



# Forty Gavels

The Life of Reuben Soderstrom  
and the Illinois AFI-CIO

Volume Two  
1930-1949



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# FORTY GAVELS

The Life of Reuben G. Soderstrom  
and the Illinois AFL-CIO

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Chris M. Stevens  
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*The labor movement means something more than shorter hours, higher wages, and improved working conditions. It means the intellectual development of wage earners; it means that an untold number of workers will eventually carry their trade union independence from the shop, mill, or mine into daily life. And herein lies the true reason for opposition to trade unionism. The trade unionist is interested in more than merely shop conditions. Every political, social, and economic question attracts him. By his constructive statesmanship, by his righting of wrongs, he demands democracy shall function.*

- Reuben G. Soderstrom, 1936

# THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR & CONGRESS OF INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATIONS

We honor and welcome this biography of Reuben Soderstrom, which outlines his many contributions to the labor movement—both in Illinois and nationwide.

In the early years of the last century, the Illinois State Federation of Labor stood out as a progressive beacon and model for many trade unionists as they struggled to improve the wages and working conditions of those toiling long hours in difficult conditions. And as president of the Illinois labor federation from 1930 to 1970, Reuben Soderstrom was the state's guiding light.

When he was a child, Brother Soderstrom worked on a trolley, in a glass factory, and on a linotype press, experiencing firsthand the grueling abuse of child labor. Determined to change the laws that made it legal to put young children to work—and resolute in pushing for safe and healthy workplaces, decent working hours, and retirement security for working women and men—he began his many years of service to America's working people as an elected official of the Illinois House of Representatives. His work there inspired national officeholders across the decades to follow his lead.

On behalf of the twelve and a half million working men and women of the AFL-CIO, the AFL-CIO officers salute Brother Reuben Soderstrom for his life-long dedication to improving the lives of working families and setting an example for us all.

In Solidarity,

Richard L. Trumka  
*President, AFL-CIO*

Elizabeth Shuler  
*Secretary-Treasurer, AFL-CIO*

Tefere Gebre  
*Executive Vice President, AFL-CIO*

# THE ILLINOIS AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR & CONGRESS OF INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATIONS

The Illinois AFL-CIO's history is full of strong leaders who gave of their heart and soul to improve conditions for workers. In that illustrious honor roll, it is hard to find a record equal to Reuben Soderstrom.

As the Great Depression was beginning in 1930 and workers were facing record unemployment, with no unemployment insurance, no safety net and no Social Security. Illinois labor turned to Reuben Soderstrom for leadership. He not only led the Illinois AFL during that record decade of union expansion, he also helped shepherd laws through the Illinois State House, like unemployment insurance and old age pension, that became national models.

During World War II he rallied workers for war production with a no-strike pledge. After the war he fought to improve unemployment insurance, workers' compensation and other protections for Illinois workers. He helped unify labor with the merger of the Illinois AFL-CIO Industrial Union Council in 1958. And in his final years, he was still a voice for progress, bringing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders to Illinois AFL-CIO conventions, carrying forward labor's efforts for human equality.

Illinois workers today owe a great debt to Reuben Soderstrom. We hope that all citizens will stop to visit this statute for years to come and draw inspiration from the dedication and selfless spirit to improve humanity that Reuben Soderstrom represented.

Michael T. Carrigan  
*President, Illinois State AFL-CIO*

Timothy E. Drea  
*Secretary Treasurer, Illinois State AFL-CIO*

## PREFACE

### *Carl W. Soderstrom, MD*

How many attractive and exciting books celebrate the building of a business, the growth of a thriving economic sector, or chronicle the colorful titans of industry? Too many to count. And how many books have been published that celebrate the working class, laboring people and the leadership that navigated them through the dirty coal mines, dangerous factories, gruesome world wars and into the stability of middle class? Very few. The book you are holding is important because it is an unapologetic celebration of the labor movement, its colorful and committed laboring men and women, and a singular man, my grandfather, Reuben George Soderstrom, who steadfastly and charismatically churned through the decades as their fearless leader.

This book needed to be written because the stories of the great century of American labor are being lost and forgotten. The magnificent brotherhood and unity experienced when workers spoke with a unified voice—in the case of Illinois, over a million of them at once in any given year in this book—and the power and dignity that came from that collective voice is nothing short of awesome. The American worker has lost that sense of purpose and solidarity and perhaps it's time to study it again.

This book also needed to be written to remind Americans about the tremendous sacrifices made by the generations before them through indescribable pain, suffering, exploitation and abuse suffered before effective labor laws and union membership ushered in a new era. Brave men and women walked before us. Enormous numbers of workers died while fueling the great American Industrial Revolution and creating the basis for a young nation's unprecedented growth. The road to decent working conditions and fair labor laws is littered with workers who were brutally maimed, starved, abused or killed on the job. Some of the pages of this book chronicle their suffering in vivid detail and that is intentional; we can never forget the suffering of the men trapped underground amidst the suffocating flames of Cherry Mine, the widows they left behind, or perhaps the horrific disfigurement suffered by the Radium Girls. Reuben Soderstrom was there for all of it and urgently compelled to act. This book is a reminder of the need to speak up, to organize, to believe in the ability to change things for the better through speeches, writings, elections and good government.

It was a marvel to begin unearthing pieces of Reuben's story. In Volume I, we see that he suffered long lonely years as a type of indentured servant in a blacksmith shop, far away from his family in rural Minnesota. He was then sent to travel by himself as a 12-year-old to the faraway industrial city of Streator, Illinois, to work as a trolley car water boy, witnessing on-the-job accidents and living with a distant aunt whose husband was a coal miner. But through a quick mind and keen eye for an interesting newspaper article, he is tutored by John Williams and becomes something of a part-time resident at the local Carnegie library, soon turning his love for words into a career as a linotype operator, joining the union and barnstorming the Midwest. He then wins a seat in the legislature (and loses it and wins it again) before rising as a young star advocating for labor issues big and small. In 1925 he registers an enormous victory by willing the Injunction Limitation Act into passage, which gave Illinois workers the right to peacefully assemble and strike.

In Volume II and beginning in 1930, our protagonist assumes the role of President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor just as the Great Depression blankets the nation with record unemployment. He is 42 years-old and charged with leading a fledgling membership while simultaneously holding his seat in the legislature. The arrival of the New Deal gives great support to the effort he begins to build, including the landmark passage of a pension bill before turning to the foreign threats of fascism and war. He responds by directing his growing ranks into an "arsenal for democracy," refusing to strike during the length of the war

and producing record amounts of material and munitions for the campaign in Europe and the Pacific. He soon turns his attention to the growing rift between the American Federation of Labor and the upstart Congress of Industrial Organizations, both of which are dealt a heavy blow with the national passage of the Taft Hartley bill in 1947.

In Volume III, Reuben presides over unprecedented productivity in labor while playing a national role in the great merger in 1955 between the AFL and the CIO. He then charges into the 1960's as a labor leader of national prominence who is consistently wooed and cajoled by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson for advice and endorsements, no doubt attempting to secure the 1.2 union million votes at Soderstrom's disposal in the swing state of Illinois. The civil rights movement challenges the labor movement in new ways and it's gratifying to have unearthed correspondence and sincere friendship between my grandfather and Martin Luther King, Jr. from these years.

The book includes standalone pieces that represent the 12 pillars of Reuben's life work. These are: Abolishing Child Labor, Workmen's Compensation, Right to Strike, Financial Security, Ending Unemployment, Old Age Pension, Workplace Safety, Women's Rights, Religion, Education, Civil Rights and Family.

On a personal note, I must note the immense pride and joy at seeing all the photos of our family from decades and years past; first and foremost, Reuben of course, but also Mom and Dad, the Merriners, my brothers and sisters. For me, this project has been a study of a great man doing great things. And at a whole other level, it has been a study in a life well-lived with family members and all their dreams and aspirations. To that end, the purple pages in the book are something of a family scrapbook that share the equally impressive story that this semi-orphaned boy from rural Minnesota helped build a large and loving family in his hometown of Streator. It is with a certain amount of pride and also melancholy that I look at all the photos and memories through the decades of loved ones who arrived on the scene, stayed with us a while, and then departed. This book is for you.

*Carl W. Soderstrom, MD*  
Co-Author and Publisher, *Forty Gavels*  
Chairman, Reuben G. Soderstrom Foundation  
President and CEO, Soderstrom Dermatology Center, S.C.  
Assistant Clinical Professor of Dermatology  
University of Illinois College of Medicine at Peoria  
Peoria, Illinois  
2018



## PREFACE

### *Robert W. Soderstrom*

In February, 1935, the city hall building in Decatur, Illinois was packed with an overflow crowd of angry, chanting workers who huddled in from the cold, stomped their feet and sang rowdy union songs. They were waiting for a single man to take the stage, my great-grandfather Reuben G. Soderstrom, 46 years-old and President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor.

A few days earlier, a strike by the Ladies Garment Workers of Decatur turned violent when the local police fired tear gas into the crowd of 25 women outside the Decatur Garment company and things got physical; some women were thrown in jail and at least one was hospitalized. The courts responded to the chaos not by issuing an injunction against the aggressive police, but against the brutalized women themselves! The injunction disallowed any future assembly by the working women. The community was livid. Fearful that the tense situation might explode, a local labor leader called the ISFL headquarters in Springfield for help from his statewide president. Soderstrom later shared how he responded:

I requested him to call a meeting, and call it tonight. Call it in City Hall. “Well,” he said, “there’s an injunction over there.” “That’s good,” I said, “You call the meeting and make sure that you’ve got a big crowd. Call it where the police are close because I’d like to defy that injunction!”

So I got over there at eight o’clock and the place was jammed. People were sitting on window sills and hanging out the doors. I gave them a rousing talk on strike matters, inflamed the crowd, and then I finally made up my mind to defy the injunction. I announced from the platform that I was defying that injunction. “I hold that court in contempt, and I hold that injunction in contempt!” I felt that they were going to fight me before I got out of the building!”

The next day the event took a remarkable turn when the injunction-issuing judge personally drove to Springfield to meet with Soderstrom, who successfully lobbied him to drop the injunction and free the jailed women. For the ISFL president it was all in a day’s work; advocating for the rights of Illinois workers who would elect him as their fearless leader for 40 years in a row, from 1930 to 1970.

My participation in this book goes back eight years to the invitation of the publisher that I be one of its authors. I refused. A monumental biography requires a commensurate amount of research and writing and I did not have the time. Of-course that answer was not accepted, so I reluctantly committed one Friday a week for a single month; quickly I became fully engrossed by the implausible, arduous, and inspirational journey of my great-grandfather as he propelled himself through the headiest decades of the twentieth century with remarkable prescience, grit and grace. He is a charismatic and relentless protagonist in the consummate American story--one that ultimately saw me spend eight years writing and editing—and unfolds through the three volumes and 1,200 pages that you now hold in your hands.

Within two years I recruited the talented and remarkably productive Andrew Cass Burt to join me and we completed Volume One, standing on the shoulders of Chris Steven’s earlier draft. We then dug into Volume Two and saw that it would soon grow into Volume Three. Soon after, the visually talented (and very patient) Kevin Evans joined as our layout artist and contributed mightily to this biography as it is told in photographs and pictures. Guys, it has been a humbling honor and privilege to work with you on a project of such breadth and scope.

If we were to craft a fictional story about one of the great labor leaders in 20th century America, it would go something like this: he would be a child of immigrants and sent away at the age of nine to a blacksmith shop in the icy countryside of Minnesota to work off the family debt. He would then be sent alone as a child to a faraway town—Streator, Illinois—to work as a water boy on the trolley cars and that town, Streator, would be a mere one hour on the railroad line from Chicago, the large, beating heart of a young industrial nation. He would lead his first strike at the age of 13, become involved in local politics and pivot to a job at a small newspaper, where his mental acuity quickly catches the eye of a local intellectual who sponsors his access to the town's Carnegie library, where our young protagonist now becomes enthralled with the writings of Hamilton and Lincoln, self-educating himself through voracious consumption of literature, philosophy and history.

As a 21 year-old he sets the newspaper type for one of the greatest industrial tragedies ever—the Cherry Mine Disaster—which occurs in a neighboring village and kills over 250 men and boys in a underground coal mine inferno, leaving a local population of impoverished widows and fatherless children to struggle without workmen's compensation or death benefits. He then throws himself into the rough and tumble world of local politics and finds himself personally hosting Samuel Gompers on the front porch of his house after the labor great speaks in Streator's City Park, shortly after inspirational visits to the bustling industrial town by other firebrands like Teddy Roosevelt and Mother Jones. As a 32 year-old in 1920, it is not surprising that he then finds himself standing on the back of a flatbed farming truck in Mendota, Illinois, giving side-by-side political speeches with that year's Vice Presidential candidate, Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Fortunately we did not need to write this story as fiction because my great-grandfather authored it himself through his own spectacular life journey. In 1918 he was 30 years-old and elected to the statehouse for the first time, where he introduced his contentious Injunction-Limitation Bill (Right for Workers to Assemble) on the session's first day. He was defeated in his re-election bid partly due to that, and also due to his opposition to prohibition (Streator was home to many bottle factories), but he came back—surviving death threats and a sabotaged rear axel under his car--and won again in 1922. He immediately returned to the floor of the statehouse where he pulled a crumpled paper from his suit pocket: an injunction lawsuit that decreed he not visit his mother at her home for fear that he may assemble railroad workers in a strike (she lived near the Santa Fe tracks). Against extraordinary opposition he passed his Injunction Limitation Bill in 1925, partly by breaking with statehouse orthodoxy and enjoining four Negro legislators from Chicago in his bill. And to think that the young man was just getting started.

As a Republican, he broke with his party in 1936 and publicly endorsed Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt in a rousing speech at a packed house in Chicago Stadium. He was on the right side of history with remarkable accuracy, probably because his commitment was not to party or politics but to people and their needs. Along the way he was a prodigious letter writer, close friend and self-described “co-worker” with luminaries like Jane Addams, Agnes Nestor, Milton Webster, Frances Perkins, Adlai Stevenson, Senators Paul Simon, Everett Dirksen, and Paul Douglas; judicial luminaries like Arthur Goldberg and Abner Mikva; Mayor Richard Daley, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and all Illinois governors. (Each Governor of Illinois had a unique place in his life and the best way to state his relationship with them is “it's complicated.” He found them to be maddening dance partners and in Reuben Soderstrom's world, the word “lobbying” the governor can be replaced with cajoling, bullying, sparring, triangulating, pleading, overpowering, publicly shaming, strategizing, sometimes partnering with, and on rare occasion, endorsing).

His election-year support was coveted by Presidential candidates eager to capture Illinois' swing state electoral votes through Soderstrom's endorsement to his 1.3 million-person membership. For that reason he was courted by Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. (Richard Nixon, who lost Illinois by a hair in 1960, was eager to reach out to Soderstrom in 1968). He was

revered among labor leaders and tussled frequently and publicly with John L. Lewis, even when the two greats shared office space for an uncomfortable spell in Springfield.

Of course he practiced a labor trade himself as a card-carrying member for nearly sixty years in the International Typographers' Union, late night work that saw him behind the inky newsprint machine of the Streator Free Press until he was 43 years-old, moonlighting to supplement his day job as a legislator. During the day at the statehouse he was a lion, aggressively advocating for labor bills and creating unique coalitions. After ruinous run-ins with his arch-enemy, the Illinois Manufacturers' Association, he personally designed the brilliant Agreed Bills Process, wherein the two opponents hammered out differences before the legislative session, thus guaranteeing smooth sailing for bills on the statehouse floor. As president of the ISFL he committed his Illinois "army of workers" to a no-strike guarantee during World War II and directed them to buy generous amounts of war bonds.

After the war, national AFL president Green appointed Soderstrom to a 10-person committee in Washington DC to help "win the peace" with the formidable task of integrating returning GI's into the American workforce. This appointment was immediately followed by another Washington D.C. appointment to help steer the great national merger between the warring labor factions of the AF of L and the CIO. Soon after, Soderstrom was invited to Philadelphia to help draft the AFL Bill of Rights for all nations, where the historian sees a noticeable and permanent shift in his personal pedagogy toward the broader specter of human rights and world peace.

Immediately following labor's big domestic push to win World War II, he felt outraged and betrayed when Congress passed the Taft-Hartley bill, eviscerating much of unions' negotiating power. The subsequent years were one big barnstorming tour to repeal it; he was unsuccessful. But he forged on in other areas, and in 1952 introduced a comprehensive Civil Rights bill in the Illinois statehouse a full twelve years before LBJ's hallmark bill was approved in Washington. Although Reub's statehouse bill was defeated in 1952, it is inspiring to read the outpouring of support to him from Illinois' African-American labor leaders, Jewish labor leaders and ministers and priests. He was ahead of his time.

Reuben did not always bet right; in both 1949 and 1968 he spent considerable political capital arguing against the "ConCon," an idea to modernize and rewrite the Illinois constitution. And according to my research he may have done well to retire in 1966; his close colleague Paul Douglas had lost his seat in the US Senate and more importantly the Illinois labor movement was roiled with the complicated politics of leadership succession and downstate versus upstate rivalries. However, in the tumultuous political landscape of 1968, our 80 year-old protagonist was more active than ever, producing a formidable amount of writings and speeches across the state. Read the chapters and see for yourself. With his iron-will and unshakeable conviction, he would drive the ship of Illinois labor until the day he died, in 1970.

He revered the United States Constitution--the 13th amendment in particular--the forefathers, and extemporaneously quoted at length from Abraham Lincoln, the Bill of Rights, and poems both popular and obscure. He believed in capitalism, democracy, justice and fairness, family and freedom.

It is remarkably incongruous to acknowledge such a humble man with a book of such opulence and abundance. But the written word was paramount to him and it is our pleasure to hear his voice thunder across these pages. Take a look at one of my favorite parts to assemble: his most memorable quotes in Epilogue I, which are also memorialized in bronze at the statue plaza dedicated to him in Streator, Illinois.

Reuben's public legacy was workers' rights, but his private legacy was family. The purple pages in the book show the growing throng of active relatives around him, all informed by his optimism and care for each other,

a togetherness that has only prospered over the decades through many Soderstrom family reunions, graduations, weddings and births. To that end, I'd like to make a special acknowledgement to my father, Carl W. Soderstrom: Dad, what a special honor it's been to work on this creative endeavor over the years as father and son. You are most like Reuben in your will, charisma, love for people and generous spirit, and as you were fortunate to have him in your life, we too are fortunate to have you in ours.

I wrote the first chapter of this book in the library of the Writers Guild of America, which happened to be close to my residence at the time on Blackburn Avenue in Los Angeles. The historical irony is not lost on me that a book about my great-grandfather, the union leader, was written by me, a union member (Writers Guild of America West), who has walked the picket line and fully understands the vulnerability of a lone contract-employee facing the powerful might of a large corporation. In a more severe and pressing vein, it is my sincere hope and plan that this book finds life in digital form in the Philippines or Pakistan, Honduras or Sierra Leone, where a young laborer there may find kindred spirit, hope and vision from my grandfather's journey. Many of the very same abuses endure, and the fight for human dignity in labor is as urgent as ever.

I would like to thank my wife, Soyun Kim Soderstrom, for her constant support and urging to record and write this great book; I could not have done this without you. And last, my participation and contribution to these three volumes are dedicated to our remarkable daughter: Emma Min Soderstrom, may you go forth into the world with the same inspired conviction and big-hearted hope for humanity as your great great-grandfather Reuben. The future is waiting to be invented.

*Robert William Soderstrom*  
Los Angeles, California  
2018

## PREFACE

### *Andrew W. Burt*

*Forty Gavels*, the story of Illinois AFL-CIO President Reuben G. Soderstrom, is possibly the most ambitious biography of any labor leader to date. It is also one of the most in-depth histories of organized labor in America, spanning more than a century and examining its subject in documented, year-by-year detail. The result is a narrative of both a man and a movement. In many ways, Reuben's personal journey mirrors that of the AFL-CIO itself—born of immigrants, forged by hard work and sacrifice, and driven to create a better world for all workers.

For more than forty years, Soderstrom was a pillar of organized labor in Illinois. As president, he steered the Illinois State Federation of Labor through depression, division, and war, ultimately guiding it to unprecedented prosperity and influence. His legislative accomplishments bettered the lives of workers not just in Illinois but across the nation. By the time he was honored as President Emeritus in 1970, Reuben had become one of organized labor's most prolific leaders, leaving a legacy that endures to this day.

Just as important was the vision Reuben articulated for organized labor's role in American life. He was a fierce advocate for the tripartite approach to labor legislation, a practice most clearly reflected in his own "agreed bills" process. He argued passionately for an activist government unafraid to adopt and enforce broad regulations on wages, prices, and hours of labor. All this was grounded in his faith in representative democracy and the instruments of civil society, especially unions. He viewed the AFL (and later the AFL-CIO) as an American institution, a "fifth estate" worthy of the same respect and responsibilities as the judiciary or a free press.

Throughout his career, Reuben judged every action according to a single measure: is it in the best interests of working men and women? His scrupulous nature set him apart from many of his contemporaries. Illinois politics is infamous for its corruption, and labor leaders often share a similar place in the popular imagination. Even if this reputation is more anti-labor spin than fact (as Reuben asserted), it is true that too many too often leveraged their power for personal gain. Soderstrom, however, never succumbed to such temptation, a fact even his fiercest critics acknowledged.

Not that Reuben was without his faults. His reflexive denial of corruption and racism within unions often rendered him blind the truth behind such critiques. He could be famously stubborn, spending political capital on quixotic campaigns like his fight against a revised Illinois constitution. Many interpreted his consistency as rigidity, and decried his policy positions as obsolete. Yet it is many of these same policies, and the broader philosophy of labor from which they were derived, that make Soderstrom a subject worthy of study today. His approaches to labor issues routinely defy modern political labels, and possess a coherence and practicality often missing in today's discussion of the nature and future of organized labor. This work is intended to expand that conversation.

A project of this scope would be impossible without the hard work of many, and I am deeply grateful to all those who lent their time, effort, and talent. I would especially like to thank Dr. Carl Soderstrom, without whom this book would never have been possible. Special thanks as well to my co-authors Robert Soderstrom and Chis Stevens. Collaborating with writers of such caliber has been a professional and personal pleasure. Heartfelt thanks are due to graphic designer Kevin Evans, whose skill and resolve have been indispensable. My deepest gratitude to my family, especially parents Stan and Colleen, for their encouragement and strength. Most of all, I would like to thank my wife, Dr. Rosanne Chien, for her unfailing love, faith, and

insight. Her support and sacrifice throughout the creation of this work have been invaluable to both it and the author.

“The onward and upward march called Progress that we have long been striving for is about to begin,” Reuben wrote at the outset of his presidency, “and the Illinois labor movement should head the parade.” This was more than just a prediction; it was a promise. A promise to lead. To never stop fighting or give up hope. To be unafraid of bold solutions. To move forward, step by step, confident in the belief that tomorrow can and will be better than today. It is my sincerest wish that this book can play a role in renewing that promise for a new generation.

*Andrew Willis “Cass” Burt*  
Portland, Oregon  
2018

## PREFACE

### *Chris M. Stevens*

Reuben G. Soderstrom. The remarkable journey of his life—82 years a son, brother, husband, father, grandfather, and great grandfather, 18 years as a state representative, and 40 years as president of organized labor in Illinois—illustrates how effort, ability, and vision propel a person past the visible horizon.

Leaders reach beyond the boundary. They possess the ability to identify the limitations of the environment. Then when those borders hindered or hurt people, “Rube” found a way to improve, or remove the damaging limitation from the daily life of those who toil.

Did Rube look where he was going? Nope. Rube would go where he was looking. The focus forward provided him the ability to reach for the handle on the doors of opportunity while most were still searching for the opening in the wall. Rube, rose to the top of his profession through dogged determination and a dedication to lifelong learning. Not a day went by that Rube failed to learn something new. A voracious reader, lent him the skill of writer. Throughout his years in public life Rube penned many an article and essay. Never once did he shy away from confronting the troubles of the time.

Solution. A word revered by Rube. A man of many words and world class orator, yet, his lifetime reflects tangible achievements. Having been a full-time worker in a blacksmith shop at the age of nine, first-hand experience drove Rube to first and foremost ensure children left the mines, mills and factory floors in order to attend school.

