992, he spoke at the TDU convention shortly after the reform movement in the Teamsters had succeed in defeating the mob-dominated leadership and electing Ron Carey as International President. To many there was a question about whether the rank and file TDU had accomplished its purpose and should now dissolve. Reuther held his right arm up, indicating a leadership standing straight. Then he explained how the pressures of the corporations, as well as the institutional pressures of the union would act from one side to force that leadership to bend, illustrating with a push from his left hand. What we need, he argued, is an active and organized rank and file to provide the counter pressure—so our new leaders can in fact stand straight and continue in the forward direction, slowly returning his arm upright as if driven by a powerful force. In many ways his words were prophetic.

Victor acted his whole life on the understanding that social justice is a continuous struggle. If you stop fighting for it, you lose it. Our missing him is exceeded only by an appreciation for his life and what he has taught us.

Mike Parker

## UAW International Statement

UAW President Ron Gettelfinger issued this statement on the passing of Victor Reuther on June 3:

“The entire UAW community is saddened by the loss of Victor Reuther, a pioneer of our union whose passion for social justice and talent as an orator energized and mobilized early sit-down strikers. Victor and his brothers Walter, UAW president from 1946-1970 and Roy, the union's legislative director played a pivotal role in the birth and growth of the UAW.

“The Reuther brothers grew up in a tradition of trade union, political and social activism. Their father, Valentine Reuther, a steel and brewery worker, was a trade union leader in Wheeling, West Virginia.”

“Victor Reuther began working in the auto industry on the assembly line of the Kelsey Hayes Wheel Company. A member of UAW Local 174, he was a strike leader during UAW campaigns in Flint and Detroit, which played a key role in establishing the right of workers to bargain with auto industry employers.

“Victor went on to serve the UAW, the U.S. labor movement and the international labor movement in a variety of ways. As director of the UAW Education Department, he helped UAW members throughout the United States and Canada become leaders in their local unions and communities.

“Victor's dedication to the rights of working men and women, however, reached far beyond the borders of North America. He served as European representative of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and became CIO director of International Affairs, and then served as director of International Affairs for the UAW.

“As director of International Affairs for the UAW, he forged lasting relationships with trade unionists from all over the world. Victor's vision of international solidarity across borders and across cultures remains an essential principle of our union and an essential principle for working people everywhere.

“During his years as a trade union activist, Victor displayed great personal courage and endured great personal risk for the right of workers to organize. He faced tear gas and billy clubs during the UAW organizational campaigns of the 1930s, and was a victim of an assassination attempt in 1949.

“Victor lost his right eye in that attack. But he never lost his vision of a better world or his determination to join with others to make that vision a reality. His example and his accomplishments continue to inspire the men and women of the UAW today and will continue to inspire future generations.”