While wearing the reputation as a public servant, elected official and effective leader, Rube’s family never sat in the back seat. Not only did he make all but a handful of Sunday family dinners, Rube paid the expenses for his mother and sister following his father’s death.

What I have learned on this multi-year journey as a writer? Reuben G. Soderstrom provided a bulk of the legislation and leadership that provide the comfortable life we lead: financial support after the loss of a job, (Unemployment Compensation), Credit Unions in Illinois so working people could get a mortgage, and several other pieces of legislation, social programs and ongoing policies that ensure working people live with dignity.

I also learned my wife Mary offered unending support as 40 Gavels consumed countless hours. She sacrificed a lot of shared time together. And Mary never failed to ensure Doc and I had an ample supply of her incredible homemade fudge.

Join us as we unravel and reveal this remarkable journey that chronicles Reuben’s life, friendships, professional peers, and achievements.

*Chris M. Stevens*  
Peoria, Illinois  
2018

## FOREWORD

### *Professor Robert A. Bruno*

For me, contemplating the life of Reuben G. Soderstrom is like reaffirming a set of sacred vows that have existed since someone realized that one person's labor could be a source of profit for another. His accomplishments are profound and working people in Illinois owe much to the labor-relations foundation that Reuben helped to build.

His life's work is a testament to the contributions that labor unions have made in the development of a democratic state and nation. Against great odds organized labor created the core elements that lifted the material conditions of the masses. Clarence Darrow said it best: "With all their faults, trade unions have done more for humanity than any other organization of men that ever existed. They have done more for decency, for honesty, for education, for the betterment of the race, for the developing of character in men, than any other association of men." And yet, as I engaged with the events of Reuben's illustrious and extraordinary life I was constantly reminded of the irrational and often near manic opposition to unions that characterizes American history.

For example, in the 1920s the Chicago Federation of Labor described Illinois Assembly representative Reuben G. Soderstrom as "capable and courageous" for fighting for legislation that protected workers and union organizing rights. His efforts won him the enmity of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association, which set out to defeat his re-election in 1926. They failed. Reuben went on to serve sixteen years in the state assembly and another four decades as Illinois' highest-ranking labor official. In those years Illinois and America prospered. But despite Reuben's and labor's positive contributions to the country, the vitriolic campaigns against unions never ceased. Today a network of right-wing corporate funded anti-worker groups in Illinois and other states are actively soliciting union members to quit their labor organizations. Union and non-union workers should first consider the record.

During Reuben's leadership tenure, labor in Illinois and across the country transformed America. One of the movements' and Reuben's biggest achievements was the adoption of state worker compensation systems to provide a strong safety net against the life-threatening and daily depilatory aspects of work. The idea of a "fair day's wage for a fair day's work" inspired millions to action and produced work hour restrictions and minimum guarantees against pauper-level earnings. Health and safety statutes were passed so that workers would not risk life and limb as they produced the nation's wealth. Laws to prohibit child labor, defend organizing rights, recognize unions, prohibit forced labor and collectively bargain labor contracts were also among Reuben's and the trade unions' many proudest accomplishments.

Reuben was part of a movement that made it possible for working-class families like mine to buy houses and cars, afford medicine, save for a retirement, take a vacation, send their kids to college, afford holiday gifts, occasionally eat a better cut of meat and purchase a new winter coat. The social progress that Reuben and a generation of labor leaders and workers made possible is breathtaking and undeniable. An American middle class is unimaginable without organized labor. You would think that something so well done and beneficial would be settled practice. But instead Reuben's shared legacy is at risk – not just in Illinois but almost everywhere.

Nearly half a century after Reuben's death, state after state have attempted to roll back worker benefits, collective bargaining rights, and basic worker health protections. As 2017 began there were seven more anti-labor Right-to-Work states than when Reuben gavelled his last state convention into adjournment. Reuben



understood the hardscrabble world of labor relations and politics but I'm confident he would have viewed this new political reality as a form of insanity.

He was a visionary man who pursued big things. His world included U.S. presidents, civil rights leaders, corporate heads, military chiefs, university presidents (he is the "founding father" of the university school I teach in) and union leaders from Streator, Illinois to Washington, D.C. Reuben was not only an Illinois labor leader; he exemplified the characteristics of what political scientist once called a "national statesman."

Statesman like Reuben could in 1956 lead the Illinois AFL-CIO to endorse Democrat Adlai Stevenson for president, while also supporting William G. Stratton, a Republican, for governor. When asked why the federation split their endorsement Soderstrom explained to the New York Times that it was because the incumbent Stratton had kept his word that there would be no anti-labor legislation in his administration. Hard now to imagine a time when America prospered on the strong back of a large, institutionally recognized labor movement.

In 1943 Reuben pledged the Illinois labor movements' continued defense against fascism abroad. But he also made a promise that rings as relevant today as it did more than three-quarters of a century ago; to stand ready to defend against those at home who are "waging war on the wage earners of America." Crazy and dangerous that what Reuben dedicated his life work to building is now once again up for grabs. But if it was once worth fighting for, it remains so today. If you need a reason to read the story of the son of an immigrant family who at age nine worked in a blacksmith shop and later as a printer and bottle blower before becoming a national leader for America's working class, I couldn't think of a better one.

*Robert A. Bruno*

Professor of Labor and Employment Relations  
Director of the Labor Education Program  
School of Labor and Employment Relations  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## FOREWORD

### *Robert Gibson*

My congratulations to Dr. Soderstrom and all his associates on this brilliant work honoring and exploring the legacy of a truly great leader of the labor movement.

A work this impressive and distinguished is usually reserved for military leaders, and politicians, but many labor leaders such as Reuben Soderstrom made more significant contributions to a better life in our nation than all of the others.

I had the privilege of working with Rueb for ten years while he led the Illinois State AFL-CIO. It was a great learning experience, and helped me become a better person as I followed in his footsteps. He was the greatest orator I ever heard—broadcasting his message of fairness, equality, and safety in the workplace. I never tired of listening and watching him rouse and motivate union members as well as non-members to our cause. He was the best.

I am grateful for the opportunity to lend my voice and support to this noble enterprise. I would like to thank you all for your wonderful work on behalf of Illinois workers, and for this wonderful tribute to one of the legends of the American Labor Movements.

*Robert G. Gibson*

President, Illinois State AFL-CIO, 1979 – 1989

## FOREWORD

### *Jimmie Lansford*

As the Mayor of Streator, it is my privilege to welcome this extraordinary book project about Reuben G. Soderstrom, one of Streator's favorite sons who brought more impactful and positive change to Illinois and the nation than any other individual. Streatorites remain steadfastly proud of Reuben's legislative, labor, and social achievements to this day because he is a shining beacon of progress for all of us in Illinois.

In the pages of this book you will see Reuben was a constant presence and true product of our community. As a child laborer, he grew up with our glass factories and trolley cars and then became a linotype operator for the daily newspaper. He educated himself in the Carnegie Library in our town and spent countless afternoons in City Park listening to great political speakers, until one day when he stood up himself. It would be the first of many. Now, the northwest corner of our beautiful City Park is occupied by a commanding bronze statue of Reuben making a speech while clutching his Fortieth Gavel. The twelve eloquent and moving plaques around this plaza can be found in the Epilogue of this mighty book.

We call Streator "A Quiet Surprise on the Prairie" and we invite you to visit the Reuben Soderstrom Statue Plaza as well as the gorgeously renovated Reuben Soderstrom Reading Room in our Carnegie Library. We are proud of Reuben and of all our sons and daughters from Streator who contributed their services for the betterment of mankind. Please come and enjoy our progress!

*Jimmie D. Lansford*  
Mayor of Streator

## FOREWORD

### *Mike Matejka*

Labor's story is not often encapsulated into one life—but that epic tale is contained within the Reuben Soderstrom's story.

As the industrializing, steam-driven 19th century moved into the 20th, the United States was a youthful power, emerging from an agrarian economy to a mechanical powerhouse. In doing so, workers were often treated as so many “hands,” critical to production but interchangeable and easily discarded, as waves of immigrants came to American shores.

Within the 20th century, Americans would face two World Wars, a severe economic depression and finally begin to honestly wrestle with its ignored issues of racial intolerance.

A child of rural immigrants who early started work, Reuben Soderstrom quickly grasped that his situation was not unique, but shared by millions. With a strong moral foundation from his religious family, he became a life-long workers' champion, a visionary with the patience to struggle relentlessly to bring change.

The labor movement in America always fought two battles. One was to organize workers into trade unions, so they could use their concerted power to better conditions. The other front was legislative, changing the legal framework to insure workers' rights. Large enterprises needed to face that combined leverage of organized workers and government vigilance to insure humane treatment.

There are many great union organizers in American history, from “Mother” Jones to Samuel Gompers to John L. Lewis. There are political figures like Robert Wagner, Franklin Roosevelt and Frances Perkins who passed laws to insure decent treatment. Rare is the individual like Soderstrom, who was both a legislator and a labor leader, with deep insight into both systems and the nuances of each.

The hands he shook and discussions he shared is a roll-call of the American century—Samuel Gompers, Eugene V. Debs, “Mother” Jones, Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon B. Johnson and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

There are books that document strikes, union organizing and community struggles. Rare is the history of a particular state legislature and a state labor federation over a fifty-year period. This book delivers that story within the framework of Illinois, birthplace to numerous unions, a pioneer in worker legislation and the storied land of many a labor triumph and tragedy.

Reuben Soderstrom not only witnessed these efforts, he lived and breathed them daily. This book will bring an in-depth and thorough treatment to a state labor movement and its long efforts, told through the story of one committed and spirited leader, Reuben Soderstrom.

*Mike Matejka*

Great Plains Laborers District Council  
Vice-President, Illinois Labor History Society

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the eight years it has taken to write these volumes there has been tremendous help from literally hundreds of friends, supporters, staff and family. Sharon Williams gave life to the lifelong dream I had to compile and write the extraordinary story of my grandfather, Reuben G. Soderstrom. The result is three volumes and over one thousand pages that include the written narrative, a pictorial story and original newspaper articles that march through Reuben's colorful career year-by-year, making this work a colorful and comprehensive narrative for casual readers and academic readers alike.

Sharon brought the Illinois AFL-CIO together at the 2008 anniversary of the merger of the ISFL and the CIO and introduced writer Chris Stevens to me and therein started this eight-year journey. Chris brought talent, enthusiasm and dedication to the pages by being the first to venture into the massive scale of the story and tackle the task of writing. That Christmas, my son Robert W. Soderstrom gifted me a full size table top cover of the volumes as an inspirational reminder. It has been front and center on my desk during all of these years. Soon after, he joined the effort to research and write Reuben's story and has contributed formidably for many years as a passionate visionary, editor and historian committed to making a historical biography like no other before it. We then recruited historian Andrew Cass Burt as a professional writer and researcher for more academic input, and his considerable care and effort for many years has been nothing short of awesome. As so we have labored on this project as a team for eight years.

A very early inspiration was photographer Vicki Taufer of V Galleries. Vicki is a Morton, Illinois, native who has achieved national and international recognition and enriched this story with exciting photography of Reuben's gavels, badges, plaques and awards – hundreds of them. Her remarkable talent brought Reuben's mementos richly back to life!

President of the Illinois AFL-CIO, Mike Carrigan, and Secretary-Treasurer Tim Drea were instrumental in trusting us with open access to the voluminous archives and stored files and documents of the labor organization. Over thirty file cabinets--four legal drawers deep--of Reuben's letters and correspondence were made fully available to us. We were welcomed at State Conventions, spoke before the delegates and received immense and invaluable support from Mike and Tim. As Reuben's story unfolds, so too does the story of the Illinois Federation of Labor. Without their commitment and full support these volumes could never have come to life.

Thanks to Nick Kaleeba and Jorge Ramirez, the offices of the Chicago Federation of Labor were opened to us and contributed documents, encouragement and photographs. Professor Robert Bruno of the University of Illinois made a major contribution by introducing us to Lew Rossenbaum, who plowed through documents and files for months, making the major discovery of a cache of thousands of photographs by the Burke and Dean Studio in Chicago of labor meetings in the 1960s and 70s. Lew and I spent a day searching through these dusty and forgotten photographic files in the research library of the Chicago campus. We found valuable records of Chicago labor leaders, meetings, committee reports and a treasure trove of photographs of Reuben!

In cleaning the musty, dirt floor basement of Reuben's home at 103 E Lincoln Avenue in Streator, we found all of the ISFL newsletters from 1915 to 1933, many plaques and awards, and hundreds of newspaper headlines and stories, precious kept in his honor by his loving wife and life partner, Jeanne Shaw Soderstrom. We also found two wooden cross-continent luggage cases full of family heirlooms from Sweden and Scotland.

A most rewarding visit was two full days spent interviewing, visiting and discussing Reuben as told by his close friend, chosen successor and past president of the ISFL, Robert Gibson. Now retired and living in Florida, his stories and recollections brought much into perspective and added real life to his years working with and mentoring under Reuben.

Mike Matejka, a past president of the Illinois Labor History Society, added much insight, facts and historical research to this project. Mike is a walking, talking labor historian and knows where all the history can be found. Mike contributed the side bars and several excerpts to these volumes.

Crystal Schmidt was our first layout artist who inspired much of the original design, including the gavel chapter pages, the gavel collage and all of the working chapter and photo layouts. Reagan Gearhart scanned and recorded thousands of important photos and documents.

Mayor Jimmie Lansford of Streator, Illinois, and the City Council of Streator gave wholehearted and inspiring support by approving a plaza and statue honoring Reuben in the City Park, where my grandfather delivered many speeches decades ago. Jimmie has also helped with establishing a Reuben Soderstrom Seminar room soon to arrive in the Streator Public Library, where Reuben was self-educated.

My father, Carl Soderstrom Sr., spent many hours before his death in 2009 retracing the family's many steps in Streator, Illinois, and giving interviews to me and Chris Stevens and my son Bob about our family history, life in Streator and his life as Reuben's son, his own career and many colorful memories! We miss you, Dad, and wish you could hold this book in your hands.

Also, many citizens of Streator made this book journey rewarding, including Cynthia Maxwell at the Streator Public Library, as well as Mary Lou Anderson and John Gilbert at the Streator Historical Society, where we spent many hours researching and borrowing many pictures to include in the book.

The board at the Streator Public Library have been studious and gracious and contributing to the Reuben G. Soderstrom Seminar Room. There are many others without whose time and expertise we could not have completed this work. Eric Siebenthal, our untiring IT expert, Heather McMaster, our patient computer and IT operator, secretary and jack of all trades. Photo credits are numerous and listed throughout these volumes. Morton Community Bank and Jean and Gordon Honegger provided access to photograph antique desks that comprise the backdrops of many photos in these three volumes.

My brothers Bob and Bill and sister Ginny, who have given their time, effort, photographs and most of all, encouragement at our annual sibling trips with the question "Carl, when will the book be done?" My sister Ginny's recollections from my parents' 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary booklet have been paraphrased in various parts of the book.

To my five sons, Carl, Bob, Steve, Erik and John and their wonderful families and children, my wife and my many friends, thank you for eight years of encouragement, inspiration and support. May these volumes sit proudly on your bookshelves as a reminder of the inspiring Soderstrom heritage of positively contributing to humanity and moving the world forward.

Lastly, the incredible printing shop Global PSD guided and helped us in numerous ways. Steven Goff is a world-class publisher, printer and project manager. His colleague, Kevin Evans, is a graphical design genius who patiently and methodically designed every single page in this three volume set. What an impressive and

astounding amount of work.

David Raikes, retired member of the Laborers' Local is a bundle of energy, as loyal a man as there is, and his phone calls, inspiration and energy was contagious and propelled me forward.

Many thanks to Jen Eidson and Michael Henry of the Hornbake Library at the University of Maryland. Thanks to Debbie Hamm at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library.

And so we are deeply grateful to the undying encouragement and tremendous support of our vast and varied team. We did it!

*Carl W. Soderstrom, Jr, MD*  
Co-Author and Publisher, *Forty Gavels*  
Peoria, IL, 2018

# REUBEN'S PILLARS

Reuben Soderstrom was driven to right the wrongs in life that he encountered and all too often personally experienced. As a state representative and leader of organized labor, Reuben enacted laws and advocated for reforms to improve the lives of working men and women on both the state and national levels. During his long career as a fierce advocate for laboring people, these are the major issues that he tackled—his personal and professional Pillars of Labor.

## I. CHILD LABOR

Reuben personally experienced the hardships of child labor. From his beginnings in a blacksmith's shop at the age of nine through his work on Streator's trolley lines and in its glass factories and the local print shop, Soderstrom was—like many children of his generation—deprived of his childhood. Poverty and a deplorable absence of protections were responsible for this sorry state of affairs, and one of Reuben's first acts upon entering public life was to right this pernicious wrong. "Our children are our most precious resource," he later wrote. "It is on them that the future of our nation depends. Planning for progress should be the aim of our lives and of our state and nation."

As a state representative and chairman of the Committee on Education in the Illinois House, Soderstrom won many increases in state funding for education. He worked alongside labor officials in the state and nation to pass crucial child labor protections, finding a powerful ally and leader in President Franklin Roosevelt. These efforts culminated with the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) in 1938, which firmly established a minimum working age and set standards for the employment of youths. "Children have been taken out of mills, mines and factories," Reuben triumphantly wrote in the wake of the Act's passage, "And placed in schools where they are given the opportunity to grow into strong, healthy, fine young men and women."

## II. WORKMEN'S COMPENSATION

Workmen's compensation is one of the American labor movement's greatest victories. At the dawn of the 20th century, caused by unsafe conditions and costing hundreds of lives, a series of workplace tragedies shocked the country. The resulting public outrage led to the adoption of revolutionary laws ensuring that workers and their families were made whole for harm suffered at work. One of the most horrific of these disasters was the 1909 fire at Cherry Mine, Illinois. Over 271 miners lost their lives in the gruesome event, which garnered national attention. John E. Williams, a Streator native and Reuben's mentor, was called in to help arbitrate a settlement between the mining company and the widows and orphans of Cherry. The agreement he crafted became the basis for the 1912 Illinois Workmen's Compensation Act (WCA), which in turn served as a model for the nation.

Reuben made repeated improvements to the WCA as a state representative, increasing both the amount of compensation and the breadth of coverage. As president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, he established regular, direct negotiations between the ISFL and representatives of industry to make amendments to the WCA. This "agreed bills" process enabled both parties to focus on their common interests. After all, as Reuben noted, the law replaced costly court battles with a system of benefits that was swift and certain—something good for business as well as labor. It also allowed them to unite against a common enemy: private insurance companies, which reaped huge sums off the premiums they charged employers (money injured workers never saw). Still, Soderstrom never backed down in his negotiations with organized business, refusing to accept anything he believed wasn't in labor's best interests. "When a representative of the employer spits in my face," he said, "I never pretend that it's raining. I spit back at him."



### III. RIGHT TO STRIKE

Of all the rights labor defended, arguably none was more precious than the right to strike. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, injunctions became the preferred legal weapon used by industry to undermine the right of assembly by aggrieved workers. Court orders issued by a judge, injunctions were originally intended to prevent one person from infringing on the rights of another. But under a series of interpretations by “injunction judges,” they morphed into judicial decrees banning boycotts, pickets, sympathy strikes and general assembly. Injunctions were also used to prevent labor leaders from making any contact with striking workers, forbidding them from coming within a set distance of the picket line. This routinely made labor organizers like Soderstrom captives in their own cities. In 1922, he and the Streator Trades and Labor Council even faced the threat of prison for merely publishing a statement in support of a local strike.

In 1925, Reuben courageously led the first successful attempt to roll back the injustice of injunctions in Illinois. His Injunction Limitation Act faced incredible opposition from the powerful JM Glenn and his Illinois Manufacturers’ Association. For years, the group had used a powerful mix of cash, intimidation, and exploitation to defeat organized labor’s attempts to restrain this judicial abuse. Under Soderstrom’s leadership, however, the pro-labor forces of the Illinois General Assembly dramatically (and finally) passed a package of reforms that gained national attention and put Reuben in the spotlight.

### IV. FINANCIAL SECURITY

Reuben long recognized the importance of financial security for working Americans, especially the ability to access credit. Without it, a laborer in need of a small loan or payday advance could only turn to the local loan shark, lenders who offered small, short-term, high-interest loans that trapped the borrower in debt.

In 1925, Reuben helped bring affordable lending to workers through the Illinois Credit Union Act. The law created a network of chartered credit unions in Illinois that offered affordable loans for working-class citizens by placing firm limits on loan interests and amounts. It also promoted community ownership by capping the number and value of shares any one person could own. Most importantly, it empowered workers to take control of their own finances; as Reuben said, “You can make a banker out of anybody if he has the opportunity and intelligence to become one.”

### V. UNEMPLOYMENT

Reuben called unemployment “the cause of all economic trouble...the only real trouble that I’ve been confronted with during my entire 40 years.” As leader of the Illinois State Federation of Labor through the Great Depression, he faced this threat at its peak; by 1933 one out of every four laborers was unemployed. Protest and hunger swept the nation as banks collapsed, businesses closed, and communities were gutted. Reuben’s Streator was no exception; nearly 4,000 men and their families were forced to beg for food and scavenge coal for warmth. Even the city’s interurban rail couldn’t afford to run.

President Soderstrom supported several measures to help ease the pain of unemployment, including unemployment insurance and relief, retraining programs, and the industry codes of President Roosevelt’s National Industrial Recovery Act. In depressed economic times, he was a life-long proponent of spreading work across more laborers through a six-hour, five-day work week, arguing that the government could stimulate both employment and consumption while creating gratitude and self-worth for marginalized workers. Decades after the Great Depression, Soderstrom continued the fight against labor’s greatest foe, a struggle which led to such labor achievements as the weekend, a minimum wage, overtime pay,

unemployment insurance, and more. No matter the unemployment rate, Reuben unwaveringly heeded AFL founder Samuel Gompers's maxim that "as long as there is one person seeking work and unable to find it, the hours of labor are too long!"

## **VI. OLD-AGE PENSIONS**

Reuben's struggle for the respectful treatment of the elderly, regardless of their wealth or station, was rooted in the experiences and values of his own family. Soderstrom's native Sweden had created the world's first universal public pension system in 1913 and for over a decade he led the fight to create a similar system in Illinois. To Reuben, pensions were not a fiscal issue but a moral one. He forcefully argued that government had both the right and the responsibility to "put a greater value on human flesh than on the dollar" by abolishing the county poorhouse and erecting in its place a pension system that allowed the elderly to live out their final years at home. "The silver lace of old age touches me more deeply than the flash and color of youth," he said, "I claim the right to die comfortably is just as desirable in the hearts of men and women as the right to live prosperously." For years, he reliably introduced and unsuccessfully argued for passage of his Old-Age Pension bill in Illinois House.

That changed in January of 1935, when President Roosevelt brought his Social Security proposal before the US Congress. Its offer to match state expenditures with national funds breathed new life and urgency into Reuben's bill, which he successfully leveraged to line up support in both the General Assembly and the Governor's mansion. His actions came at a price, earning him enemies in the Republican party who would eventually cost him his legislative seat. Still, Soderstrom never regretted his actions. The Illinois Old Age Pension Act, which went into effect in 1936, was his crowning legislative achievement, enabling countless Illinois citizens to live out their lives with dignity.

## **VII. WORKPLACE SAFETY**

To Reuben, access to a safe and secure working environment was a laborer's right. His mentor, John E. Williams, had begun to improve workers' safety in the wake of the Cherry Mine Disaster of 1909. Similarly, Soderstrom helped further Illinois safety legislation in the aftermath of another devastating workplace tragedy: the Radium Girls of Ottawa, Illinois. The female workers of the Radium Dial Company sued after discovering they had been knowingly poisoned by their employer, leaving them with an array of grotesque and debilitating illnesses. Unable to plead ignorance, the company argued that the law, as written, could not hold them accountable. Astonishingly, the Illinois Supreme Court agreed in a decision issued on April 17, 1935—a date Illinois labor would later call "Black Wednesday."

Outraged, Soderstrom called on legislators of both parties to right this wrong. He oversaw passage of a new Occupational Disease Act that would prevent tragedies like those the radium girls faced from occurring again. As with the Workmen's Compensation Act, he used his invented "agreed bills" process to negotiate directly with his counterparts in the Illinois Manufacturers' Association, continually improving the law. His efforts did not stop there. During World War II, he used his position on various state safety committees to increase employee training, set higher factory and equipment standards, and protect work-hour limitations to prevent worker fatigue. In the post-war era, Soderstrom was repeatedly called to Washington to serve on committees advising the President on national safety standards and practices.

## **VIII. WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

The story of women at work in America is rife with tales of discrimination, scapegoating, and abuse. Early American "factory girls" were routinely targets of mistreatment, working far longer than their male

counterparts for considerably less pay. Eventually, many of these working women organized and began pushing for legislation limiting the number of hours they could be forced to work. In 1893, Jane Addams of Hull House and the Illinois State Federation of Labor succeeded in passing an Eight Hour Women's Act. Their success prompted the businesses of Illinois to organize; the resulting Illinois Manufacturers' Association (IMA) undid the law and quickly became a menace to all unions in the state.

In the 1920s, Reuben combined efforts with the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) to try to undo the work of the IMA. In 1937, they finally succeeded with the passage of a new Women's Eight Hour law, an event Reuben declared "takes Illinois out of the class of low-standard states and places it high in the ranks of progressive states in relation to working women." The progressive women's movement celebrated the victory with feasts, speeches, and celebration. Ironically, this achievement eventually became a target of the 1960's feminist movement, which viewed it as discriminatory and a barrier to women's professional advancement. Still, even that turn of events was a testament to how powerfully and permanently the Women's Eight Hour Act impacted the lives of working women within Illinois and beyond.

## IX. RELIGION

Soderstrom's commitment to Judeo-Christian principles permeated every aspect of his leadership of Illinois labor. His connection to faith can be traced back to his father, a Lutheran minister who came to America from Sweden in search of religious freedom. The values he instilled in Reuben drove him to maintain a relentless pursuit of fairness, justice, and equality of opportunity for all people. As president, Reub befriended and enrolled a variety of priests, preachers, rabbis, and ministers to testify in support of labor legislation before the Illinois General Assembly and to speak at the annual labor conventions. He forged a deep and lifelong bond with his Jewish friends in Illinois, including several rabbis and Jewish trade unionists in Chicago. Soderstrom felt a kinship with the religious figures he worked alongside. "Reub felt his job was like a priest caring for his flock," one friend later explained. "You have to believe in yourself; you have to believe in what you're doing, or it won't work."

Reuben spoke frequently about how biblical values had inspired the labor movement. No doubt he saw the union movement in the example of the carpenter of Nazareth, and was inspired by the idea that seemingly ordinary men and women, united by the principles of justice and compassion, had the power to change the world. "The similarity between the philosophy of the churches and the philosophy of organized labor is striking," he said. "Closer unity between labor leaders and religious leaders has done more to humanize and civilize the human-race than all the statesmen and warriors combined."

## X. EDUCATION

Education was an intensely personal subject for Reuben. Deprived of formal schooling, he was largely self-taught from the age of nine onward. While most children were walking to the schoolhouse, Reuben was already hard at work in the blacksmith's shop, on the rail lines, at the glass factory and, eventually, in the print shop. It was there at the age of fourteen that he met labor writer and mentor John E. Williams, who developed a curriculum of self-study that would forever change the boy's life. For the next several years Soderstrom spent almost every off-work hour at the Streator Public Library, poring over books on topics ranging from classical history to progressive economics. He maintained this academic discipline into his early adulthood, visiting public libraries in every city to which his work took him.

As a legislator and labor leader, Reuben worked to ensure that everyone, no matter their income, age, or previous experience, could have access to public education and all its tools. He also helped fund the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations at the University of Illinois, known today as the School of Labor and

Employment Relations. Today, the school is one of the nation's premier centers of labor education, research, and outreach—all possible only because of the vision, dedication and values of Reuben G. Soderstrom.

## **XI. CIVIL RIGHTS**

The organized labor and civil rights movements are linked by a common history, morality, and mission—a connection Reuben was quick to recognize and celebrate. He was deeply opposed to discrimination and believed in the need to take action against it. In 1961, he helped pass the Fair Employment Practices Act in Illinois, making it illegal for employers to deny a job to anyone because of race, color, religion, national origin, or ancestry. He forged friendships with several civil rights leaders, including the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Rev. Dr. Ralph Abernathy, both of whom he invited to address the Illinois AFL-CIO.

In 1953, Soderstrom was honored for his commitment to civil rights by the Jewish Labor Committee of Chicago, which praised him for his efforts “in establishing equality of opportunity for all people.” “The American Federation of Labor has long adhered to the fundamental principle laid down by our forefathers—that all men are created equal,” Reuben said in his acceptance speech. “Regardless of race or religion we address each other as brothers. Discrimination against any person because of his or her race or creed is wrong, because discrimination itself is wrong.”

## **XII. FAMILY**

Each week Reuben circulated around the state of Illinois, from Springfield to Chicago and many points in between, but without fail he always came home to his family in Streator. Many of Reuben's legislative victories and labor policies were driven by a commitment to the values of family. He imbued the primacy of family into bills like the Old Age Pension Act, the “One Day Rest in Seven” bill, the Women's Eight-Hour Act, pensions for widows, and Workmen's Compensation. He set out in life to keep families together, and his labor policies flowed from that principle.

It can be surmised that Reuben's role within his family—energetic, supportive and reliably strong—was his own creation. As the years progressed, Reuben's family grew to include multiple generations, all informed by the great compassion, energy, close-knit togetherness and strength of his making. He would be amazed and touched to see that his grandchildren, Carl, Ginny, Bob and Bill, have created a greater Soderstrom family that has married and multiplied over the decades since he died. Reuben's big-hearted love for family is alive and well.

# ERA V

## 1930-1941

# THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE NEW DEAL

## IN THIS ERA

In 1930 and at the age of 42, Reuben becomes President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, just as the Great Depression shrinks ISFL membership to less than 200,000. Soderstrom begins to rebuild the organization and focuses on legislation. Aided by FDR's New Deal, he passes a series of pro-labor bills, including the Illinois State Industrial Recovery Act, a new Occupational Disease Act, and the Old Age Pension Act. He is repeatedly called to Washington, D.C., to meet with the Roosevelt administration, and is appointed Secretary of the national AFL's influential Resolutions Committee.

Soderstrom's support of FDR—including a rousing public endorsement at the Chicago Stadium—angers the Illinois Republican party. In 1936, they maneuver to split the Republican vote and cost Soderstrom his seat in the Illinois House. Undaunted, Reuben helps pass the Women's Eight-Hour Act and defeats anti-democratic efforts in Chicago. He also crafts an "agreed bills" process to streamline the passage of labor legislation. Nationally, the AFL splits between trade and industrial unionists, the latter of which leave to form the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Reuben deals with the repercussions in Illinois.

Reuben enjoys many family achievements. His son Carl becomes the first in his family to graduate from college, receiving a BS from the University of Illinois in 1937. He is followed by sister Jeanne, who earns her Bachelor's degree in 1940 and a Master's degree the following year. In 1941, he celebrates Carl's marriage to Virginia Merriner, daughter of Arley and Verna Merriner of Streator.

Meanwhile, production radically increases as the nation prepares for war. While strongly supportive of the Allies, Soderstrom calls for restraint to avoid direct US involvement in the conflict. All that changes on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor.

"The object of the labor movement is to establish social and economic justice, to promote education, and to abolish misery, poverty, suffering, intolerance, and crime. To see to it that every child born under the flag has an equal opportunity for peace, for happiness, for prosperity, and for success. These are not only the principles by which organized labor lives; these are the principles by which government itself lives and functions."

– *Reuben Soderstrom, first ISFL presidential address, 1931*

# CHAPTER 19

## 1930, Pt. 2

# REUBEN ELECTED PRESIDENT OF THE ILLINOIS STATE FEDERATION OF LABOR

## CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY

### *Labor in Crisis: A Leader to Rally*

Upon John Walker's resignation, First Vice President Robert G. Fitchie became the interim president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor. It was an honor he desperately did not want. First, he didn't want to leave his post as President of the Milk Wagon Drivers of Chicago; second was his desire to remain in the Windy City.

Looming above all this, of course, was the enormity of the task at hand. Walker's rebellion devastated the UMWA, traditionally the strongest union in the ISFL. Somewhere between 65% to 85% of Illinois's miners left the UMWA to join Walker's new Progressive Miners over the course of 1930.<sup>1</sup> This was just the beginning of the ISFL's woes. By the early summer it had become clear that the panic of Wall Street had broken Main Street. Even the most ardent optimists could no longer turn a blind eye to the massive scale of the economic depression sweeping the nation. This had a devastating impact on unions as members were laid off or forced to work without representation. By the year's end, ISFL membership had declined to under 200,000 members.<sup>2</sup> Whoever followed Walker as President faced extreme challenges.

In June, Fitchie approached Reuben with a bold idea: he and the board wanted Soderstrom to seek the ISFL Presidency. On the surface the plan seemed far-fetched; while a district representative and officer in his own local, Reub had no position in the ISFL. He'd never held a statewide office, and his only non-local campaign had ended in failure. As a union official, he possessed only modest experience as an organizer.

But it was his legislative experience that made RG Soderstrom such a powerful candidate. With no end to the economic crisis in sight, ISFL officials became increasingly convinced that the best hope for the organization and its members would be to seek relief through the law. As Reuben later shared with historian Derber, "The entire official family wanted someone active in the field of legislation to head the Federation. I was in legislative activity and seemed to be the logical choice."<sup>3</sup> Geography also played a role; the Chicago vs. downstate divide was an ever-present one in Illinois labor; many outside of the big city were wary of domination. Reuben's election would, in Fitchie's estimation, provide a needed counterbalance to Secretary-Treasurer Victor Olander's Chicago standing.<sup>4</sup> John Walker had already given Reuben his full support. "I know of no man his age in our country who has had a greater or more varied experience in the struggle of labor as a trade unionist for the betterment of humanity," Walker said in a lengthy public endorsement of Soderstrom. "Through it all he has stood unflinching for labor—capable, well-informed, intelligent, thoroughly honest."<sup>5</sup>

Walker could not have chosen a more appropriate successor. He was the one who first recruited Reuben years ago, charging him with an aggressive agenda of bills to pass for labor's cause. He now had in Reuben a man to

carry on his legacy, capable of seeing the Illinois Federation through this storm. Even Walker could not have envisioned the heights to which Reuben would take the organization. But first he had to be elected.

### ***“Outstanding Champion of Organized Labor”***

Once Reuben accepted the ISFL Executive Board’s support, they had to move quickly. It was already summer, and the ISFL convention was only a few short months away. The first step was to appoint Reuben to the Vice Presidency left vacant by Fitchie’s appointment to interim president, which the board did immediately. Fitchie then wrote to all members in late July officially announcing his intention not to run for the presidency and his endorsement of Reuben for president:

I am asking my friends in the movement to support the candidacy of a man whom I believe is one of the best fitted in the state for the position of president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor. He is able, honest and well-informed in legislative matters.

He has been the outstanding champion of organized labor throughout his several terms in the legislature and his ability is well recognized. He has stood the acid test that is required by organized labor and has not been found wanting. I find that even our enemies, who do not agree with his views, respect his sincerity and honesty of purpose, nevertheless. I find that even those who may not agree with him respect his sincerity and honesty of purpose.

The man I have in mind is Representative R.G. Soderstrom of Streator, whose ability has been outstanding in the state legislature and who has been the champion of organized labor throughout his many terms in the House of Representatives.

He has stood the acid test that is required by organized labor and has not been found wanting. He is a member of the Typographical Union and is working at his trade when not in Springfield attending the sessions of the legislature. I trust that organized labor will give its support to him.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the month of August Reub and the ISFL prepared for the annual convention to be held at the Knights of Columbus Hall in Springfield that September 15–20. During the following weeks, all affiliated locals submitted their nominations for president. It wasn’t even a contest; by the end Reuben had secured 138 of 147 nominations.<sup>7</sup>

## **A DREAM ACCOMPLISHED**

### ***Kind Words, Cruel Realities at the 1930 ISFL Convention***

Behind the pleasant pageantry of the 1930 ISFL convention in Springfield lurked dark politics and a deep loss. Former president Walker was loved...and now absent. So was his massive contingent of miners—only three miners were among that year’s accredited delegates. In the days leading up to the gathering, the Progressive Miners attempted to be recognized by the ISFL as the legitimate mining union. This forced Victor Olander, ISFL Secretary and one of Walker’s oldest friends, into an impossible situation. While he deeply wished to welcome his brother in arms, AFL President Green’s ruling left him with no recourse. In a tense meeting with the excluded delegates, Olander was compelled to tell the insurgents that admittance was not possible. Speaking on behalf of the ISFL, Olander tried to console the miners, telling them “We hope that the matter has been settled peaceably because eventually the miners will get together again in such a way that they will again be eligible for membership in the Federation.”<sup>8</sup>

Walker ended the stand-off peacefully, officially stating his group would make no effort to win seats in face of the ruling. Still, despite the amicable words on both sides, it must have been heart-wrenching for Reuben to watch as the man who first brought him into the world of labor politics was now turned away from the organization he once helmed. The bittersweet reality for Reuben was that he was gaining a chair emptied by the very person who most deserved to be there. But there was little time for mourning: the convention was fast approaching and Reuben had to prepare.

The forty-eighth annual convention of the Illinois State Federation of Labor was hosted in Springfield, where it began with a stirring invocation by Rev. H.H. Pittman. Speeches by Springfield Mayor Hal Smith, State Senator Earl Searcy, Illinois Department of Labor Director Barney Cohen and others soon followed. As the final speaker drew to a close, Fitchie was presented with a “handsome union-made gavel” which he used to officially call the convention to order for business.<sup>9</sup> That evening Reuben spoke at length, closing the first day’s session with an impassioned call for the piece of legislation closest to his heart—the Old Age Pension bill:

The true aim and end of government is the welfare of the people who live under it, and the destitution of any class of our citizens, old or young, is a matter of governmental concern and their relief is governmental duty. So you will see that we are seeking to introduce no revolutionary legislation in the state. What we seek to do is emphasize this important moral duty and to request the performance of that duty by the members of the Illinois House and Senate...Is this government less interested in its dignified, dependent old citizens than in its strenuous youths? Are citizens to be appraised and valued by the state only according to their years and their capacity to produce wealth and pay taxes? What is it that Lincoln who lived here said with respect to governmental responsibility: “I hold that this government should be by and for men and women.” This implies a humanitarian motive in governmental motives...

I want the work of that General Assembly when it shall have been completed to apply fairly to all the people of the state; I want it to be fair alike to youth and old age, and this federation is going to bring them this bill again in favor of a class of people too feeble and weak themselves, too poor in money and in life’s prospects to do it for themselves. I want the state to demonstrate that these people are not [forgotten by] the state because they have become old and feeble; I want the state to declare for homes rather than poorhouses; I want liberty instead of imprisonment for the old, and I want this grand old State of Illinois, whenever possible, to help that gray haired pair, bent with age, to live together and dream their dreams out under their own roof, at their own table and by their own fireside.<sup>10</sup>

The following days were filled with reports, speeches, and (most importantly for Reuben) a flurry of procedural and legal changes necessary to make his presidency possible. According to the ISFL constitution, a presidential vacancy was to be immediately filled by the most senior vice president. Reuben, a vice president for only a few months, was last in line, barred from appointment unless all other vice presidents resigned. To clear this hurdle the Convention passed a constitutional amendment allowing the Executive Board to appoint a successor until an election could be held. When the amendment passed, Fitchie officially offered his resignation. The Board then appointed Reuben as the new ISFL president by a unanimous vote and called on him as chair to preside. The 42-year-old Reuben accepted, solemnly swearing to fulfill all the duties and obligations of his office before the men who had chosen him to lead.

### ***Reuben Soderstrom Becomes ISFL President***

That Saturday, September 20, 1930, RG Soderstrom spoke before the assembled delegates for the first time as president of the ISFL, humbly reflecting on his improbable journey—one made possible by the organized labor movement—and promising honest and faithful service:



Mr. Chairman and delegates to the convention:

I really did want to express my appreciation and gratitude to the delegates for the many expressions of good will that have been extended to me during the past week. Perhaps it would be good for me to say this with reference to myself personally, so that you may know the entire history of the next President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor.

About forty-two years ago, a boy was born in the backwoods of Minnesota. He came to Illinois about the age of twelve, but without his parents, and went to work in the glass industry in the city of Streator. At the age of fifteen he secured employment in a newspaper office, which was a sort of poor boy's school...At twenty-nine he was sent to the Illinois Legislature, and he has served there ever since that time, with the exception of one session, that of 1921, and he stands before you today, not only holding the highest educational position in the Illinois Legislature, that of chairman of the committee on education, but also the next President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor.

And because of my political connections and the attitude of the trade unionists with regard to the loyalty that may be held in the heart of the legislator toward the labor movement, may I make this statement: That to the highest aspirations of labor and the labor movement I want to pledge to you, and through you to the men of labor, to the women of toil and to our children who are to take our places, that there will be neither a wrongful nor a dishonorable act on my part which shall in the least detract from the greatest triumph that can come to labor or to the cause of labor as long as I remain President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor.<sup>11</sup>

Before walking off the stage, Reub must have taken a moment to absorb the scene around him. The packed hall of delegates now looked up to him as the leader of one of the nation's most industrialized states, but all he could likely think of were childhood days spent separated from his family as a blacksmith's boy, or carrying water on the muddy and dangerous Streator trolley line, or leading the first strike of child workers in his hometown's bottle factory. His brother Lafe joined him on stage, linking arms and leading the crowd as they rose and sang the Reverend Samuel F. Smith's popular song "America." Later at the convention hotel, Reuben stayed up until two in the morning receiving congratulations, backslaps, and handshakes...as well as urgent reports from delegates about their dangerous working conditions. Saliently, a congratulatory telegram from John L. Lewis never arrived.

### *Reaping the Whirlwind*

The convention's end did not give Reuben a moment's rest. Instead, the closing months of 1930 were a whirlwind of activity. On Monday, September 29, Reuben presided over his first Executive Board meeting, focusing chiefly on legislative matters. They also formally adopted the constitutional changes made at the convention allowing Reub's presidency.<sup>12</sup> Soderstrom then immediately took off for Boston to attend the AFL's national convention. While there, he was invited to give addresses to two Boston churches on the subject of unemployment, which he eagerly accepted.<sup>13</sup>

Over the next two months, he attended a banquet given by the Kensington branch of the Milk Wagon Drivers, appeared before the convention of Highway and Municipal Contractors to address wages and the Prevailing Rate of Wage Bill, and attended local trade unionist meetings around the state to discuss labor legislation.<sup>14</sup> As the year closed, he again renewed the cry for an old-age pension bill, stating "Organized labor's aim is to remedy wrongs and bring added happiness into humble as well as prosperous family homes, and in a legislative way no better or finer thing could be done to bring this about than to enact labor's old-age pension bill into law at the coming session of the General Assembly."<sup>15</sup> The November elections confirmed

Reub's rightful place in that Assembly; Soderstrom was reelected by a wide margin to his seat representing the 39th District in the Illinois Legislature, where he would serve simultaneously as a state representative and ISFL president, a position which was formally solidified when members voted overwhelmingly to change Reuben's title from appointed to elected president.

It was the beginning of a new, troubled era, one marked by massive economic depression, a badly fractured miners' union, a quarrelsome legislature and none other than John L. Lewis stomping just outside the ISFL doors. Despite all this, Reuben G. Soderstrom, the "Happy Warrior," plunged enthusiastically into his Gavel Years.

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# THE GAVEL

Gavels are symbols of labor, power, and authority. For President Reuben G. Soderstrom, the gavels he received at the annual Illinois State Federation of Labor and Illinois AFL-CIO conventions meant even more. They were beautiful works of union-made carpenters' art, celebrations of labor's heritage representing absolute fairness for every union member—a collection of 40 gavels which continue to serve as tangible emblems of his legacy.

The origin of the gavel can be traced back to humanity's earliest tools: Stone Age implements with a flat surface and cutting edge used for rudimentary labors such as chipping stone, breaking rock, or chopping trees. In the middle ages, stone masons used specialized hammers to channel their strength and creativity, carving hard, shapeless surfaces into products both practical and beautiful. In later years, the Freemasons used gavels—small, wooden mallets symbolizing the masons' trade—to call their meetings to order. Eventually, this practice spread throughout the world; today chairmen, speakers, presidents, and authorities of all types use gavels to start and end meetings, mark the passage of resolutions, and bring an end to debate.

When the American Federation of Labor began holding annual conventions in the 1880s, it became customary for the host city's Carpenters' Union to present a gavel to AFL President Samuel Gompers for use during the proceedings. This practice was adopted by state federations, including the ISFL. The gavels presented to Reuben came from a wide variety of unions in cities across Illinois, from Chicago to Springfield to Peoria to Belleville.

Each convention's gavel is a work of art, painstakingly crafted and unique in design. The carpenter begins by picking out his desired material, typically wood—oak, walnut, cherry, and maple are often selected for their strength and décor. Next, he uses a lathe and saw to turn and cut the wood into three sections—base, handle, and hammer. He then carefully carves each piece, using the lathe and chisel to make fine cuts and intricate grooves. Finally, the pieces are assembled, sanded, and stained. The result is an appealing instrument so elegant it can call attention with the lightest tap, yet rugged enough to withstand a forceful pounding.

The 40 gavels presented to Reuben Soderstrom, all made by union tradesmen and stamped with the union label, come in all sizes, shapes and forms. Some are large and some are small. Some are checkered; some are engraved with brass or silver or plated with gold. Some are covered in ribbons, while others remain bare. Some are carved from maple, some from oak; some aren't even made from wood at all. No two are alike.

Yet they were all wielded by the same hand for a single cause—to conduct the affairs of organized labor with integrity, honesty, and respect. President Soderstrom took seriously his role of arbiter, and took pains to ensure that his conventions were guided by the principles of democratic governance, which he considered the bedrock of organized labor. As he said nearly every year upon accepting the gavel:

While the gavel is an emblem of authority, you may rest assured that your president will endeavor to deal fairly with each and every delegate to this convention. The convention belongs to the delegates, and all that I desire to do is to preside impartially...Gavels are used to guide parliamentary procedure, and so it will be in this convention. Every delegate's rights will be protected by your presiding officer during this week of deliberations...Every delegate has the right to be heard, and there will be no sharp tap of the gavel to stop him or confuse him.<sup>16</sup>

To Reuben, these 40 gavels were a source of immense pride. For him, they were reminders of his own youth spent toiling away in a blacksmith's shop, where at the age of nine he first used a hammer to help work off his family's debt. They were symbols of his commitment to labor and his love for those he represented. They were evidence of the trust those people had placed in him, of the promises made and kept during his decades in office. Even today, they continue to serve as a testament to life lived in service to others—40 gavels for 40 years dedicated to freedom, economic security, equality, and opportunity for all.

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# MOTHER JONES

*“Pray for the dead, but fight like hell for the living.”*

-Mary Harris “Mother” Jones

On November 30, 1930, Reuben joined all of organized labor in mourning the loss of one of its leading lights, Mary Harris “Mother” Jones. He marked her passing in the pages of the *ISFL Weekly Newsletter* with a fitting tribute to the woman who meant so much to so many, writing:

The militant spirit of Mother Jones, which carried her so courageously through the many stormy battles she fought in the interest of the mine workers of our country, has passed on. Throughout her life, no one could intimidate her, no power was ever able to coerce her into deserting those who were making the sacrifices and enduring the suffering associated with the work of organizing the workers in the mines. The trade unionists throughout the nation are saddened by the news of her death. Her life was one of devotion to labor’s great cause, and as her name is flashed across the sky of eternity, the men of labor today mourn the loss of a great advocate of justice, right, and humanity—Mary “Mother” Jones.<sup>17</sup>

Born in Cork, Ireland, in 1837, Mary Harris suffered a series of horrors during the first half of her life, beginning with the Great Famine that consumed her homeland. After emigrating to the New World, she found a brief happiness in America as a schoolteacher. In 1861, she moved to Memphis, Tennessee, where she met and married foundry worker (and union organizer) George Jones; together they had three boys and a little girl. Mary left teaching to become a dress maker, eventually opening her own shop.

But in the space of a few short, wicked years, it was all ripped away. In 1867, her husband and all their children died in an outbreak of yellow fever. Bereft, Jones tried to make a new life for herself in Chicago, only to see her new shop (and all her savings) burn in the Great Fire of 1871. By the age of 34, Mary was widowed, childless, impoverished, and alone.

Most people would be left broken by any one of these calamities. Mary was not most people. Viewing her losses as the result of class injustice, she joined the Knights of Labor and began organizing strikes, throwing herself into her work. She eventually became attached to the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), earning a reputation as a fierce advocate for the downtrodden miners, who referred to her simply as “Mother.” According to Father Maguire, an old personal friend of Jones who conducted the service at her funeral:

The name grew out of the love and devotion of the hearts of miners, because they loved her and they revered her...It was won by painful years of struggle and sacrifices...She tramped up and down this earth from mining camp to mining camp, from strike to strike. Where the men were struggling for better things, there was Mother Jones. She could knock at the door of a miner’s cabin and she would be received with joy. The miner thought no higher honor could come to him than his little shack should shelter the heroic Mother Jones.<sup>18</sup>

Columnist Mary Field gave similar testimony to the devotion Jones inspired:

Watch her in action...She enters the dismal camp with only a little black handbag. Straight for the cabin-door of one of the workers. She knocks. A woman with a baby in her arms opens the door a crack. “God bless you, dear,” says Mother Jones, beaming friendliness. “I’m come to stay with you. I’m Mother Jones.” The door

flings open. Arms and hearts open. What honor!<sup>19</sup>

If Mother was loved by the miners, she was despised in equal measure by the wealthy and powerful. Again from Father Maguire:

She was a scold. She stirred up the people. She was always creating trouble. Away with her and into jail she was clapped! And there she made so much noise the communities had to let her out so that they even might be able to sleep.

Mother Jones's name in certain circles of this land only a few years ago was a hissing and byword. She was held in contempt as being unchristian and unwomanlike, but she replied to that kind of charge that they said she was unchristian and unwomanlike because she was a labor agitator. She answered that the first great agitator was Christ, and therefore, that she was a Christian.<sup>20</sup>

Mother Jones was a polarizing figure, even within labor. Her sharp tongue and uncompromising nature led to confrontation with the UMWA leadership. Jones held special contempt for John L. Lewis, whom she described as "an empty piece of human slime."<sup>21</sup> Even many of her friends within labor disagreed with her confrontational tactics and abrasive language. Still, by the time of her passing, even her most ardent critics could not fault her integrity or intention. "Mother Jones's faults were the excesses of her virtue," Maguire eulogized. "The excess of her love of justice, the excess of her courage, the excess of that mighty mother's heart that reached out to embrace the children of all the world."<sup>22</sup> Field concurred, writing "in this nation, so adverse to individuality, so cruel to its saviors, Mother Jones will be remembered as one of the few, one of the very few who have become personalities, who have stood resolute and alone."<sup>23</sup>

To Reuben, the death of Mother Jones was an epic loss. She had been a close friend of John Walker, Reuben's predecessor and mentor, and of Father Maguire, who was one of Soderstrom's closest advisors. Although he did not agree with all her values and beliefs (her socialism, for example) he still viewed her as one of organized labor's bravest heroes. Her eulogy was the first article (save his AFL report) that Reub officially wrote for the *ISFL Weekly Newsletter* as president.

Soderstrom was among the thousands that came to Mount Olive, Illinois, on December 8, 1930, to pay homage to Mother as she was finally laid to rest. Per her request, she was buried "alongside her boys" in the Union Miner's Cemetery near a monument honoring those murdered during the 1898 labor struggle known as the "Battle of Virden." Walker's Progressive Miners led an impassioned effort to establish another monument to Jones herself, and on October 12, 1936, a beautiful marble obelisk, bearing a plaque of Mother Jones and flanked by the figures of two sentinel miners, was dedicated in her honor.<sup>24</sup> Restored and rededicated on June 20, 2015, it remains one of America's most touching tributes, a site of continued pilgrimage for labor's faithful.<sup>25</sup>

# PILLAR V

## ENDING UNEMPLOYMENT: THE RIGHT TO WORK

### LABOR'S GREATEST CHALLENGE

In an interview in 1958, R.G. Soderstrom was asked to name the greatest challenge he'd faced in his first years as president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor. His answer came without hesitation:

Well, I'd say that unemployment caused the greatest trouble that we were confronted with. In fact, I sincerely believe out of forty years of active work in the labor world that unemployment causes all of the economic trouble that we have. If we can keep our people employed, everything else seems to work out some way, in a fairly satisfactory way. But when folks are unemployed and home conditions worsen, then all are in a terrible state of mind. When there's no income there, things are really bad. And that's the thing that has caused the only real trouble that I've been confronted with during my entire forty years.<sup>26</sup>

It's easy to understand why Reuben was so attuned to the dangers of mass unemployment. He assumed the ISFL presidency less than a year after the infamous "Black Tuesday" stock market collapse. The subsequent depression quickly wrought destruction wholly unlike its 1907 and 1921 predecessors. The failure of thousands of local banks, including the People's Trust and Savings Bank in Streator, wiped out billions in value from the economy.<sup>27</sup> Industrial wages were slashed by a third, construction wages by half. Prices, meanwhile, fell by only 16%, pushing basic goods even farther out of reach.<sup>28</sup> Amid the chaos, unemployment soared. The number of those unable to find work quintupled between 1929 and 1931. By 1933, one out of every four laborers was idle.<sup>29</sup>

To Soderstrom, this mass unemployment was not just a tragedy; it was a violation of workers' rights. Every laborer, he said, had a "right to work which must not be taken away," a right just as sacrosanct as the guarantee of free speech or the free exercise of religion.<sup>30</sup> To think otherwise was a crime against not just humanity but common sense. "There should be a job for every wage earner who needs work," Reuben maintained. "Every right-thinking person in either management or government will agree this fact is correct."<sup>31</sup> It was an opinion echoed by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, championed by Eleanor Roosevelt and ratified by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, which proclaimed "Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment."<sup>32</sup>

Throughout the Great Depression and beyond, Reuben argued for and secured a number of measures to help ease the pain of joblessness, including unemployment insurance, retraining programs, and public relief. While the public dole and private charity could address the symptoms of unemployment, Soderstrom believed they failed to treat the underlying disease. Relying on these alone, he warned, was unhelpful and unhealthy for labor. "Wage earners would much prefer employment to unemployment checks, helpful as these benefits are," he wrote. "Resentment is always seething underneath. The unemployed worker rightfully feels annoyed and frustrated."<sup>33</sup>

Instead, Reuben advocated a simple yet profound idea—a shorter work week without reduction in pay. "The

only sound method of dealing with unemployment,” he argued, “is to reduce the number of hours per day and the number of days per week in proportion to the increase in the number employed.”<sup>34</sup> A six-hour, five-day work week without wage cuts went to the very heart of the joblessness problem by spreading the work around. True, employers may initially pay more for labor up front, but their losses would soon be offset by increased purchasing power and consumer confidence. As Soderstrom explained, “The worker must earn enough money to make him a steady purchaser and consumer. Those who employ labor cannot continue and will not continue to produce without customers—without consumers—and six million people unemployed and deprived of their weekly pay check does not stimulate consumption.”<sup>35</sup>

Such a plan was fair as well as sound. For decades, industrial automation had allowed manufacturers to slash work hours while simultaneously increasing production. Yet the benefits from this culling had gone solely to the factory owners, allowing them to grow increasingly rich even as their practices eviscerated the American working class. The 30-hour work week, Soderstrom said, would return a portion of those gains to labor. “If Industry can produce in six hours per day more than it can sell,” he asked, “why work longer than a six hour period?”<sup>36</sup>

From his earliest days as ISFL president, Soderstrom fought relentlessly to guarantee that every laborer had the right to work. As he wrote in his very first presidential Labor Day address in 1931:

The labor movement is charged with a grave responsibility: To point out, speak out, and lead the way in the attempt to break down the depression and solve this vexing problem of unemployment is our immediate responsibility and a task that must be done. Shorter hours and the five day week will not come by accident. Only through the pressure of the worker’s movement can this step be made. There is no other solution for unemployment.<sup>37</sup>

Many modern benefits, including the weekend, minimum wage, overtime pay, unemployment insurance, and more are the direct result of this historic struggle. Too often taken for granted, these fundamental protections have saved and enriched the lives of countless workers, a fact Reuben repeatedly noted with pride. Still, he never stopped pushing for more, always repeating Samuel Gompers’s maxim that “As long as there is one person seeking work and unable to find it, the hours of labor are too long!”<sup>38</sup>

## LABOR WARNS OF LOOMING DEPRESSION

While the severity of the Great Depression is not in doubt, its cause remains an issue of controversy. To this day, economists, historians, and policy makers fiercely argue over its origins, in part because belief about what started this depression influences the actions taken to prevent and end future ones. Ben Bernanke’s conviction that the Federal Reserve was to blame for the Great Depression, for example, spurred him to radically cut interest rates and increase liquidity as Federal Reserve Chairman during the Great Recession nearly 80 years later.<sup>39</sup>

Organized labor of the era, however, had a very different answer. Automation—or more specifically, the unfair distribution of its fruits—was to blame for the depression and the unemployment it caused. Production had outpaced consumption, largely because the gains made from technological innovation went almost entirely to the manufacturer, leaving workers without enough capital to buy the very goods they made. As Reuben said, “Unemployment is the child of modern devices.”<sup>40</sup>

If automation was the cause of unemployment, the AFL maintained, then the answer was a shorter work week at the same pay. This way, workers could finally share in the benefits of automation while spreading the available work around. More money in the hands of more workers would spur consumer demand, eating



away at surpluses and triggering a virtuous cycle that would pull the nation out of the depths of depression. Soon, the call for a universal five day, six hour work week without reduction in pay rang out from every union hall across the nation.

The idea that unemployment should be addressed by shortening work hours dates back at least to the founding of the American Federation of Labor, when Samuel Gompers declared that fighting for fewer hours would increase both the availability and value of labor.<sup>41</sup> The argument was largely a response to the Industrial Revolution, which had seen machines become an integral part of the world of work. While some laborers viewed industrialization with suspicion, the AFL largely believed automation could enrich the lives of everyone, worker and owner alike. The problem wasn't industrialization itself, but the fact that its benefits were awarded to only one side; as Soderstrom explained in a 1932 address:

Is machinery a curse? Of course not, but it should be a blessing. So far labor is excluded from this blessing. Machinery makes for an ease of production that excludes three-fourths of the thousands who were formerly employed. It could, by cutting labor to six hours, prove a benefit.<sup>42</sup>

Reuben and his fellow labor leaders were keenly aware of the gross inequality this exclusion had created, and began warning of a pending economic catastrophe at a time when most industrialists were predicting uninterrupted prosperity. The nation's ability to produce, they said, had outstripped the populace's ability (if not appetite) to consume, creating an unprecedented contradiction. Ohio State Federation of Labor President John Frey called it a "new Industrial Revolution," writing in 1927:

No nation in the world's history has ever enjoyed the actual and potential wealth which the United States enjoys today. We have become the wealthiest nation of the world. Our vaults contain more gold than any other country. Our banks have more deposits. Since the Great War we have lent many billions of dollars to other countries...[Yet] half of the miners were idle last year because home consumption and export of coal was not sufficient to give steady employment. An army of men and women in many of the other industries were idle one-third or one-half of the time for the same reason. In the midst of what we are told is prosperity, hundreds of thousands of wage earners were dependent upon outside relief to maintain themselves. There was not sufficient work to keep them employed. Huge manufacturing establishments with millions of dollars invested in buildings and machinery were idle much of the time because there was no market for their product...The world has never witnessed such an extraordinary situation.<sup>43</sup>

Examples of this prosperity paradox could be seen everywhere, especially in America's beloved automobile industry. From 1919 to 1926, General Motors had increased auto production from 391,738 to 835,902 while reducing its workforce by 2,000.<sup>44</sup> The following year, roughly 40,000 Detroit auto workers lost their jobs due in part to automation.<sup>45</sup> If industry wanted to stave off crisis, Frey cautioned, they needed to put more money in the pockets of their workers immediately:

The problem is not one of over-production...The mass of people can make use of much more than they use and consume today. The real problem is one of under-consumption, the inability of the mass of people to purchase in sufficient volume to keep our industries at full capacity...The purchasing power of their wages has not enabled them to buy back in equal proportion to what they have produced.<sup>46</sup>

These warnings went unheeded, and any evidence of the problems labor voiced was actively suppressed. When James Davis, Secretary of Labor under President Coolidge, publicly stated that the number of idle workers was 4,000,000, he was allegedly rebuked by the President and told to "revise" his numbers. His subsequent report in April 1928 placed the number at less than half his original estimate.<sup>47</sup> Long after the stock market crash of 1929, industrial and political leaders refused to acknowledge the severity of the

problem. As late as March of 1930 President Hoover still insisted:

Unemployment amounting to distress is in the main centered in 12 States. The authorities in the remaining 36 States indicate that only normal seasonal unemployment exists or that any abnormal unemployment is rapidly vanishing...The amount of unemployment is considerably less than one-half and probably not more than one-third of the volume of unemployment at the same period in the cycle following the crash of 1907 or that of 1922...All the facts indicate that the worst effects of the crash on employment will have been passed during the next 30 to 60 days.<sup>48</sup>

By the end of 1930, however, even the President could no longer deny the truth. The country was entering a depression unlike any it had known before—exactly as labor predicted.

## REUBEN FIGHTS FOR A SHORTER WEEK

Soderstrom faced a daunting challenge upon assuming the ISFL presidency in 1930. This was labor's darkest hour; a record number of workers were idle, and those lucky enough to be employed lived with the grim knowledge that they could lose their jobs at any moment. True to form, Reuben took the issue of unemployment head on, making it the focus of his first Illinois Federation of Labor convention. Speaking directly to workers across the state in his first-ever presidential address, Soderstrom announced:

Unemployment at this time is in the minds and on the lips of all workers; newspapers and magazines have printed hundreds of columns on the subject matter of unemployment and the prevailing depression. For a time the public press tried to minimize the seriousness of unemployment, but all business has been affected by it, and they can no longer hide their heads in the sand but are admitting that a crisis exists. As this depression continues to drag, unemployment increases...

Hours of labor must be reduced in order that more people can be employed. And the wages of those employed must be sufficient to make them good, steady purchasers; employers cannot continue to produce without steady purchasers. I think the best brains and the finest men in the labor movement are needed at this time, and with proper cooperation, the proper organization and the proper convention action we will be able to overcome the crisis. I think the Illinois State Federation of Labor ought to stand for the five-day week and the six-hour day without reduction in wages, as the sound solution of the problem.<sup>49</sup>

Soderstrom then made good on his word by approving ISFL Resolution One, calling for a 30-hour week across all industries—an audacious start to his presidency. He didn't stop there. For months on end, Reuben campaigned for the five-day, six-hour work week. He opened his 1932 Labor Day address with a direct appeal for the shorter work week, predicting:

Give labor a pre-depression wage, a five day week and a six hour day and the unemployment problem growing out of the existing business depression will be solved before another Labor Day comes floating down the stream of time. The six hour day and the five day week is the brilliant sun of hope, shining behind the darkest cloud America has ever known, and here and there the rays of that economic orb must soon penetrate the overshadowing industrial darkness. Labor Day this year will find those who come in contact directly with life and real labor, and who are not blind or trying to blind others with humbug theories and scientific terminology, openly advocating this common-sense shorter day solution to the economic depression reigning throughout the United States. Our country today is well able, because of modern equipment in its industries and agriculture, to not only support itself but to supply three other countries of its own size with the necessities of life and raw material. Is there any good reason why millions of people should starve in the midst of such unparalleled abundance? Give back to the wage earners and farmers their buying power! This is the

recommendation of the American labor movement.<sup>50</sup>

At that year's ISFL convention, Soderstrom took direct aim at those who called the AFL's plan too extreme, ridiculing them for failing to comprehend the enormity of the crisis:

While I am comparatively a young man, I have a rather keen recollection of three major panics. Back in 1893 a crisis such as we are passing through now was referred to as a "panic." In 1907 a similar condition arose but the name given to it had changed—it was called "hard times." Today the language mechanics are calling the unemployment and suffering experienced by the people of our country a "depression." The word brings to the imagination a lane or road with a low place in it that we should pass over soon, but we are beginning to realize that this is something more than a mere depression. We are beginning to understand that we are facing a deep economic problem that can be solved only by a fundamental reorganization of industry, that with all this machinery production reaches to undreamed-of heights. If we are ever again to enjoy what is known as prosperity, the hours of labor must be reduced in order that more people might be employed...

Sometimes I think that this whole economic structure, this whole economic system is on trial. Sometimes I think that this whole capitalistic system is on trial. If I were a Communist I would certainly rejoice...If I were a Socialist I think I would exclaim to the whole world, "I told you so!" But I am neither a Communist or a Socialist, but a trade unionist who prefers the present economic system if it can be made to work. I believe that it can be made to work, unless the overlords of capitalism are as blind and stupid and dumb as were the Bourbons of France when they disregarded every warning and the whole empire crashed around their ears and the mob set up a guillotine in the marketplace. What is the answer? The buying power of the farmers and the industrial workers must be vastly increased and the hours of labor must be sharply reduced.<sup>51</sup>

Even if the cowardly "overlords of capitalism" couldn't be counted on in this battle, Soderstrom assured, America's workers could be:

Labor officials are facing the future confident and unafraid..If labor leaders sense the thought dominating wage earners everywhere, it is safe to say that a new courage, born in the very depths of despair, is rapidly crystallizing. Figuratively speaking, labor—starving, staggering, bleeding, with its back to the wall from the force and abuse of poverty and depression—is now to about-face and fight to end unemployment. While food, clothing, and shelter may be rapidly diminishing, we are still fighters, we still represent the fighting spirit of America, we still have our ancient fangs and claws, and wage earners, both organized and unorganized, are looking to the labor movement to give the command to march forward...to take such action as will force, if necessary, through pressure of our economic organizations, every employer to establish a six hour day and a five day week to permanently end unemployment in this great commonwealth of Illinois.<sup>52</sup>

With these words, the young state federation president declared war on any and all who opposed the 30-hour week in Illinois. The next front in that war, however, would open not in Springfield, Illinois, but in Washington, DC.

## **BIRTH OF THE NIRA & FLSA**

The 1932 election breathed new life into the labor movement. Franklin D. Roosevelt's landslide victory, accompanied by sweeping Democratic gains in the U.S. House and Senate, was broadly viewed as a resounding endorsement of an activist government focused on new and innovative solutions to unemployment. At the top of the agenda was a new bill, put forward by Alabama Senator Hugo Black, which would outlaw the transportation of goods produced by any company that permitted its laborers to work more than 30 hours per week. The popular bill moved with alarming speed; introduced in December of 1932, it

passed the senate on April 6, 1933 by a vote of 53 to 30. The AFL threw its full support behind the bill. President William Green testified before the House Labor Committee in its favor, giving the bill his “personal and official approval.”<sup>53</sup>

Not everyone was enamored with the legislation, however. President Roosevelt and Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins had serious reservations about the bill. They worried about the one-size-fits-all nature of the legislation. “We agreed there must be some understanding of the differences in industries,” Perkins later wrote. “Some industries require continuous operation; others do not; and some must work long hours at peak season. We felt that a government agency must be set up, empowered to grant variations under responsible controls.”<sup>54</sup> They also worried that the Supreme Court would find the act unconstitutional. Most important was the absence of any wage protection provisions. FDR was convinced that, without a legally defined minimum wage, the immediate effect of the bill would be dramatic and damaging pay cuts. In response, he sent Secretary Perkins before House Labor Committee to argue for amendments introducing a flexible scale and industry-specific minimum wages.

This brought the new administration into direct conflict with the AFL, which had long opposed legislative minimum wages in the belief that they eventually turned into maximum wages. Higher pay, they held, was best achieved through union negotiation, not government intervention. “We want a minimum wage established,” Samuel Gompers wrote in 1912, “But we want it established by the solidarity of the working men themselves through the economic forces of their trade unions, rather than by any legal enactment... We must not, we cannot depend upon legislative enactments to set wage standards.”<sup>55</sup> President Green echoed that sentiment in his testimony and in discussion with the White House, insisting that the best thing the government could do with respect to wages was to ensure workers’ rights to form and join unions properly empowered to bargain with employers.

As a result of these discussions, the 30-hour bill was replaced with the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), which created industry-specific codes establishing maximum hours, minimum pay, and working conditions. At the heart of the NIRA, to address Green’s concerns, was Section 7a, a clause enshrining the right of employees to “organize and bargain collectively, through representatives of their own choosing.”<sup>56</sup> The subsequent Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), enacted in 1938 and still in force today, went even further by establishing a national minimum wage and 40-hour work week enforced in part through guaranteed overtime pay for most jobs. It also prohibited abusive child labor. FLSA amendments have since added protections against discrimination based on gender and age. To this day, the FLSA is the single greatest protection laborers have against overwork—an accomplishment which would not have been possible without the drive for a 30-hour week.

## UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Another important victory Reuben and the AFL achieved in their fight against joblessness was the creation of a national unemployment insurance law. Initially, like most of labor’s leaders, Reuben preferred union-administered voluntary unemployment insurance plans over public options, and worried that a public relief program would interfere with union efforts to bargain privately with employers.<sup>57</sup> In 1931, the AFL even passed a resolution in opposition to government-sponsored unemployment insurance, writing that “such laws would be unsuited to our country.”<sup>58</sup> Victor Olander, Reuben’s close ally and secretary of both the ISFL and the AFL resolutions committee, had played an especially crucial role in the resolution’s passage. “I have been as outspoken against unemployment insurance as any man in the country,” he said at the ISFL convention the following year. “It is no secret that the report written at the [1931 AFL] Vancouver convention, which struck squarely at the whole question, was largely the product of my pen.”<sup>59</sup>

Eventually, however, even Olander had to admit that the AFL's approach to unemployment relief was inadequate. Union unemployment plans covered less than 1% of the workforce at a time when over 11,000 workers were losing their jobs every single day.<sup>60</sup> By the summer of 1932, the AFL executive board had reversed course, publicly coming out in favor of mandatory, government-administered unemployment insurance.<sup>61</sup> When the AFL delegates met again in 1932, they passed a resolution in favor of advancing such a program by vote of 300 to 5.<sup>62</sup> Although supportive of a national plan, the subsequent AFL proposal put most of the burden for passing such measures squarely on the shoulders of state federation leaders like Reuben, concluding:

It would be desirable, if possible, to press for the enactment of one uniform measure for unemployment insurance applicable throughout the United States. But, due to the provisions and limitations of the United States Constitution as interpreted by the courts...it is practically impossible to enact constitutional federal legislation adequately providing unemployment insurance covering employees engaged in work in the different states. The American Federation of Labor, therefore, advocates the passage of unemployment insurance legislation in each separate state, and the supplementing of such state legislation by federal enactments.<sup>63</sup>

Soderstrom immediately got to work. Labeling unemployment relief “an item of paramount importance,” he drafted and sponsored an unemployment bill in January of 1933 based on a measure recommended by the Unemployment Insurance Commission of Ohio.<sup>64</sup> Predictably, the effort was immediately met by fierce opposition from the Industrial Manufacturers' Association and its allies, who testified that “Most of the industries of Illinois now are operating in the red and any added burdens imposed upon them probably will necessitate locating in another state.”<sup>65</sup> For two legislative sessions, this argument—that any effort to establish state unemployment insurance would send what few jobs remained out of Illinois—hamstrung Reuben's efforts.

That all changed with FDR's passage of the Social Security Act in 1935. Under the innovative unemployment insurance provisions of this bill, all businesses across the nation would be taxed “in order to make the cost of such a social policy bear evenly on business over the whole country.”<sup>66</sup> That money would then be disbursed to the states to administer unemployment insurance as they saw fit. It was a brilliant plan that turned the IMA's argument on its head; now businesses were encouraged to leave states *without* unemployment insurance laws, as they would face the same taxes without the benefit of local customers with additional money in their pockets.

Thus empowered, Soderstrom passed Illinois's first unemployment insurance act in 1937. The law, which Reuben called “the finest unemployment insurance act in the United States,” provided up to 16 weeks of unemployment payments equaling one-half of their normal pay, up to \$15 a week. Furthermore, the cost of the program was borne entirely by employers, with no taxes on employee pay.<sup>67</sup> It was an unmitigated success, and a huge triumph for labor in Illinois.

## BEYOND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Over the years, Reuben repeatedly introduced and passed legislation to increase the duration and amount of unemployment payments. In 1945, the ISFL increased unemployment insurance minimums from \$7 in 7 weeks to \$10 in 10 weeks, and extended the length of payments from 18 to 26 weeks—a general increase of 40%.<sup>68</sup> By 1961, he had raised benefits to as much as \$59 per week for a family of five for up to 39 weeks.<sup>69</sup> Even then, however, Soderstrom still preferred the shorter week as the answer to joblessness—so much so that he dedicated his Labor Day address that year to a proposal taking all the funds currently spent on unemployment insurance and investing them in companies that adopted the 30-hour week instead:

Subsidizing industry in this way could lead to a shorter work day without a reduction in pay...The shorter day works. When hours were reduced from 60 to 48 it resulted in absorbing the unemployed people...The possibility of full employment, through a reduction in working hours and financed with revenue now being used to provide solvent checks for unemployed people, has an attractive appeal. The idea is worth exploring.<sup>70</sup>

Unfortunately, Soderstrom's attempts to pass 30-hour legislation in Illinois did not fare as well as his insurance bills. His first attempt in 1933 never received a proper hearing due to political machinations, and his 1937 bill, although recommended by the Illinois Senate Industrial Affairs Committee, was unable to secure passage.

Yet Reuben never gave up the fight, continuing to assert throughout the Great Depression that "the six-hour day and the five-day week without reduction in pay, as advocated by the American Federation of Labor, is the remedy. Nothing short of that will do."<sup>71</sup> Even after the depression and the war that followed, anytime there was an economic tightening or a rise in the unemployment rate, Soderstrom took to the podium and press to call for a 30-hour week.<sup>72</sup> He continually challenged the notion that the 8-hour day was fixed or that labor had no right to demand more, reminding workers that "a 40-hour work week is no more sacred than the 60-hour week or the 44-hour week."<sup>73</sup> Through it all, he never wavered in his conviction that the shorter week was the best way to guaranteed employment. "Government can do anything," he always asserted. "It should make things favorable for the people. It can and should help to wipe out unemployment by encouraging the establishment of a six-hour day without reduction in pay."<sup>74</sup>

Ultimately, Soderstrom's fight for the right to employment enriched the lives of workers throughout Illinois and the nation. Through it, labor had won a range of benefits and protections that would have been unthinkable at organized labor's birth. As Reuben himself later said, "Out of our experience we have found the so-called wild ideas of today frequently become the practical realities of tomorrow."<sup>75</sup> It is this sense of imagination and possibility that gives Reub's call to arms, first delivered in his inaugural Labor Day message over eighty years ago, an optimism and urgency that still resonates today:

Through proper agitation, pressure, and organization we can overcome this unemployment crisis...Doubt, hesitation, cowardly inactivity must go. Courage, work, sacrifice, whatever is necessary to be done to bring order out of this industrial crisis must take its place. The onward and upward march called Progress that we have been striving for so long is about to begin and the Illinois Labor Movement should head the parade.

We want higher wages. The surest way to get them is to reduce the work day; demand a shorter week. It will bring the blessing of employment for all and larger pay. It is a simple remedy for what ails industry, and labor history proves that it actually works when all other remedies have failed. Let's Go!<sup>76</sup>

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# THE OTHER “RIGHT TO WORK”

When Soderstrom spoke of the right to work, he was referring to the human right of all people to gainful employment. This principle, established under international law, entitles the citizens of all nations to fair wages, safe working conditions, equal opportunity, a decent living for themselves and their families, and fair hours that allow for rest, leisure, and reasonable limitations on work.<sup>77</sup> When most Americans hear the phrase “right to work” today, however, they most likely think of anti-union laws and organizations dedicated to undermining collective bargaining. So how did a term originally synonymous with fair hours and wages come to be associated with the people and practices opposed to those very things? The answer can be traced to one man—Vance Muse.

Vance Muse, a six-foot-four, 260-pound Texan with a well-rounded paunch and a fondness for 10-gallon hats, was a professional lobbyist who excelled at self-enrichment. He began his career fleecing gullible donors through sham conservative organizations.<sup>78</sup> In 1936, he partnered with former National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) President John Kirby to form the Southern Committee to Uphold the Constitution, a reactionary group funded by industrial elites like Pierre du Pont and John Raskob to “rob Roosevelt of Dixie” by playing on racial prejudices.<sup>79</sup> Their most memorable stunt was the circulation of a photograph featuring two black ROTC officers escorting Eleanor Roosevelt during her visit to Howard University, an image Muse casually described as “a picture of Mrs. Roosevelt going to some n\*\*\*\*r meeting with two n\*\*\*\*rs on each arm.”<sup>80</sup> Their unsuccessful campaign also included attempts to stir up racial animus within labor by charging New Deal policies meant “white women and white men will be forced into organizations with black African apes whom they will have to call ‘brother’ or lose their jobs.”<sup>81</sup>

After Roosevelt’s reelection, Muse founded the Houston-based Christian American Association (CAA) with Lewis Ulrey, an Illinois native and Nazi sympathizer who viewed the fight against unions as part of a “great struggle between Christianity and Jewish Marxism.”<sup>82</sup> They initially spent most of their time fundraising off vague, vitriolic calls to help “save America from being Sovietized by the labor union czars and their racketeers.”<sup>83</sup> Muse thrived on the antipathy he generated, and considered his opponents’ attacks “Terrific publicity. Much better than a pat on the back.”<sup>84</sup>

By the early 1940s, however, the duo had discovered another racket—promoting anti-labor legislation. After some early mixed performances in Texas, Mississippi, and Louisiana, they found fertile pastures in Arkansas. There, Muse launched a successful \$50,000 direct-mail campaign to pass a “Freedom to Work” amendment to the state constitution outlawing closed shops and the maintenance of union contracts.<sup>85</sup> His sizable win—and the profit it generated—encouraged him to expand his efforts. He began a massive “education” campaign for anti-labor amendments in 21 states, earning himself the title “Labor’s Public Enemy No. 1.”<sup>86</sup> Along the way he tweaked the name of his proposal to match the deliberate perversion, first employed by NAM President Walter Fuller, of a cherished labor term: Right to Work.<sup>87</sup>

Muse’s “Right to Work” (RTW) campaign savaged unions. By 1947, 16 states had outlawed closed shops, largely due to the CAA’s masterful (if deceptive) direct mail campaign, which exploited wartime patriotism to devastating effect.<sup>88</sup> “If you believe in true democracy,” read one such mailing, “if you wish to GUARANTEE these fighting sons and daughters of yours and ours, an equal opportunity to earn when they return—the RIGHT to WORK regardless of membership in some labor union...Sign the ‘Right to Work’ petition—WRITE or WIRE NOW TODAY.”<sup>89</sup>

In 1957, Muse's successors brought his poisonous RTW legislation to the Illinois General Assembly. For a moment, it appeared the state would be swallowed by the anti-labor wave. Soderstrom, however, fought back. "The forces which oppose progress seek to turn the clock back [by introducing] this completely immoral piece of legislation," he warned. To defeat them, "Hundreds of decent employers, professional people, and churchmen, who recognize this legislation's nature, have indicated their willingness to stand with organized labor to stop this perfidious misnamed 'Right-to-Work bill.'"<sup>90</sup> Reuben's coalition triumphed, exposing the bill as unpopular, immoral, and as bad for the economy as it was for workers. Ohio soon followed Illinois' lead, rejecting a RTW ballot proposal by 63%-37%.<sup>91</sup> By 1958, six states had repealed their RTW laws, successfully turning the tide against Muse's "Right to Work" for the rest of the 20th century.



# CHAPTER 20

## 1931

### A NEW LEADER AT LABOR'S DARKEST HOUR

#### REUB HITS THE GROUND RUNNING

##### *Troubling Times*

Carrying a bundle of files in one arm, Reuben could hear his footsteps echo in the hallway as he walked to his new Springfield office as President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor. His heart sank as he opened the creaking door to yet another nearly empty room, the darkness penetrated by a single light emanating from the rear desk of Secretary-Treasurer Victor Olander. The chaos from the miners' struggle had decimated an ISFL already crippled by the growing economic depression. The unemployment rate had nearly tripled since the crisis began, and the losses had hit union men the hardest.<sup>92</sup> More unemployed workers meant fewer dues-paying members. The Federation had to do more with less. At this point, the ISFL could afford no lawyers or researchers, no secretaries or assistants; the grand Illinois State Federation of Labor was in reality two men sharing a small office inside a half-vacant building.

Although Reub and Vic had known and respected each other for some time, their present circumstance bonded them in an entirely new way. They were now brothers in the trenches, fighting against what must have felt like overwhelming odds. Often they would burn the midnight oil in their tiny shared office, sharing ideas and strategy. With his encyclopedic mind and wealth of experience, Victor acted as both mentor and aid to his new president. As Reuben later recalled:

Victor A. Olander was a great man...He could analyze any situation accurately and evaluate the opposition to labor's progress in language that needed no translation. His memory was matchless and his judgment of proportions penetrating and entrancingly correct...He was a natural teacher and a dedicated leader of labor of the Samuel Gompers variety. He and I worked together and we always helped each other.<sup>93</sup>

Physically and stylistically, the two of them couldn't be more different. Victor was a study of the subdued. His ruffled, giant frame would sprawl out comfortably as he lulled the opposition, leading them down a reasoned path to agreement. Many adversaries would enter negotiations with the nearly blind giant set on opposing his agenda, only to leave swearing "I'm damned if we didn't sit there and agree to the whole darn thing!"<sup>94</sup> He lumbered into the office door every morning with keen insights into the tasks ahead, but with a steady and pensive approach.

The keen-eyed Reuben, in contrast, held his five-foot, nine-inch frame coiled and compact, seemingly ready to strike. Whether addressing an audience or conversing casually, he displayed a theatricality and vigor that inspired friends and intimidated enemies. His sharp intellect and skilled oratory overwhelmed opposing viewpoints, but perhaps most salient was his immense will to win. He willed victory where there was none, converting allies, charming audiences, and chastising opponents. He hustled, he fought, he complained, he solved. If he sat at a table of eight men, he often spoke for half the time while the other seven shared the other

half; he addressed every statement and single-handedly steered the discourse from one man to the next and back to himself to approve some ideas and dismiss others. He could drive any debate—compassionate, impatient, frustrating, and funny all in one short exchange. He did not discuss things; instead he held forth. He was a spectacle to absorb, with a torrent of words and opinions on everything and now a tour de force with the agency of his new office. He was poised to sit on the statewide stage for decades as a force that was both enduring and immovable.

But for now, the ISFL office was not powerful but lonely, compounded by the absence of Reuben's revered friend, John Walker. The State Federation had long operated out of a building owned by District 12 of the United Mine Workers (the most powerful of the UMWA's mining districts), which made sense when the Miners were the largest union and Walker (a former Illinois UMWA President) was leading the ISFL. The UMA office had always been bursting with action under Walker, cramped with petitioners and alive with energy. Now it was a ghost town. Rebelling against the dictatorial UMWA President John Lewis, Walker and his men had abandoned their former offices while they sued for control of the union in court. And although Lewis lived in Springfield, he elected to work every week out of the national UMWA offices in Indianapolis, which he preferred to staying in Walker's world.<sup>95</sup> All this left the offices in Springfield a desiccated shell, a mausoleum commemorating times gone by.

With this tension and dwindling funds, Reuben wearily sat down to work. In his first two years as President of the ISFL, one gets the sense that Soderstrom was rowing a boat without the benefit of a paddle; it's not until the formidable winds of the FDR administration rolled across the Midwest that the Illinois labor movement accelerated forward at full sail. But until then, Reuben paddled hard and fast with the ready tools at his disposal: local speeches, crafty alliances and the dogged, familiar battles of the statehouse. Despite these turbulent conditions, he and Vic clearly navigated in the right direction and made some valuable headway. Reub later recounted:

The membership of the Illinois State Federation of Labor had dwindled until we had less than 200,000 members. As President of the State Federation I felt that my first duty was to build up and strengthen the organization. A tremendous amount of time was devoted to this activity. It entailed visiting local unions, meeting labor officials on all levels—national, state, and municipal—pointing out that through an effective state federation of labor in Illinois we could work together unitedly and in closer unity than ever before.<sup>96</sup>

All throughout 1931 Reuben flung himself headlong into this mission, criss-crossing the state to rally his troops. The year started with an address to the apprentices of Typographical Local 16 in Chicago, soon followed by several trips to smaller communities such as Joliet and Murphysboro. All year long the new 42-year-old ISFL president rode the rails across Illinois to connect with his constituents. The Great Depression had robbed unions of much of their influence. Few had the stomach to strike in such desperate times and the ISFL was largely unable to offer financial support to strikers' families as it had done in the past. Times were bleak. Reuben later reflected, "I concentrated on legislative work; addressed endless meetings; encouraged the membership to personally contact their lawmakers on needed legislation; intensified the work in the Illinois General Assembly by calling upon religious leaders, social welfare leaders and educational leaders to publicly support labor bills."<sup>97</sup>

Still, Reuben moved boldly forward. On January 6, he called to order the meeting of his Executive Board for the first time, laying out ambitious plans to re-introduce the longstanding proposed Woman's Eight Hour, Old Age Pension, One Day Rest in Seven, and Anti-Yellow Dog Contract bills, as well as improvements to the Workman's Compensation Act. He also planned to propose new legislation, including a Prevailing Rate of Wage bill and a bill to create a new Division of Statistics—the latter to counter the IMA's relentless drumbeat of cheery economic news.<sup>98</sup>

## GETTING TO WORK

### *Soderstrom Continues as State Representative*

It may be surprising to remember that up to this point Reuben had continued to work part-time in Streator as a linotype operator, proudly carrying his ITU card and paying his dues even though he didn't have to.<sup>99</sup> But with his new duties as the new President of the ISFL, he had to quit operating the oily linotype machine for good. One job he firmly held onto, however, was that as a legislator. As he later explained:

I sat in that Assembly as the President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor...And I wanted to do that because there was always a sort of a feeling that a labor official couldn't carry on that type of work and still be a labor official but I wanted to demonstrate that that's possible. A person elected to public office, if he bankrolls himself, pays his own expenses, and he's obligated to no one, then he's free to serve whomever he pleases after he's elected to public office. I bankrolled my own campaigns, every one of them. I wouldn't accept a penny.<sup>100</sup>

To Reuben, the dual roles of legislator and ISFL President weren't contradictory; quite the opposite, they facilitated the efficient movement of a pro-labor legislative agenda. There was also no public conflict; as a state representative Reuben was expected to have a full-time job for the 18 out of 24 months the Assembly wasn't in session, and he had no state-funded staff. Reuben could act in both positions with a clean conscience. So it is with remarkable durability and agency that Reuben Soderstrom set forth into the 1930's as both legislator and ISFL president.

For years Reuben had learned to live out of a suitcase during the six-month legislative season, traveling up to Springfield on the first train leaving Streator in the pre-dawn hours of Monday morning, returning home on Friday afternoon for the weekend. Now, that schedule would continue for the better part of the year, with frequent trips to Chicago included. Despite this hectic schedule, Reub remained devoted to his family. During a contentious debate in the spring session of the 1931 general assembly, Soderstrom remained at home in Streator for several days when his son Carl was hospitalized for appendicitis. Reuben stayed by his son's bedside at St. Mary's Hospital for four days until he was assured Carl recovered. Only then did he return to Springfield to resume the fight. And what a fight it was.

### *The 57th General Assembly and the Fight for Workman's Compensation*

As the legislative season began, James Donnelly of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association pushed two messages: first, the worst of the economic crisis had passed; and second, Illinois manufacturers were taking every means possible to help workers. They promoted the use of alternating and split shifts to give employment to the greatest number of workers possible, and promised not to lay off workers except "in extreme cases of business pressure."<sup>101</sup> Given these efforts and the abating nature of the crisis, the IMA claimed, none of Reuben's proposed legislation was necessary.

In the statehouse, Donnelly and his cohorts aggressively pushed back against labor's position that the depression was actually worsening and required legislative intervention. Despite their supposed support of alternating and split shifts, the IMA actively opposed proposed laws that prevented owners forcing women to work more than eight hours per shift. Donnelly called such protections "experimental," potentially yielding unforeseen negative consequences. Reub responded with characteristic wit:

To hear the hue and cry raised by the Illinois Manufacturers' Association against the Woman's Eight Hour Bill one would think that these opponents never did try out anything new...In fact, these employers have displayed

no hesitation to enter into mergers, consolidations, to institute speed-up, efficiency and mass production systems calculated to improve profits and business conditions for themselves. They do not hesitate to install new machinery, modern equipment, labor saving devices—so-called—that release working men from steady jobs...The eight-hour day for women is far less a radical solution for the unemployment growing out of the installation of modern machinery than the radical changes in the modern way of operating plants where women are employed.<sup>102</sup>

Despite Reuben's efforts, the IMA succeeded and the Women's Eight Hour Work Bill again went down in defeat. Buoyed by this win, the Association fought tooth and nail on every bill that followed. From old-age pensions to workman's compensation, the IMA sent in lawyers, lobbyists, and pet legislators to kill labor's bills.

Reuben countered, turning to his allies to open new fronts in the fight. He re-introduced his Old Age Pension bill, and worked with representatives Truman A. Snell and Sen. Earl B. Searcy to introduce Prevailing Rate of Wage bills in each chamber of the assembly.<sup>103</sup> The bills, which would require state contractors to pay the wage prevailing in the community in which the work was occurring, was central to Soderstrom's plan to stop local wages from sliding. All too often, outside companies would import cheap labor after winning a contract, lowering the standard of living in the community—a phenomenon Reuben experienced firsthand in Streator during the open-shop war. The bills likewise prevented contractors from requiring employees to work more than eight hours a day, except in cases of emergency.<sup>104</sup>

Reuben also advanced legislation establishing a division of statistics for the state's Department of Labor, a move he viewed as instrumental to labor's survival.<sup>105</sup> For two years the IMA had been publishing "scientific reports" claiming to prove the worst of the economic storm had passed, using their dubious studies to silence calls legislative relief. Reub realized that he could never win the argument as long as his opponents insisted on their own set of facts; creating a credible agency to produce reliable and accurate data that was crucial in his struggle against the depression-deniers of the IMA.

The most contentious legislative battle, however, centered on Soderstrom's proposed improvements to the Workman's Compensation Act. Of all the proposed legislation, none was desired more fervently or despised as thoroughly as this bill. As the legislative season stretched into its fourth month, the *Carbondale Daily Free Press* set the scene:

SPRINGFIELD, Ill, April 11—Manufacturers and organized labor of Illinois will be arrayed against each other here next Wednesday to do battle over proposed amendments to the Workmen's compensation act which would increase payments made to injured workmen from 30 to 50 percent.

The amendments to the compensation law were asked for in the lower house of the general assembly by Rep. R.G. Soderstrom, president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, which is standing behind the bill. Chief opposition to the measure has been organized by the Illinois Manufacturers' Association...

Representative Soderstrom said that the amendments are designed to raise the Illinois standard to the New York level. The Illinois Manufacturers' Association, on the other hand, contends that the proposed amendments are not needed. Officials of the organization have issued a statement saying that the Soderstrom changes would increase the cost of accidental injuries in manufacturing plants by 83 percent.....

In letters sent throughout the state, opponents of the proposed compensation increases said that "passage of a bill of this kind at this time when industry is so seriously depressed would simply tend to increase production costs, increase unemployment, force employers of all kinds to decrease wages, and tend to stifle and arrest

business and thus further retard our economic recovery.”

Representative Soderstrom, on the other hand, argues that further protection of the workman is necessary if industry is to continue developing. “Modern life is a complex thing and requires a liberal application of cooperation,” Rep. Soderstrom said. “Modern life requires that many work together, and that all groups cooperate with each other. Legislation is the only medium through which justice for employees can be obtained in accidental injury and other phases of our equalizing problem. Yet when organized labor proposes remedial legislation, the employers raise the cry that we are trying to ‘drive industry out of the state.’ That cry has been raised against almost every piece of labor legislation proposed by labor, introduced in the Illinois general assembly as far back as most of us are able to remember. This battle-cry was particularly in evidence, used most liberally by the manufacturers’ association, when the Injunction Limitation bill was pending back in 1925. This law was enacted and industry did not leave the state. Instead it continued to grow and the huge industrial machine is more efficient, more powerful today than ever before.”<sup>106</sup>

Reuben continued, accusing the IMA of “spreading propoganda” around the capitol building and intentionally misleading the public. The conversation became even more acrimonious as the hearing progressed, with accusations of deceit and false testimony on both sides. The heated rhetoric underscored the amount of distrust between Soderstrom’s ISFL and Donnelly’s IMA; both men were committed to their cause and certain of the unscrupulous nature of the other.

But then something remarkable happened. The newly elected president of the ISFL and the IMA president agreed to meet, with Reub stating, “(a)s long as they will meet with us, if they’ll meet often enough with us so they understand our problems and our difficulties, we can make some progress.”<sup>107</sup> So, for the first time since the Cherry Mine Disaster of 1909, the head of the IMA and organized labor reached a negotiated end to a legislative standoff. While he never abandoned his principles, Reub was not afraid to accept compromise, and with the passage of the Workman’s Compensation Law he announced “The representatives of labor are well satisfied, because the conference has resulted in substantial improvement in the law and nothing of importance has been sacrificed to secure these gains.”<sup>108</sup>

By the close of the legislative session, Reub was able to credibly claim the fifty-seventh General Assembly “One of the most successful sessions in history...Organized labor had 29 bills in this session and 14 were passed. That’s the best record labor ever had in an Illinois legislature. Previous to this year labor was able to obtain favorable action on only six bills in 14 years.”<sup>109</sup> While unable to pass legislation on a women’s eight-hour bill or anti-yellow dog contract bill, Soderstrom was able to secure an old-age pension commission bill establishing the creation of a two-year commission (to which he got himself appointed as a member).<sup>110</sup> He also secured passage for his bills regarding prevailing wages and creation of a research and statistics agency. Alongside these accomplishments, Reub also secured legislation for wage collections and garnishment exemptions, as well as a law barring the use of convict labor.<sup>111</sup> Soderstrom attributed the success to the members of organized labor. “The credit for this unusual record of achievement belongs to the affiliated unions who furnished the means which make it possible for the Illinois State federation of Labor to carry on its work,” he wrote that summer. “The interests of all men, women and children of Illinois require constant activity on the part of our great state labor movement. This is particularly important during periods of business depression, such as is being experienced at the present time.”<sup>112</sup>

With the state’s most able and reliable pro-labor legislator now acting as president of the ISFL, labor finally held an advantage in its negotiations with business and manufacturing interests. Soderstrom had an intimate knowledge of the Assembly that his opponents lacked, and could quickly build coalitions and solicit support from legislative allies, who in turn could credibly believe that Reuben spoke with the full authority of labor. While Reuben savored his success against John Donnelly’s IMA, however, another often antagonistic figure

who loomed large in Soderstrom's professional life waited for him inside the halls of labor itself.

### *Alliances: John L. Lewis and Others*

Reub's next alliance was an unlikely and often contentious one; John L. Lewis. Lewis was an enemy of Reub's predecessor and friend, John Walker. Like Reub, he knew the power of presentation. In contrast to Soderstrom's clean-cut image, however, Lewis possessed a ruffled, intimidating look characterized by big, bushy eyebrows and a permanently etched scowl, a visage that gave him a "singularly sensuous and mysterious appearance."<sup>113</sup> Whereas Reuben's family and community were central to his character, Lewis clearly separated his professional and personal personas, leading one biographer to note "Lewis drew a sharp line between home and career, family and business. It was as if the two aspects of Lewis's life required totally different personalities and to intermingle them would diminish his dual roles as father-husband and union leader. The union role necessitated public presence, cunning excessive selfishness, and low ethics; proper family life demanded privacy, personal warmth, cooperative effort, and a firm moral code."<sup>114</sup>

Reub distrusted the unscrupulous and dictatorial UMWA leader, while Lewis had little time for the newcomer he dismissed as squatting in his unused lot. Despite these personal distastes, however, the two needed one another. The UMWA was still a force within the ISFL, and after Judge Harry Edwards ruled in favor of Lewis over Walker as the legal head of Illinois District 12, Reuben knew he had little choice but to work with him. Reuben, too, was central to Lewis's agenda. While legally vindicated, Lewis had very little actual leverage; many of the miners in Illinois had defected from the UMWA in the wake of the court's decision, leaving Lewis the master of an empty (and penniless) house. Any victories Lewis could secure for his men would have to come through the legislature, which meant going through Reuben. The two engaged tentatively at first, with Reub asking the elder Lewis for advice, Lewis reciprocating as best he could. Both gifted writers and orators, they occasionally collaborated on addresses. Although mostly incidental in the opening years of the 1930s, the connection between Lewis and Soderstrom would eventually come to knit the two together in many ways, forging an alliance that was personally cool but politically necessary.

Reuben struck other relationships in his first year as ISFL president that would prove to be important in the years to come. Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) President John Fitzpatrick soon became a close ally. An able reformer, Fitzpatrick had ushered in a new era for the CFL by rooting out corruption and increasing organizational autonomy. Fitzpatrick had advised Reub prior to the latter's ascent to the presidency, and the two shared a vision of organized labor that made them fast friends.

Soderstrom's work on the old age pension law also brought him into contact with a broad range of notable supporters. When in Chicago he would often consult with members of the Illinois Committee on Old Age Security. Jane Addams from the Hull House had been named Chair of the committee, while the group's Secretary, Harvey Kailin, maintained an office at the ISFL Chicago headquarters. University of Chicago Economics Professor Paul H. Douglas served on the board as well. Kailin and Douglas soon became friends of Reub, who both sponsored and spoke at a mass lecture the committee held in Chicago in February of that year.<sup>115</sup>

Reuben also expanded appeals to religious organizations in an effort to broaden support for his legislation. One of Reuben's most stalwart advocates was the Father JWR Maguire of St. Viator College in Kankakee, IL. The outspoken cleric became a close friend of both Reuben and labor, calling Reub's old age bill "not only heroic, it is also important and indispensable...its heroes deserve well of industry and of the nation."<sup>116</sup> The Churches of Christ in America also provided support for Reub's policies, stating in their Labor Sunday message in 1931:

During the past year we have seen millions of men and women tramping the streets looking for jobs, seeking help in churches and police stations, standing in breadlines, and waiting in the vestibules of relief societies...The facts of the situation themselves constitute a challenge to the churches to assume their rightful place of ethical leadership, to demand fundamental changes in present economic conditions, to protest against the selfish desire for wealth as the principle motive of industry; to insist upon the creation of an industrial society which shall have as its purpose economic security and freedom for the masses of mankind, 'even these least, my brethren'; to seek the development of a social order which shall be based upon Jesus' principles of love and brotherhood.<sup>117</sup>

Reuben made important national connections as well, particularly through his work at the American Federation of Labor conventions. In 1931, he was appointed to the AFL's Committee on Education. He was a natural choice; as a state legislator Soderstrom already served on the Illinois House Education Committee, and had successfully fought for issues such as increased funding for schools and free textbooks for children. He brought his signature passion to the committee's work, declaring through its report:

One of the most notable contributions of the American Federation of Labor to the public welfare during the fifty years of its existence has been its unwavering support of the extension of education for all the people. Indeed, labor's contribution to the widening of educational opportunities for the entire citizenship would alone justify its existence and merit a generous measure of public approbation...Your Committee on Education is firmly of the opinion that there is no clearer trend of labor development for the past fifty years than the utilization and extension of both educational methods and objectives for the labor movement. Educational methods have been stamped upon hundreds of Labor's proclaimed policies. It is the rule of a wide variety of labor practices. It is the prophecy of Labor's future development and service to the public welfare. Your Committee is accordingly of one mind in feeling that the development can no more fittingly signalize its past trend and its future direction than to make education one of its foremost working policies.<sup>118</sup>

Reuben would spend the next several years working to advance such policies, particularly through the founding of educational institutes—joint endeavors by the AFL, Workers' Education Bureau, and institutions of higher learning to provide training and education programs for workers. The following year, Soderstrom's Illinois received national recognition at the national AFL convention for its plans to create such an institute on the University of Illinois' Champaign-Urbana campus.<sup>119</sup>

These efforts and alliances would prove to be enduring and fruitful. And as the green president of an ISFL decimated by depression, Reuben needed support everywhere he could find it.

### *The ISFL Presidency*

Reuben maintained a hectic traveling schedule after the close of the legislative session. In the summer of 1931, Reuben attended both the Wisconsin and Indiana Federation of Labor Conferences.<sup>120</sup> Relishing in his roots, he also spoke at an immense gathering of Swedish Societies supporting the Old People's Home at Evanston, Illinois.<sup>121</sup> His efforts kept him constantly engaged; a typical week included a trip to Chicago to meet with the CFL on the heels of a speech downstate, followed by a train ride to Springfield the next day before returning home to Streator for the weekend. By year's end, Reub's new salary enabled him make a purchase to help him in his travels, one he'd dreamed of since childhood—a 1931 Buick. But much to his happy chagrin, his playful son Carl had beaten him to the punch with a purchase of his own car two years earlier!

For Labor Day, Reub traveled to Peoria, where he addressed a joyous crowd of over 3,000 at Water Park, whose celebration included a picnic, baseball game, and free dancing at the Grandview Park pavilion.

Standing before them in the withering heat, Reuben gave his first-ever Labor Day Presidential Address. His twin messages of optimism and urgency were in full force as he warned the crowd:

Organized labor is facing a painful transition period. Labor Day this year has but little of the usual celebration spirit. Deep and serious meditation, however, is arousing in the hearts and minds of trades unionists a desire to mobilize the necessary courage to cope with and solve the problems ahead...

For many months the public press tried to minimize the seriousness of unemployment, but all lines of business have been affected by it and they cannot any longer treat it as if it did not exist and are admitting to the crisis at hand. As the depression continues to drag and menace our people, the danger of slashing wages increases...

Wage cuts will not bring back prosperity...Those who employ labor cannot continue and will not continue to produce without customers—without consumers—and six million people unemployed and deprived of their weekly paycheck does not stimulate consumption.

The labor movement is charged with a grave responsibility. To point out, speak out, and lead the way...Shorter hours and the five day week will not come by accident. Only through the pressure of the workers' movement can this step be made. There is no other solution for unemployment and it is high time we cease to hide our heads in the sand and courageously announce to the world that before another Labor Day arrives the organized laborers of Illinois will have reduced the number of hours per day and the number of days per week in proportion to the increase in the number of people who are now permanently unemployed...

We want higher wages. The surest way to get them is to reduce the work day; demand a shorter week. It will bring the blessing of employment for all and larger pay. It is a simple remedy for what ails industry, and labor history proves that it actually works when all other remedies have failed. Let's Go!<sup>122</sup>

At the ISFL Convention that year at Galesburg, Illinois, Reub received his first-ever gavel as the presiding president of the ISFL convention, a beautifully hand-carved wooden work of art. The audience rose to its feet in applause as Soderstrom accepted the handsome hammer, the cheers increasing as Reub took to the podium. The response both embarrassed and emboldened the man who had taken charge in the organization's darkest hour. Reuben spoke as the crowd finally settled, telling those assembled:

I am not sure that I deserve this rather spontaneous demonstration. I know that through a combination of circumstances I have been assigned the wondrous honor of presiding over this convention, and if I live to be a hundred years old I shall never forget the acclaim, the spontaneous welcome that has just been extended to me...

This labor convention of the Illinois State Federation of Labor has become an annual event, and I believe that it is well that it is so, because on this occasion those of us who are organized and have an opportunity to get together and discuss questions that are of special interest to us, and also to emphasize before the world that there is nothing dishonorable in earning our bread by the sweat of our faces. And I am proud to stand here, friends, with this gavel, I am proud to stand in the presence of some of those whom this state is so indebted for all that it has been, for all that it is now, and for all that it can hope to be!<sup>123</sup>

Reuben had faced a series of staggering challenges in his first year as ISFL; following in the wake of a popular president, leading an organization gutted by mass defection and wounded by economic depression, attacked on all sides by foes and supposed friends alike. He proved more than equal to the challenge. He re-oriented the Federation's focus and re-energized its base. He carefully picked his battles, winning where he could and settling when he must. Demonstrating an ability to learn from friends and talk to enemies, he proved a cagey



and pragmatic leader able to achieve results, with successes resulting in an overwhelming acceptance by the men he led. As he told the delegates at the convention's close, "we have as a convention served notice upon our employers that the human element in industry is the most important thing and entitled to the greatest consideration."<sup>124</sup>

It was a good start.

# CHAPTER 21

## 1932

# SODERSTROM DEFENDS AGAINST DEEPENING DEPRESSION

## THE WOLF AT THE DOOR

The opening months of 1932 were dark, with the economic situation going from bad to worse. Between November 1931 and February 1932, national unemployment increased a full third to over 8.3 million able-bodied men and women, according to AFL surveys.<sup>125</sup> From within their tiny two-man office, Reub and Vic gave voice in their weekly newsletters to those hardest hit. In a passage almost certainly written by Reub, the ISFL painted a vivid picture of a family ravaged by the throes of the Great Depression:

Hunger and want stalk abroad in Illinois as the storm clouds of the approaching winter herald the bitter cold days to come. Despairing fathers search vainly for the means to keep the wolf from the door during these long winter months. Anxious mothers pray that somehow the frost may be kept out of the home, that somehow food may be made available and that help—sorely needed help—will come from somewhere—somehow—and not too late. Children move about less buoyantly than usual, their spirits depressed by something they see in the eyes of their parents but do not fully comprehend. The grim specter of unemployment is reaping its ugly toll.<sup>126</sup>

Over the past year Reub had done all he could as newly elected ISFL president to keep the “grim specter” at bay. He pushed for pro-labor legislation on the House floor, fighting fiercely when he could and shrewdly negotiating what he must. He traveled across the state nourishing the spirits of his labor brothers; while he often spoke, he found his most valuable contribution now was to listen. His constituents were suffering mightily.

## LEGISLATURE IN CRISIS

### *Labor Legislation Under Attack*

In Springfield, it wasn't long before Reub's signature accomplishment from the 1931 legislative session—the Prevailing Rate of Wage Act—came under attack. To Reuben, the Prevailing Wage law was “the most important feature of the legislative achievements of the Illinois State Federation of Labor in the last regular session of the Illinois Legislature.”<sup>127</sup> With Soderstrom's defeat of injunctions in 1926, the most devastating tool employers now used against labor was “regional outsourcing,” the shipping in of cheap labor from outside a city or county when workers went on strike. This practice not only depressed local wages but increased racial and ethnic tensions, since most of the outsourced labor came from poorer minority communities. By requiring state contractors to pay their workers the wage that prevailed in the local community, Reuben hoped to stop sliding wages and prevent racial violence.

But push-back began immediately. First, the Department of Public Works and Buildings failed to include this new requirement in its call for bids, forcing the organization to reject all bids and requiring contractors to resubmit. Then, the department unilaterally set the “prevailing wage” at a ridiculously low 35 cents per hour

across the board, including in Chicago's Cook County. Reub fought at every turn, filing an official protest and compelling the governor to form an appeal board which produced a wage schedule that increased wages by 28% in Cook County and 14% in surrounding areas.<sup>128</sup> In spite, some contractors filed a suit against the new schedule, declaring it unconstitutional. To Reub's stunned surprise, the courts agreed, with the Illinois Supreme Court declaring the law at odds with the requirement that state agencies accept the lowest bid.<sup>129</sup> Heartbroken and angry, Reuben swore to revise and restore the act.<sup>130</sup>

### *Special Session Called*

The Supreme Court's ruling not only undid Reuben's wage law; it also invalidated all state contracts for building projects. This meant delaying the creation of much-needed jobs and ultimately drained the Illinois treasury. The state was officially in a state of financial crisis, and as a result Governor Emmerson was forced to call the General Assembly into an emergency session at the end of 1931. To close the funding gap, Emmerson called for the creation of a state income tax, a move that Reuben and labor strongly supported. Such a progressive tax would allow Illinois to meet its obligations by asking the most from those best able to meet the need. While he objected on some points (including the small size of single person and head of family exemptions), Victor Olander urged the General Assembly to pass the bill. Speaking before the House as a member of the executive committee of the Governor's Tax Conference, he also called on legislators to tie the new funding to unemployment relief. He specifically cited the Tax Conference's recommendation to authorize a \$10,000,000 bond, using \$3,000,000 for public charitable relief and \$7,000,000 to create jobs for unemployed workers.<sup>131</sup>

The Illinois Manufacturers' Association, of course, opposed such measures. The IMA's James L. Donnelly predictably attacked the idea of an income tax as "social legislation" that would "drive industry from the state of Illinois."<sup>132</sup> The state's financial worries, in the IMA's view, could be easily remedied by reforming "wasteful government extravagance," and it called on the special session to take up only bills intended to reform the accounting and bookkeeping systems of local and state financial officials.<sup>133</sup> Donnelly also took the opportunity to attack public relief programs. As much as they detested the idea of an income tax, manufacturers despised the prospect of giving aid to the unemployed even more. Such government assistance, they warned, would "stifle individual initiative." They wanted less government spending, not more, and Donnelly, alongside IMA President Samuel Hastings, led the opposition's efforts to sway the Assembly.<sup>134</sup>

As the special session extended into the early months of 1932, Reuben and Victor fought the IMA tooth and nail. Addressing the Illinois Senate, Olander slammed the idea that Illinois had been extravagant in its spending. He cited national reports and census data clearly showing Illinois took in less per capita and had less debt per capita than nearly all similar states.<sup>135</sup> While he praised Illinois as an "example for the nation" for its private charity efforts, he took the IMA to task:

Now let me ask these questions: Is the entire relief burden to fall on private citizens? What of the state itself? Has it no duty to perform except to call upon private citizens to assist each other? Is it not the plain duty of the state government itself to at least match the contributions of and relief activities of private groups? Is it possible that the state will do nothing except to aggravate the difficulty by 'economizing,' by laying off state and city employees and thus make a bad situation worse? I think the State of Illinois has a duty to perform in providing funds for unemployment relief. The passage of this appropriation bill to furnish additional funds for Mothers' Pensions seems only part of this duty.<sup>136</sup>

Reuben, meanwhile, worked behind the scenes to gather the votes necessary to secure the relief his constituents so badly needed. As a member of the Governor's Commission on Unemployment and Relief, Soderstrom crafted two bills: one proposing a two cent per gallon tax on gasoline for one year, and another

appropriating \$20,000,000 of that revenue for unemployment relief work.<sup>137</sup> To counter the voices of Donnelly's manufacturers, Reuben directly appealed to the public:

The army of unemployed is steadily growing larger, destitution, hunger and want is increasing on every side, and the general situation has become desperate. Under such circumstances the people of Illinois have the right to expect that their representatives in the legislature will take steps to provide relief measures.....The citizens in every section of Illinois should inform their representatives in the state legislature regarding local needs without delay. The legislature, it should be remembered, is a representative body whose members are accustomed to act under the pressure of public opinion as reflected in their home communities.<sup>138</sup>

The tactic worked. Flooded with letters, state senators and representatives began to respond to the desperate circumstance of their constituents, their fear of the manufacturers outweighed by the sense of duty to those they served. As the months passed and the fight raged on, Reuben built a successful coalition in the Senate and House. Even early skeptics of relief legislation like Representative John Devine were flipped in early February 1932, directly attributing their change of heart to Reuben's efforts. "Devine, who earlier had been a strong opponent of the program, changed his position near the end of the debate," the *Murphysboro Daily Independent* reported at the time. "He declared that the change was due to a statement by Representative R.G. Soderstrom, Rep., Streator, and president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor that there were a million unemployed persons in Illinois in need of relief."<sup>139</sup>

Soderstrom's statements carried such weight in part because, unlike the IMA, his numbers came from a credible source. In the 1931 session Reuben had pushed for the creation of a Division of Statistics and Research within the Department of Labor to provide impartial, reliable numbers that all legislators could accept. Contrary to the IMA's fancifully mild estimates, the statistics division revealed a dire situation: over 640,000 unemployed able-bodied men and women in Chicago—19% of the city's total population—were unemployed, and roughly 425,000 were out of work downstate.<sup>140</sup> Reuben used this data to drive home the sheer enormity of the problem at hand, and it worked. He was shrewdly winning the public relations war as the IMA's reports on unemployment were dismissed as inauthentic and out-of-touch.

By early 1932 Reub had the votes he needed and the General Assembly passed the state's first ever income tax and a \$20,000,000 emergency relief fund.<sup>141</sup> It was a remarkable achievement. Donnelly, shocked and frustrated, vowed revenge to his IMA membership. He immediately instructed their attorney, David Clarke, to sue the income tax portion of the law in court.<sup>142</sup> He also called for outside help, holding a meeting that March for all Midwest manufacturers at the Union League Club in Chicago. Together they designed a campaign "sounding the alarm" and sending out thousands of bulletins and pamphlets claiming that the Soderstrom initiative and other "public expenditures" threatened to become a "national menace." For the rest of the year, Donnelly and the IMA waged war to undo Reuben's work.<sup>143</sup>

In the thrust and parry between Soderstrom and Donnelly, it was the latter who then claimed victory when the income tax was soon declared unconstitutional. Reinvigorated, Donnelly and his machine launched an all-out war in the press, crafting a narrative that pointed at government spending, not unemployment, as the root cause of the crisis. Mounting pressures soon forced Gov. Emmerson to call yet another special meeting of the General Assembly. All throughout 1932, the Illinois Assembly—typically only in session for six months in odd-numbered years—was called into action, creating a "perpetual assembly." The longer they stayed in session, however, the less they seemed to accomplish, and as the 1932 elections drew nearer, statesmanship in Springfield ground to a halt.

## CONVENTIONS AND ELECTIONS

## *Keeping it All Together*

This continual call of the legislature was particularly difficult for Reuben, who was double-booked as ISFL president. Still, he persevered, spending night after night on the road, making his way to events throughout the state and beyond. He spoke to the Springfield Order of Eagles, the People's Church of Chicago for the Sunday Afternoon Forum, and the UMWA. In May, Reuben embarked on a speaking tour throughout the state, garnering support. It was on that trip that he was reunited with a special friend.

John Walker had been determined to be the rightful leader of UMWA District 12 by Judge Edwards of Dixon. As such the wreckage of the UMWA fissure had been solved by two lawsuits: John L. Lewis was the national president while John Walker could lead District 12. Reuben gladly embraced his old friend Walker, and they jointly addressed coal miners at a well-attended mass meeting on the fairgrounds in Duquoin, IL on May 22, and on the following day they traveled together to talk to the miners of Centralia<sup>144</sup>. At the gatherings, Reuben stressed the need for unity, reminding all in attendance of the power they possessed when they spoke with one voice. Finally, the largest union in Illinois was returning to the ISFL fold, as was Reuben's mentor and friend. Despite all odds, Reuben pulled off a neat trick by significantly expanding the membership of the Illinois Federation, healing old wounds and bringing union brothers back together. It was a message he would take with him to the convention.

## *The Fiftieth Convention*

The fiftieth "Golden Anniversary" convention of the ISFL almost didn't happen. Illinois was in the throes of a worsening depression and an inconceivable fourth special session of the legislature was convened less than a week before the opening of the convention, diverting much of Reuben's attention. Despite these pressures, Reuben, Victor, and the rest of the Federation's Executive Committee successfully carried out the convention at the Armory in Decatur on September 12, 1932.<sup>145</sup> The minutes are an extraordinary and inspiring read; Reuben adopted an ambitious agenda, tackling everything from his philosophy of economy to bank failures to the "gangster menace."<sup>146</sup> Still, he stuck to two overarching and intersecting themes: the fight to relieve unemployment, and the need to hang together, both as a union and more broadly as a society.

Reuben sounded these themes loudly in his convention speech. He congratulated those assembled for holding strong as one union. Clearly proud of bringing Walker's men back into the ISFL and more than doubling the ISFL membership, Reuben encouraged his audience to view themselves not as an organization under assault but as an institution on the rise.

To watch the Illinois State Federation of Labor organize this Golden Anniversary convention is in itself an impressive drama...[it] fills my whole being with tender emotions, a tender happiness hard for me to describe...For the second time in my experience as a labor official it becomes my pleasant duty to deliver a presidential address to a convention of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, and I regard it as a wondrous honor to be permitted to do so; to stand here with this gavel, the emblem of impartial authority in my hand. I am proud of the labor movement of this state. I am proud of its ideals and its accomplishments. I am proud of every member of organized labor in Illinois...We still have, counting organized railroad workers, something like 500,000 trade unionists in this state. The Illinois State Federation of Labor itself is a great organization. We are still the strongest state federation of labor in point of numbers in these United States.<sup>147</sup>

As Reuben continued, he excoriated the existing state of affairs, artfully tackling greed while simultaneously embracing capitalism and dismissing communism:

Friends, we are not suffering at this time from a famine, we are suffering because we produce too much. I heard

a great leader in the miners' union say some time ago that the human being is the only part of the animal kingdom that has intelligence enough to starve in the midst of plenty....Sometimes I think that this whole economic structure, this whole economic system is on trial. Sometimes I think this whole capitalistic system is on trial. If I was a communist I would certainly rejoice, with 1,250,000 people without jobs in this great state of Illinois at this moment. If I were a socialist I think I would exclaim to the whole world, "I told you so." But I am neither a communist nor a socialist, but a trade unionist who prefers the present economic system if it can be made to work.<sup>148</sup>

In a powerful and prescient stand that would last his whole life, Soderstrom asserted that labor was rooting for American capitalism to succeed. It is remarkable that even in dire economic times, he rejected the pull of the communist creed that was so attractive to other intellectuals of his time. He was a laborer who believed in the power of capital. Tearing into his opponents, Reub ridiculed the IMA and their ilk for their "principled" opposition to state assistance for the unemployed while demanding bailouts for themselves:

I don't believe the working people of our state ought to apologize for asking for government aid. The bankers of our country didn't hesitate to ask for governmental aid to tide them over a hard depression period. They went to Washington and asked for two billion dollars, and got it...I know a bank president, who masquerades as a school man, who stood on the floor of the Illinois Senate and said it was a disgraceful thing for labor to ask for governmental aid. The bankers went to Washington and cloaked their request with reason and eloquence and Americanism and patriotism, and yet this banker stood on the floor of the Illinois Senate and said that it was a disgraceful thing for labor to ask for aid, that it was the dole system, that it was unpatriotic and un-American. It was governmental aid in both cases. The only difference was that the rich and powerful secured eighty times as much as the poor and needy.<sup>149</sup>

Governmental aid wasn't too much, Reuben declared—it was just the start. Despite IMA claims to the contrary, this economic crisis was, in Soderstrom's estimation, not ending anytime soon; dire circumstances required bold action, and Reub was unafraid. The way forward, he stated, was clear: in terms of policy, it was a six-hour day for hard labor and a five-day week, what he referred to as "the brilliant sun of hope shining behind the darkest cloud America has ever known."<sup>150</sup> These policies made good economic and moral sense, allowing more to participate in the economy, increasing demand while also enabling all Americans to share in the dream that had forged the nation. Most importantly, labor had to remember their duty to love one another. Their humanity and faith, above all else, would see them through the current crisis:

The spirit of fellowship and the brotherhood of man are the life of the labor movement. If this life be not nourished, the whole will become a dead thing...While food, clothing and shelter may be rapidly diminishing, we are still fighters, we still represent the fighting spirit of America, we still have our ancient fangs and claws, and wage earners, both organized and un-organized, are looking to the labor movement to give the command to march forward, to marshal our strength, to concentrate our thought, to face East as it were, to face the rising sun of a new day.<sup>151</sup>

As the 43-year-old Reuben accepted his second gavel before the cheering crowd, he almost certainly was fighting back the pangs of exhaustion. It had been a year of fighting, surviving and growing in the chaos of economic depression, which was certainly reflected in his darker, more aggressive tone. Behind the applause and energy of the moment sat a fear threatening to wither everything it touched—that this was not merely a crisis but the new way of things. As Reub had written in the weeks leading up to the convention, "The word depression brings a mental picture of either a lane or road with a low stretch that we should pass over soon, but we are beginning to realize that this is something more."<sup>152</sup> The thought that this was the "new normal"—perpetually struggling to stave off collapse—had to wear on the minds of all men, and on Reub more than most. He was a leader now, responsible for these people; how can you navigate when you can't

possibly know what the route ahead even looks like?

Despite the weariness and uncertainty—perhaps even because of it—Reuben put full faith in the course he'd first charted over a decade ago in Streator. Reuben concluded the annual report of the ISFL Executive Board with the following poem:

Ships sail east and ships sail west,  
While the self-same breezes blow;  
It's the set of sails and not the gales  
That determine the way they go.<sup>153</sup>

### *The 1932 Election*

In the middle of all this activity, Soderstrom needed to campaign for re-election to his seat in the legislature. Soon after the close of the convention, Reuben turned his attention to the 1932 election. Fortunately, his seat was under little threat; he easily won the April primary and faced only token resistance in the fall. The national presidential race, on the other hand, easily captured everyone's interest. July 1932 put the national spotlight on a presidential candidate who embraced a pro-labor attitude: New York Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt. When Reuben and FDR met in Mendota, Illinois in 1920, FDR already had a history of supporting worker-friendly legislation, a record that was augmented when he was governor of New York. A tireless advocate for those left weakened by the cruelty of life's misfortunes (an empathy likely strengthened after a bout with polio left him crippled), Roosevelt promised a new, personal approach to the problems of the people. When nominated for President by the Democratic Party, he became the first nominee to deliver his acceptance speech in person. There is no doubt that Reuben and Vic sat close to a radio to listen to the speech as it was broadcast from Chicago to the nation, where FDR first spoke of a "New Deal":

My program, of which I can only touch on these points, is based upon this simple moral principle, the welfare and soundness of a nation depend first upon what the great mass of people wish and need; and second, whether or not they are getting it. What do people of America want more than anything else? To my mind they want two things: work, with all the moral and spiritual values that goes with it, and with work, a reasonable measure of security, security for themselves and for their wives and children. Work and security, these are more than words. They are more than facts. They are the spiritual values, the true goal toward which our efforts of reconstruction should lead. I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people.<sup>154</sup>

As the elections of November of 1932 bought both Soderstrom and Roosevelt into office, Reuben must have for the first time seen at least a small break in the storm. After years of push-back and resistance, the country was turning to leaders who embraced the idea of governmental activism. Roosevelt was a leader who believed that Americans had an ethical responsibility to take care of one another, and that governments, as representatives of the people and stewards of the common good, had a moral duty to provide for the general welfare. It may have been a small ray of sunshine, but it likely filled Reub with a feeling he'd sorely missed in the darkest days of '32: hope.

# CHAPTER 22

## 1933

### THE NEW DEAL ARRIVES

*“The unconquerable spirit of organized labor is again in the ascendancy in the hearts and minds of those who work for a livelihood...The labor movement has a chance to do battle now in defense of its own faith without being victimized or discriminated against.”*

-Reuben Soderstrom, 1933

#### THE NATIONAL RECOVERY ACT IS BORN

Without a doubt the most fortuitous event in Reuben’s long political life was the election of the thirty-second President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose 13-year tenure would create an industrial engine to employ millions of workers as well as robust pro-labor legislation to protect them. The powerful FDR legacy would endure through Reuben’s entire life, and his reign as ISFL president would both benefit from and dialogue with the great leader’s administration in Washington. In 1933, Roosevelt’s substantial legislative victories and emergency economic policies lifted the tide for labor causes around the nation, and perhaps no one captured and localized these policies more effectively than Reuben G. Soderstrom, who sat in the Springfield offices of the fledgling Illinois State Federation of Labor.

Public opinion had turned so hard against Herbert Hoover that a constitutional Amendment accelerating the date of the Presidential inauguration from March 4 to January 20 was passed in the opening weeks of 1933. Still, the nation had to wait until March to remove its lame duck president, and during those months the depression worsened considerably. Unemployment was at an estimated record 25% and manufacturing had dropped over 30% during Hoover’s term in office.<sup>155</sup> Illinois was hit particularly hard.

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal promised a “more equitable opportunity to share in the distribution of national wealth,” a message welcomed by the public generally and organized labor in particular.<sup>156</sup> The 1932 election had ushered in a new age for Illinois politics as well. The state’s General Assembly swung heavily to the Democrats, with 33 of 51 Senate seats and 80 of the 153 Representative seats now held by newly ascendant party.<sup>157</sup> Reuben welcomed the shift. “During the twelve years that I have acted as the legislative spokesman for the Illinois labor movement, usually more Democrats have voted for more controversial labor bills in the House of Representatives than Republicans,” Soderstrom wrote in the wake of the election. “Following this line of reasoning it is natural to believe that an increase in the Democratic membership in both the House of Representatives and the Senate should mean an increase in the number of votes that will be given to important labor bills.”<sup>158</sup>

Buoyed by the prospect of additional votes, Reuben planned an aggressive agenda in the statehouse. Meanwhile, in Washington, DC, FDR recited the oath of office and took unprecedentedly quick and decisive action. The day after his inauguration he declared a bank holiday, a move Reuben strongly and openly supported, telling his readership, “Our banking system has been gradually been breaking down since 1929; over one-third of our banks had failed before the crisis...The bank crisis brought clearly to light certain basic weaknesses in our banking system which must be remedied by national legislation.”<sup>159</sup> Soderstrom outlined



his own recommendations for greater reform, calling for unification (requiring all banks to be Federal Reserve members, ensuring consistent and comprehensive regulation), divorce of security affiliates (enforcing a clear wall of separation between deposit banks and investment houses) and branch banking (supplying small communities through branches of strong city banks, strengthening the overall banking structure).<sup>160</sup> That year he would see similar recommendations put to practice through the 1933 Banking Act, more commonly known as the Glass-Steagall Act.

But it was only the start. In his first 100 days, FDR famously sent Congress a flurry of bills aimed at addressing all facets of the Great Depression. One of the most radical was the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA, also referred to as the National Recovery Act or NRA). Built on the foundation of the Norris-La Guardia Act passed the previous year, the NIRA called for the creation of industry codes, setting standards for prices, pay, hours, and working conditions. Even more importantly, it formally guaranteed the right of workers to form and join unions, stating in Title I Section 7a:

Employees shall have the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and shall be free from the interference, restraint, or coercion of employers of labor, or their agents, in the designation of such representatives or in self-organization or in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection; [and] (2) that no employee and no one seeking employment shall be required as a condition of employment to join any company union or to refrain from joining, organizing, or assisting a labor organization of his own choosing...<sup>161</sup>

Reuben knew immediately that this was an unprecedented and revolutionary boon to labor. National legislation now directly addressed some of the very issues that vexed him in towns across Illinois. Even before the bill was enacted nationally, Reuben pressed the advantage in Springfield, introducing three bills in both houses of the Assembly: one to further limit the use of injunctions, another to outlaw yellow dog contracts (employment contracts that hired non-union workers only on the condition that they would not later join a union), and a third limiting the liability of trade unions and officers against the unauthorized acts of individuals.<sup>162</sup>

## THE 1933 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

### *Fighting Unemployment*

The legislative season of 1933 began with the inauguration of the new Governor, Henry Horner, who replaced the overwhelmed one-term Governor Emmerson. Horner, the first Democratic Governor in 20 years, struck a decidedly conciliatory tone regarding labor-employer relations:

The employer and employed both must learn to understand that they are dependent upon each other for the preservation of their wellbeing...The prosperity of the laboring class creates the purchasing power upon which the manufacturer and the distributor prosper. Our standard of life as a people is judged by the way the laboring man lives...While the depression has wiped out or materially decreased many individual fortunes of the country, no group of citizens suffered quite so much during the last two years as the working group did and does now.<sup>163</sup>

Representative Soderstrom used the broad support for Roosevelt's agenda to his advantage, tying his bills to the President's New Deal at every turn. He pressed Governor Horner, calling on him in an open letter to help pass minimum wage legislation and asking him to "take such action as may be within your power to respond to the recommendations and the request of the President of the United States in this great emergency."<sup>164</sup> Citing Reuben as a Republican who supported the Democrat Horner, the Freeport-Journal Standard wrote:

Legislators friendly to labor interests, most of whom have consistently supported administration measures in both houses regardless of party, are hopeful that Governor Horner will through the influence of the administration unbind a minimum wage bill and the five day week measure...They are expecting the governor to sponsor both measures. The minimum wage proposal has been characterized by Rep. Reuben Soderstrom, Streator Republican and president of the Illinois Federation of Labor, as the working man's sole defense during a period of inflation.<sup>165</sup>

Horner immediately called for additional unemployment relief, a goal Reuben obviously supported. Reub's enthusiasm, however, soon turned to dismay when the Governor used his influence to push through a three percent sales tax to cover the costs of relief.<sup>166</sup> Unlike progressive taxes like those on income or financial transactions, sales taxes disproportionately fell on the backs of the working poor. Worse still, a minimum per-transaction clause meant that many working families, who purchased goods in small amounts, would be paying far more than three percent. Reub soon spoke out for their plight. Calling the bill an "outrageous tax," Reub found the burden on working families to be "illegal and utterly disgraceful," arguing:

Persons of limited means who are obliged to make their purchases in small amounts are being compelled to pay a "tax" of twenty percent or more. In many places throughout the state a one cent alleged "tax" is being collected by merchants on a five cent purchase. A ten cent loaf of bread, likewise, calls for the payment of a cent additional. Thus the working people of Illinois are being required to pay far in excess of the three percent provided by law. Who gets that money? That's not the main point. The tax is three percent, not ten percent or twenty percent. And no one—not even the state itself—has any legal right to collect or to receive more than three percent as sales tax...The practice calls for drastic action on the part of the state administration without delay.<sup>167</sup>

### *The Thirty-Hour Week*

In addition to fighting against this tax, Reuben readied the introduction of his signature legislation of the session: the thirty-hour week. To him, perhaps no bill was more essential. In response to the growing depression, manufacturers had increasingly relied on a mix of machinery and efficiency to squeeze the last drops of labor from their remaining workers. "The depression stimulated invention even more than it did prosperity," Reuben warned that year. "Highly skilled engineers, highly trained efficiency experts were working day and night in their plants seeking new devices for the saving of materials, and thus the depression was creating more of the very thing that created the depression."<sup>168</sup> He worried that this malicious cycle would replace large swaths of the American workforce, devastating the American economy and society. "If one hundred men could produce all the brick needed in our country," he asked, "what would become of all the men not needed? If it were only brick makers the answer would be relatively easy—they could go into other occupations. But the same conditions would prevail in other occupations."<sup>169</sup> The only lasting answer to this crisis, Reuben believed, was legislation limiting work to a six-hour day and a five day week. It was the only way, in his estimation, that workers could meaningfully share in the fruits of increased mechanization and efficiency.

He wasn't alone; in April of 1933 Alabama Senator Hugo Black introduced legislation limiting working time to six hours a day, five days a week. "Why should we cling tenaciously to a system which forces 12,000,000 men into idleness in order that 12,000,000 to 25,000,000 more men may work 10, 12, 15 and 16 hours a day?" asked Senator Black from the Senate floor.<sup>170</sup> His colleagues agreed, and the bill passed the Senate shortly thereafter (to the shock and horror of the National Association of Manufacturers). When Reuben introduced his own version of the bill in Springfield, all the usual suspects turned out to oppose it. Even when proposed as a temporary measure with a two-year cap to help "share the work," Soderstrom could count on

Donnelly and his Manufacturers to act as a ready foil.<sup>171</sup> As the *Freeport-Journal Standard* noted:

The bill met vigorous opposition from the Illinois Manufacturers' association which fought a similar measure at the last special session. The association's position is "that the law, if enacted as a temporary measure would become a permanent statute; that regulation of hours of labor by law is unsound in principle and impractical in operation; that a great majority of manufacturing industries in Illinois are voluntarily adopting every feasible plan to distribute available work among the maximum number of persons; that Illinois would be handicapped in competition with other states where such legislation is not in effect."<sup>172</sup>

Reub responded by reiterating the projections: the Five Day bill would employ an additional 250,000 able-bodied and willing men and women, with 40 people given work for every 100 persons whose work was cut from seven to five days.<sup>173</sup> Hard pressed by the facts, Donnelly instructed the IMA's attorney, David Clarke, to engage in an unprecedented stall campaign.<sup>174</sup> After Reuben and his compatriots completed their arguments in favor of the bill in front of the Senate Industrial Affairs Committee, Clarke responded by requesting a two-week postponement.<sup>175</sup>

When hearings resumed on March 22, Reuben was not surprised to see the committee room packed with Donnelly's men. IMA theatrics were nothing new and he was ready for a public showdown. What Reuben wasn't prepared for, however, were the repeated calls from the Democratic committee leader to postpone the bill's hearing.<sup>176</sup> The same thing soon happened to all labor legislation, from old-age pensions to unemployment insurance to anti-yellow dog contract bills.<sup>177</sup> This was something new; since the days of JM Glenn, the IMA had fought labor legislation in committee, seeking to stop it from seeing a vote on the floor. But even Glenn had attempted to do so through debate and demonstration, bringing in supporters and making his case before the assembled legislators. Now, Donnelly was working behind the scenes to prevent Soderstrom's legislation from even reaching committee discussion, let alone a vote on the floor.

It was clear that the IMA had infiltrated the Democratic leadership, namely FW Lewis, House Industrial Affairs Committee Chair. Lewis, a Democrat, used his authority as chair to shut down committee discussion. "The postponement habit has been acquired by the Illinois senate and house committees to such a degree," Reuben wrote in anger that spring, "That not a single labor measure has been reported favorably by any committee of either house since the present legislature opened its sessions more than three months ago. The practice is to postpone—and postpone—and postpone!"<sup>178</sup>

By May Reuben declared all-out war on Lewis in his ISFL weekly columns. "The cause of this peculiar performance appears to be the deliberate mismanagement of committee affairs on the part of the chairman of the committee, Representative F.W. Lewis. It is either mismanagement or stupidity. Some observers insist that it is a combination of both."<sup>179</sup> Reuben made no secret about who he thought was behind Lewis' antics. "Opponents of the bills, including the Illinois Manufacturers' Association, who apparently are giving consent to the peculiar tactics of chairman Lewis, must share with him the reputation for utter unfairness which he is steadily heaping upon himself and those who are encouraging him. How long will the Illinois house of representatives tolerate the Lewis tactics?"<sup>180</sup> Soderstrom's frustrations in Springfield were matched by similar losses on the national scene, as Senator Black's 30-hour bill was sidelined by the administration, leaving the thirty-hour week in limbo for the time being.

While unable to get his big legislative bills passed in the session, Reub was not without some victories. The Governor used his political influence to help pass the Soderstrom Anti-Yellow Dog contract bill, along with modest minimum wage increases for women and minors. Reub also secured improvements for the Workmen's Compensation Act and passed banking legislation subjecting the practice of "salary purchases" (the depression-era equivalent of payday loans) to the same laws and regulations of bank loans.<sup>181</sup> Although

Reub may have been frustrated with the legislative session in Springfield, it is at this point that the might of FDR's federal legislation began to impact Illinois in the form of the National Industrial Recovery Act, creating an opportunity Reuben was ready to seize.

## A LEGITIMATE VOICE FOR LABOR

### *Reuben Goes to Washington*

FDR's new National Industrial Rights Act (NIRA) was without a doubt the most important legislative event in the history of organized labor, and Reuben was at its center. Not everyone, however, was experiencing the relief the Recovery Act promised. Many workers in Illinois were up against companies that simply refused to comply, and they turned to Reuben for help. As Soderstrom later described:

When this law was first enacted I received a vast number of telegrams, telephone calls, and many delegations to my office in the City of Springfield. Many of them said: "Soderstrom, this New Deal is a rotten deal; it just isn't working in my town; it is a joke, insofar as my community is concerned." They submitted to me the names of firms they believed were violating the National Recovery Act. I made quite a list of those names that were submitted to me, and one day, in company with John Fitzpatrick, the President of the Chicago Federation of Labor, I journeyed down to the city of Washington.<sup>182</sup>

Once Reuben arrived in the nation's capitol, he marched straight into the offices of William Green, President of the AFL. Making the case with his characteristic mix of detail, persuasion, and sheer force, Reuben convinced Green that nothing less than a personal meeting with General Hugh Johnson, head of the National Recovery Administration (responsible for implementing NIRA) would suffice. Shortly thereafter the three men—Soderstrom, Fitzpatrick, and Green—had a direct meeting with the General to discuss, as Reuben put it, "if the government of the United States is strong enough to support this Act."<sup>183</sup>

The General was clearly impressed by the ISFL President; shortly thereafter he notified Governor Horner that he wanted Reuben to serve on Illinois' nine-member National Recovery Advisory Board, overseeing the Act's implementation in Illinois.<sup>184</sup> This board was to play a major role in implementing as the Act's codes—industry-wide rules for "fair competition" exempt from antitrust laws, which were being written at the very moment Reuben was in Washington. It was a momentous occasion; for the first time labor was being treated as a full partner, sitting at the same table as the National Manufacturers' Association to help re-write the rules of American Industry. Reub, characteristically, believed the codes didn't go far enough, stating that while they provided "great changes from the old practices, both in hours and wages, I thought [they] were rather weak and hesitant."<sup>185</sup> Still, he had reason to hope. "Of course the great industries will struggle against any such measure of justice," he said on his return to Illinois. "The great industries have so long practiced autocracy and absolutism that they view the New Deal and the new ideal with alarm and hostility, but the door is open through which we may at least march to a fulfillment of a democratic destiny. If we do not march through we cannot very well blame anybody but ourselves."<sup>186</sup>

Reuben was eager to lead that march. Union membership was now part of the American fabric, and by joining together workers could share in the fruits of their struggles. It was the dawn of a new era, marrying the power of capitalism with the responsibility of representative government. As Reuben declared in his Labor Day address:

The immediate thing that can be secured through the application of the Recovery Act is shorter hours, higher wages, and putting men back to work to give them buying power. Yet there is something deeper than this toward which our eyes must turn. It is the opportunity to build an industrial democracy. That opportunity is

provided for in the National Recovery Act. It does not say that working people must join the American Federation of Labor, but it does say that the Government of the United States will protect those who do so. We have been provided with a doorway through which we may march upright, boldly, if we have the intelligence, strength, and courage to do so.<sup>187</sup>

In addition to immediately grasping the momentous nature of the legislation, Reuben also employed the term “industrial democracy,” a delicate and strategic phrase marrying the power of capitalism with the power of representative government. With both domestic Communist interests and gangster forces circling Illinois’ labor movement, the ISFL president was defining his organization for the new era.

### *Rooting Out Corruption*

Labor’s new legitimacy brought with it new responsibilities, particularly with regard to corruption. It had long been true that corrupt individuals sometimes used the power of unions to line their own pockets, particularly in big cities like Chicago. Typically this took the form of collusion with employers’ associations to keep industry profits high and competition low. These rings were unafraid to use violence, including intimidation, sabotage, and even murder.<sup>188</sup> However, by the 1920s a new “gangster menace,” created and fueled by prohibition, entered this mix, brought the brutality to horrific levels. Mobsters threatened more than labor’s public image. In the late twenties mobsters like Al Capone and Bugs Moran began to assassinate labor leaders. The lurid newspaper account of one such murder—that of John G. Clay of the Laundry and Dyehouse Chauffeurs, Drivers and Helpers Union from the *Mattoon Journal Gazette*—illustrates both the level of brutality and the public fascination with these graphic deaths:

The perforated body of a powerful union labor chief, reposing today on a slab in a local mortuary, bore mute testimony that gangland’s death-dealing machine guns had again gone into action... The “knocking off” of Clay was executed in typical gangland fashion. Clay’s office was in the front of the building on the ground floor. Only a plate glass window separated him from the street.

A large sedan rolled up to the curb. A machine gun and sawed-off shotguns protruded from the windows. When directly in front of Clay’s window the gunners opened fire. A hail of lead raked the plate glass window on a level with Clay’s body. The union official slumped to the floor, dead.

The job was executed with a fineness that would do credit to trained artillerymen. Witnesses say the automobile did not even stop, but crept slowly along the curb while the machine gun poured its deadly volley into the union office...<sup>189</sup>

Employers didn’t hesitate to turn these murders to their advantage. One man in particular, Secretary Gordon Hostetter of the Employers’ Association, used the violence to associate “union” and “gangster” in the public mind. In articles and books, he attempted to link closed shop agreements and criminal extortion, introducing a new word—“racketeering”—to describe the illicit combinations of employer associations and unions.<sup>190</sup> His argument was disingenuous to say the least; after all, these combinations were largely led by the association bosses on behalf of employers, who also gained the most through their collusion.<sup>191</sup> But Hostetter’s attempt to shift the blame (and public attention) was largely successful. It was the “corrupt union boss” who became the public face of such abuses. “The gangster was the perfect symbol for the issue of union democracy,” historian Clayton Sinai writes. “The mobbed-up local, an abuse of union power that everyone could readily grasp.”<sup>192</sup>

Initially, labor pushed back against Hostetter’s claims, accusing him of purposefully conflating illegal rackets and legitimate unions in a “war on unions.” By the time Reuben became president, however, labor’s focus shifted from the Employers’ Association to “the gangster menace” itself. The NRA had made agreements

between legitimate unions and employer associations legal, giving unions and Soderstrom's Federation unprecedented authority (and rendering moot the Association's efforts to undo the closed shop). But with that authority came responsibility, a duty to ensure that such agreements were free from graft and corruption. Together with ISFL Secretary Olander and Chicago Federation President John Fitzpatrick, Soderstrom declared a war on the "gangster menace," vowing to rip out by the roots any and all mobster influence. In a public letter to "trade unionists and all other interested citizens in Illinois," Reuben promised to "eliminate any racketeers or gangsters that may have forced their way into our local organization."<sup>193</sup> It was not an empty threat. Working with Chicago Mayor Ed Kelly and State Attorney Thomas Courtney, Reuben and his allies targeted illegitimate unions in bed with the mob. He also coordinated with the Illinois Secretary of State, who submitted all applications for charter by worker organizations to the ISFL, ensuring no union would receive state sanction without the State Federation's blessing. These efforts demonstrated Reuben's power as well as his commitment. As Professor of History Andrew Cohen notes, these actions highlighted "the degree to which the state government accepted the Illinois State Federation of Labor as the 'House of Labor.'"<sup>194</sup>

It wasn't long before the "gangster menace" fought back. 1933 was a treacherous year for Reuben, with more than one attempt made on his life. As Olga recounts:

Reub's life had been endangered. Someone had sawed the back axle of his car and this was discovered by a garage mechanic who had checked his car. Then, once he learned there was a plan to kidnap him, so he was very cautious. One night in Springfield two strangers approached him in his hotel lobby and wanted to drive him to the depot...These gentlemen were real persistent, but Reub continued to refuse the offer. However, he decided to call Governor Horner and told him about these strangers and of his knowledge that a kidnap attempt was to be tried, and he also called the Attorney General of the State of Illinois and told him his story, so if he turned up missing they would know the kidnap plot was a fact and they could make a search for him. He was not kidnaped, but it was a frightful few months.<sup>195</sup>

Luckily, 1933 turned out to be a turning point in the war on organized crime. Earlier killings and prosecutions had removed or marginalized Chicago's most powerful gangsters, and the end of prohibition that year deprived the mobs of their greatest revenue source. When gangsters tried to strong-arm their way into the new legal distribution of alcohol, Reuben, Courtney, and various employers associations united in the face of bombings in order to keep them out.<sup>196</sup> The attempts on Reuben's life eventually subsided, although he remained vigilant. He was lucky to have survived.

### *The Fifty-First Annual Convention*

Buoyed by anti-racketeering efforts and momentum from FDR's federal government, Reuben felt confident enough to hold the ISFL's fifty-first annual convention in the heart of the city of Chicago. It was a brazen and calculated move. The national labor scene had been emboldened by the events of the past year, and Reuben was determined to mark Illinois as ground zero for the movement. By holding the annual convention in Chicago, the ISFL president could guarantee a national profile for the event. Not only was Chicago the nation's second-largest city and de facto capital of the Midwest, it was also host to the 1933 World's Fair, named "A Century of Progress International Exposition" in commemoration of the city's centennial. A successful convention here at this moment would cement Illinois's status as a growing capital of organized labor.

Reuben sent out invitations to labor organizations in eight states surrounding Illinois and convinced Brig. Gen. Hugh S. Johnson, the administrator of the National Recovery Act, to deliver the keynote address.<sup>197</sup> Reserving space at the Hall of Science, Reuben and the Federation prepared for a record turnout unlike anything the organization had seen before.

They weren't disappointed. It was the best-attended convention in the organization's history, and the glamorous convention hall was filled to the brim with working men and women of all stripes. Sitting amongst the rich tapestries and golden chandeliers, they could hardly believe their own eyes; never before had the Federation enjoyed such splendor. In his closing address to the crowd, Reuben asked those assembled to savor the moment. "Just think of organized labor enjoying a banquet in the Gold Room of the Congress Hotel! It made me think of what Mother Jones used to say, that jails were built by labor and we had a right to occupy them. The hotels, too, have been built by labor and we have a right to them."<sup>198</sup> Moving swiftly from the chuckles and cheers, Reub directed his audience to take seriously the opportunity before them, granted by FDR's grand vision. "Now, the labor movement of our time has to demonstrate that we can be a directing force in this state and in this nation. These labor conventions are a sort of medium through which ideas can develop and come to the surface, where they can be acted upon by the General Assembly of the State and by the Congress of the United States...I think our work in his convention will be felt during the coming year throughout all the industrial centers of this great state."<sup>199</sup>

Reuben made the National Industrial Recovery Act the focus of his speeches and the convention. Paying homage to the Act's origins and the "blue eagle" emblem that hung prominently in every NIRA-compliant store, Reuben rallied the crowd, declaring:

The National Industrial Recovery Act is the child of the American Federation of Labor, a child which was adopted by our Federal Congress at the suggestion of the President of the United States...Four months ago there wasn't much of a country left here because of the depression and the unemployment which was caused by the depression; but since the enactment of the National Industrial Recovery Act I see changes and the American Labor movement and the American Government are justified today in proudly flashing the Blue Eagle and the Stars and Stripes against the skyline of America as the emblem of security, inspiration and hope to both the employed and the unemployed millions of our people because of what this Act has already accomplished. The Blue Eagle is just as much organized labor's emblem as is the union label, and I know I sound the sentiment of every trade unionist in Illinois when I say, God speed the Blue Eagle!<sup>200</sup>

Above all, Reub called for unity. The NRA offered an opportunity that couldn't be squandered. As the assembled press recorded, "Reuben G. Soderstrom, president of the state federation, told the labor delegates it would be their own fault if they failed to organize under the provisions of the N.R.A. 'Don't quibble over initiation fees and old rules. Forsake all trivialities and concentrate on organizing. We've obtained the very thing for which we fought for years. Take advantage of it."<sup>201</sup>

After so many years of struggle and oppression, it finally appeared, in the words of American Federation of Labor President Green, as if "the whole nation is becoming rapidly convinced not only that the American Federation of Labor is truly an American institution, but also that the National Recovery Act is the American way out of the present depression difficulties."<sup>202</sup> In the convention hall, surrounded by finery and guests and graced with speeches by one of Roosevelt's personal advisers, Reuben must have felt triumphant.

## REUBEN DRAWS ILL

While attending the convention, Reub took the opportunity to treat his family to a vacation in Chicago. They attended the World's Fair, getting their photos taken and enjoying a sky ride on the aerial tramway suspended hundreds of feet above the city. It was a happy memory for the family and a needed release after a year of legislative frustrations and shadowy death threats.

But Reub began to feel increasingly fatigued, which he conveniently blamed on the convention. Within a

month after returning home, however, he drew deadly ill. Initially refusing to go to a doctor, he finally relented and was immediately sent to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Now a major public figure, Reub's disappearance did not go unnoticed, and before long several newspaper reports confirmed that the ISFL president had been admitted as a patient at the Mayo Brother's clinic, although physicians refused to indicate the nature of his illness.<sup>203</sup> What was his condition?



# CHAPTER 23

## 1934

### REUBEN BACKS NATIONAL RECOVERY, ATTACKS COMMUNISM

#### UNIONS EXPAND AS NATION RECOVERS

At the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, the exhausted 46-year-old Reuben was diagnosed with amebic dysentery. An immediate treatment of amantadine hydrochloride most likely saved his life, but the entire experience left him weak and exhausted. From Rochester he sent postcards to his son Carl and daughter Jeanne back in Streator; it would take him months to soldier on to recovery.

In early 1934, the country too found itself on the mend. Employment in January was up 18.6% over the previous year, and the manufacturing sector saw payrolls increase by 42%.<sup>204</sup> Of course, the American economic situation was far from healthy; the 1% gain in buying power experienced nationally was offset by a 3% rise in cost of living.<sup>205</sup> But the picture was improving, and many credited Roosevelt's National Industrial Recovery Act.

Reuben was no exception. Although he thought the Act far from perfect—he believed its codes to be largely written by business for their own benefit—he hailed the NIRA a great accomplishment, particularly for its hotly contested section 7(a), which guaranteed laborers the “right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing,” a right they began to exercise in record numbers.<sup>206</sup> In the words of historian Joseph Rayback:

Long-dormant unions quickened into life, forming new locals and invading territory in which they had previously regarded themselves as trespassers. While the impulse sometimes came from AFL headquarters, more often rank and file laborers began activity themselves, forming their own locals and then applying for charters. One-third of the federation unions increased their rolls; one-fourth doubled their membership...So spectacular was the expansion of unionism in the months that followed the adoption of the NRA that William Green could announce in October of 1933 that the AFL's goal was ten million members.<sup>207</sup>

Soderstrom firmly held that it was this growth in organized labor, made possible by the NIRA, which was responsible for the newfound signs of economic strength. This “union bloom,” he asserted, undercut the old argument that workers did not want unionism. As he argued in the fall of that year:

The National Industrial Recovery Act...has made heavy contributions towards bringing working people into trade unions. Organization is spreading among working people with tremendous rapidity. Since a year ago the American Federation of Labor has gained 2,000,000 members. That means some 5,000 people a day on average have joined the labor movement of our country—and that is no small achievement.

There has been no wartime stimulation, there has been no hope for at once gaining increased wages, there has been none of the enthusiasm that marked the days of wartime elation. Today's great labor growth is due to the simple reason that the National Recovery Act makes it possible for a man to join a union without losing his job.

What we have before us, I think, is a magnificent example of the age-long assertion of labor, that men want to join the unions if they are left free to do so. Every man of labor, and every woman who toils, has heard many repetitions of the old slander that “men join the unions because they have to do so in order to get a job.” Now we have the proof, piled mountain-high, that men join unions for the sake of associating themselves with their fellows in a common effort in behalf of the wage earners... Upon the enactment of the very simple law which says that no employer shall have the right to interfere with the right of the employee to join a union and to engage through that union in collective bargaining, men rushed by thousands to join unions, and this at a time when money, even for small initiations, is hard to get.<sup>208</sup>

## LABOR FIGHTS FOR REFORM

### *Illinois Manufacturers Declare War*

Not all shared Reuben’s enthusiasm for organized labor’s newfound strength. The Illinois Manufacturers’ Association initially voiced optimism; IMA President RE Wantz told the press in January “Business of most of the members of the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association improved to an encouraging extent during 1933. There is evidence that it will be still better in 1934.”<sup>209</sup> Still, it wasn’t long before the IMA turned against FDR and his New Deal. Unable to undo NIRA in Congress, the organization and its lawyers instead adopted a different course. In a letter to his membership, IMA Vice President Donnelly and legal counsel David Clarke advised their membership to openly violate the Act. Instead of negotiating with ISFL-recognized unions, he said, owners should “decide finally and definitely that you are going to run your own plant” by signing individual contracts or creating an owner-friendly “company unions” to negotiate with.<sup>210</sup> Of course, this went squarely against NIRA, which explicitly allowed workers—not owners—to choose their representatives. Donnelly, however, dismissed this right as “illegal and not enforceable.”<sup>211</sup>

Wantz soon took the IMA’s approach across the country, personally spearheading a national campaign to ignore the Act, which he sneeringly referred to as a “governmental invasion of private industry.”<sup>212</sup> Soon, a war broke out between noncompliant businesses and labor in the form of mass strikes and lockouts. Before long, a full 15% of the country’s labor force was involved in industrial conflict.<sup>213</sup> The stakes couldn’t have been higher, with the fate of the NIRA—particularly section 7A—hanging in the balance. “Necessary for permanent improvement in business is the repeal of the infamous section 7A of the NRA, which has incited widespread labor strife,” charged IMA President Wantz. “American manufacturers and business men have their eyes on the federal administration at Washington hoping for some signs of a policy that will enable them to go ahead upon something like a normal basis.”<sup>214</sup> Soderstrom punched back, laying the blame for the chaos squarely at the IMA’s feet, declaring “What is causing unrest, upheavals and strikes more than anything else, in my judgment, is the utter disregard that some employers have for the proper enforcement of the codes that they themselves created. Strikes will stop and a complete stabilization of industry will come when these employers begin to live up to the law and live up to their own codes.”<sup>215</sup>

The fight worked towards the manufacturers’ advantage. After all, the penalty for noncompliance was social, not criminal. At worst, a business could lose its “Blue Eagle” (the symbol which showed a business was in compliance with the codes), which only mattered if people were willing to boycott businesses in violation. By prolonging the unpopular struggle, Wantz, Donnelly, and the IMA hoped to sour the general public on the NIRA—and the government—making it appear weak, ineffective and ultimately useless. Of course, such tactics carried huge risks for the state and the nation; if they won, the IMA could damage not only Reuben’s ISFL, but the force of law itself.

Unfortunately, the federal authorities of the National Recovery Administration could do little. The Supreme Court at the time held that regulation of commerce was largely a state matter. The best they could do was to

plead for state legislators to pass bills “equipped with teeth to ensure compliance with code agreements and restrictions.”<sup>216</sup> It wasn’t long before Reuben answered the call, fighting to pass the Illinois Industrial Recovery Act.

### *Soderstrom Stands With FDR*

In February 1934, Governor Horner called for a series of special sessions of the Illinois legislature to help combat employers’ abuse of the NIRA. Ostensibly, the new sessions were called to deal with a host of issues ranging from tax bonds to the possible hosting of a 1934 World Fair. However, it wasn’t long before most of the Assembly’s time and effort was focused on a single piece of legislation—Illinois’ corollary to the NIRA, the State Industrial Recovery Act (SIRA). The bill, introduced by Democratic majority leader Thomas Sinnett, would give the state the power to enforce the NIRA in Illinois and punish firms that violated it.

Reuben immediately joined the fight to ensure that working men and women received the benefits and protections of NIRA. In an essay entitled “N.R.A. State Legislation Necessary,” he excoriated the hypocrisy of special interests like the IMA, which sought to deny workers the rights and governmental resources that they enjoyed. As he wrote:

Business willingly accepted the aid of government in bringing about through the several codes what is undoubtedly the most effective and widespread organization of business groups ever contemplated in this or any other county. This having been accomplished, they now seek to prevent any extension of organization among the working people and also to prevent the enactment of laws that will make illegal some of the vicious commercial practices which have in the past contributed to the misery of the country...

In 1930 they grudgingly consented to the extension of an utterly inadequate private charity system as a means of combating the national hunger problem which was then rapidly becoming acute. They opposed the use of even local public funds for relief purposes. Later, as the situation grew worse, they objected to the use of state funds, yielding only after it became plainly evident that the state action was inevitable whether they like it or not. Afterwards they appeared before committees of the United States Congress fighting against the use of federal funds for relief purposes.

They have been merciless in this respect.

However, they readily agreed to the formation of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation designed for their own protection. They raised no question of constitutionalism when an Executive order declared a bank moratorium throughout the United States, because they benefitted thereby. They have sought and obtained relief for themselves, taking the position that bread should not be permitted to reach the mouths of the starving masses except through the medium of business enterprises which would profit thereby...<sup>217</sup>

Soderstrom increasingly viewed business interests as rabidly anti-Roosevelt, reflexively opposing any legislation or order. “The business elements now engage in a campaign against the leadership of the President of the United States in the present emergency,” he wrote. “With few exceptions, their leaders have been opposed to practically every step taken by the Roosevelt administration for the relief of the common people of the nation.”<sup>218</sup> In response, Reuben rallied organized labor behind the President. On April 29, 1934, he delivered the keynote address at Labor’s Economic Conference in Chicago. Speaking in the Ashland Auditorium before 2,500 delegates from 635 local unions, Soderstrom called for a general declaration of support putting Illinois labor “on the record in unmistakable terms in support of the policies of President Roosevelt” with the intention that “echoes of the great meeting will be heard throughout the land.”<sup>219</sup> By a near unanimous vote, those gathered adopted a general declaration which read in part:

We repeat, with emphasis, the words of the President, "The National Recovery Act was drawn with the greatest good of the greatest number in mind." That expresses not only the opinion of the Chief Executive, but the intent of the Congress of the United States...In this emergency, grave in its consequences as the most desperate of wars, the nation sought a new leader and called for a new deal. The man of the hour proved to be Franklin D. Roosevelt, a man of strength, courage and decisive action, yet kindly to the point of tenderness in his sympathetic attitude towards the problems of the masses of people.

Almost within the hour of his inauguration as the President of our great country, indeed at the very moment, Franklin D. Roosevelt's firm hand grasped the helm of the Ship of State, he gave the first command that eased tension and calmed the wave of fear then surging over the land.<sup>220</sup>

As he had done when urging passage of the State Recovery Act, Reuben again impugned the motivations of those attacking the President:

What is the purpose of the assault? Clearly, it must be this, that having used the Recovery Program to enhance their own interests, they now seek to prevent its extension to others...In the name of liberty, constitutionalism and fundamental Americanism, they are deliberately and consciously, indeed, it may be said even maliciously, seeking to maintain, for what they conceive to be their own benefit, a condition of inequality as between the legal rights and economic opportunities of those who own and manage commerce and industry, as against the great masses of the people who perform the labor, without which owners and managers are helpless.<sup>221</sup>

With labor's support of FDR and its opposition to his detractors firmly and unambiguously stated, Reub returned to the halls of the General Assembly to fight for passage of the SIRA, whatever the cost.

### ***Recovery Act Passed Over Republican Opposition***

The following days were filled with tension as Governor Horner and the Democrats struggled to pass the Recovery Act. Republicans had suffered greatly in the last two elections; in 1930 they lost control of the Senate, House, and Governorship for the first time in a generation, and fared even worse in 1932. These losses had not softened the Party to the policies of the Democrats, however. They in fact had the opposite effect, turning those who remained into a more ideologically rigid "wall of opposition." That wall was on full display in late April as Republican legislators, lacking the strength to kill the Recovery Act, still managed to stall its passage. While avoiding any personal attacks on the still-popular President, Republican leadership whipped its members into line, concentrating fire on the NIRA. Attacks ranged from traditional laissez-faire to the downright hyperbolic, with some claiming that passage of the bill would mean "the end of representative government."<sup>222</sup>

Despite this opposition, by the first week of May the proposed Act had secured 75 of the 77 votes it needed to pass. As Horner and Reub searched for votes, they found four legislators privately confessing that they would vote for the bill, but none of them wanted to go first.<sup>223</sup> After additional pressure, including Reuben's arrangement of a personal appeal from NRA Administrator Brig. Gen. Hugh S. Johnson, the bill passed in the closing hours of the special session.<sup>224</sup> The level of partisanship throughout the fight was unprecedented; as Victor Olander later described:

The passage of the act through the Legislature was one of the most difficult undertakings we have been confronted with in the legislative field. The whole matter was made the subject of a political cleavage that was very acute, the Democrats on one side and the Republicans on the other, with the respective leaders making a party issue out of whether there should or should not be a State Recovery Act.<sup>225</sup>

Of all the Republicans in the House, only Soderstrom voted in support of the measure. The Republican leadership was furious, labeling him in the press as a “lame duck,” someone who was unable to keep with the flock (as opposed to the modern meaning of legislators still in office after their final election).<sup>226</sup> They vowed revenge, but for the moment were impotent; the primaries had already passed, and Reub was selected as one of the two Republicans running for the three House seats in the 39th District. But the Illinois Republicans were already planning their revenge for 1936.

## **BRAVELY ONWARD**

### *Roosevelt Takes Action*

As Reuben worked for solutions to enforce the NIRA in Illinois, Roosevelt took action to improve implementation nationally. On June 29, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 6763, replacing the National Labor Board with the National Labor Relations Board (the NLRB, which endures to this day). Despite their similar name, the bodies differed greatly in terms of makeup and authority. The new NLRB, a three-member panel chaired by University of Wisconsin Law School Dean Lloyd Garrison, was given the authority to issue subpoenas, mediate labor disputes, and hold union elections, all of which would allow direct confrontation of the company unions. Referencing the section of the NIRA that governed labor protections, the new board made clear that, “In cases arising under Section 7(a), it is not enough that the decision be just. It must also be prompt. The rights created by Section 7(a) cannot more effectively be destroyed than by delay in hearing the cases, delay in deciding them, and delay in enforcing the decisions.”<sup>227</sup> The NLRB immediately began picking up where the NLB left off, working to ensure that workers were protected. The board soon ran into the same obstacles as its predecessors, however. As historian Rayback writes:

The new board, made up of ‘experts’ was no more successful. Although its principles were somewhat more severe—it ruled that company unions were not proper bargaining agents—it, likewise, had no power to enforce its decisions. In some ways its task was more difficult since by the summer of 1934, industry, beginning to see its way out of the depression, was becoming more truculent. It flatly defied the NLRB decisions and began a strong campaign to roll back the union tide through careful discrimination in the hiring and firing of its labor.<sup>228</sup>

What Roosevelt was unable to accomplish through boards and executive action he attempted to accomplish through persuasion. In his series of fireside chats, Roosevelt appealed directly to the American public, making the case that:

The primary concern of any government dominated by the humane ideals of democracy is the simple principle that in a land of vast resources no one should be permitted to starve... from the paralysis that arose as the after-effect of that unfortunate decade characterized by a mad chase for unearned riches and an unwillingness of leaders in almost every walk of life to look beyond their own schemes and speculations. It is well for us to remember that humanity is a long way from being perfect and that a selfish minority in every walk of life... will always continue to think of themselves first and their fellow-being second.<sup>229</sup>

### *Labor’s Army*

A major component of FDR’s New Deal was public-funded work. “To those who say that our expenditures for Public Works and other means of recovery are a waste that we cannot afford,” he challenged, “I answer that no country, however rich, can afford the waste of its human resources.”<sup>230</sup> Roosevelt initially created the Civilian Works Administration to provide work for able-bodied men, and by the start of 1934 over 4 million

men were set to work on CWA projects, repairing roads and streets, rebuilding schools, and raising new parks, pools and other public works.<sup>231</sup> The program aimed to assist families on relief, as the worker kept only \$5 of his monthly pay of \$30 with the remaining \$25 sent home to his family. The workers lived an austere lifestyle, waking up at 6:00 a.m. followed by 15 minutes to wash and prepare for roll call before breakfast. After basic-training style group exercises, the men then worked through the afternoon with only a brief break for lunch, returning to camp for dinner and camp activities such as boxing matches until lights out at 10:00 p.m. Families who had endured unemployment, poverty and hunger welcomed the opportunity to send a son to work in the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) camps.<sup>232</sup>

The martial style of the CCC was no accident; it was intentional. General Hugh Johnson, head of the NRA, saw a clear connection between his work and the training of an army—a connection he made explicit to Soderstrom. In 1934 Reuben disclosed part of an earlier private meeting between himself, CFL President Fitzpatrick, AFL President Green, and the General. They were discussing an issue of great importance—the blatant violations of the National Recovery Act by the IMA and its members. How, Reuben asked, would the federal government enforce the NIRA? In response, the General appeared ready to use his new army to do more than build, telling Soderstrom:

There has been a revolution in Spain; they have chased the king out of that country and established a new form of government...A year ago they looked upon Hitler as an impossibility; that all sorts of schemes had been hatched to get rid of him, but in eight months he came back as the dictator of Germany. That created a great deal of fear in Europe, especially in England...with so many dictators on the other side it isn't safe for the United States to be without military protection.

In Tennessee they have enlisted 250,000 men of military age, between 18 and 25, not to bear arms but to plant trees and reclaim land, but at the same time they would go through military drills and physical drills, and that is the nucleus of an army. This country is on a wartime basis; the President has wartime powers, he can proclaim martial laws whenever he wants to, and he can use that army in Illinois to enforce the Recovery Act. You go back to Illinois and be sure that this industrial program is going to work.<sup>233</sup>

Ultimately, FDR did not use this “labor army” to enforce the Recovery Act, and Johnson himself resigned in 1934. But as the General predicted, the training and discipline these young men gained did help prepare them for another, far deadlier struggle—one that would see labor and business unite to defeat the most existential threat either would ever face.

### ***“Let’s Be Bold!”***

Like many in the labor movement, Reuben echoed Roosevelt’s call for work over relief. He mourned the plight of unemployed workers; as he said in a speech before labor delegates in Peoria at the 1934 ISFL convention:

Throughout this entire depression the breadwinners of union families have been compelled to walk the streets for weeks and for months, seeking employment without finding it. Pregnant mothers in trade union families have been compelled to face the coming event without a penny in the family pocketbook, with starvation as a constant companion.<sup>234</sup>

While measures like unemployment insurance helped ease the pain, Reuben believed the only permanent solution lay in securing meaningful work for those hit by the depression. As a legislator Reub worked hard to bring work relief funds back home. After the Public Works Administration initially rejected Streator’s request for \$825,000 for a new sewer system, Reuben worked to secure the necessary funds elsewhere.<sup>235</sup> He pushed a

Sewer Bond through the special session of the Illinois General Assembly, enabling municipalities to “turn over its paper to the Public Works Administration, and in return they will be given cash for building projects...to create employment for building trades workers throughout the state.”<sup>236</sup>

Soderstrom didn’t stop there, however. He called for new legislation that he believed would end the scourge of unemployment—the shared work week:

Sustaining employment must come. I think we would be better off if we had all our people working half-time than to have half of them working full time and the other half not working at all...What shall we do to solve this vexing problem of unemployment, where half the workers are still idle? I think organized labor ought to be willing to advocate that in such places those who are working now should work three days a week and then put on an entirely new force the other three days and this provide for all.<sup>237</sup>

Reuben knew this idea would be controversial, not only among businessmen but among those laborers lucky enough to have work. He was, after all, asking them to sacrifice their own security (and their earnings) for the sake of their brother laborer. Soderstrom did not back down, however, instead encouraging his audience:

Do not be afraid of this suggestion. The first thing, in my judgment, is to get everybody back to work. After that has been done, start a real agitation for more money. It would be only a short period of time, after everybody has returned to work, before we would get four days’ pay for three days’ labor. Perhaps by the end of the year we would be able to get the more prosperous firms to pay five days’ wages for three days’ work.

When I first attended labor meetings in my town, some twenty-five years ago, the American Federation of Labor had a slogan: “The shorter hours bring larger pay.” Of course that may mean a temporary sacrifice for those who are working five and six days a week now, but there is such a thing as getting a dime so close to your eye that you cannot see the dollar behind...

Real wages will come to those who are bold. We have the physical strength and intelligence to produce wealth for employers. Let’s do something for ourselves.<sup>238</sup>

Reuben’s confidence as a leader grew with his increasing membership rolls. In his Labor Day speech in Alton, he addressed his supporters at City Hall, where he called for them to push harder with the opportunity Roosevelt had given them with the NIRA. He spoke with energy and excitement until he could barely be heard over the applause and ended his speech with, “Let’s be bold!”<sup>239</sup>

### *Striking Against Communism*

Reuben and the AFL weren’t the only ones seeking to make use of the protections offered under the Act. Other groups, many with communist sympathies, were also busy organizing workers. Secretive and antagonistic, groups like the “Council of Unemployed” and the “Illinois Workers Alliance” sought to supplant the Federation as the official representative of workers in discussions with the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission, Civil Works Administration, and Public Works Administration. In an effort to gain members, many of these groups touted lower (or even nonexistent) initiation fees or dues.<sup>240</sup>

The AFL believed these groups and others like them to be under Soviet control, and quickly equated their attacks on the Federation with Communist assaults on American principles. By September of that year the AFL had declared war on “Reds,” promising an “aggressive fight on Communism rather than mere resistance to attacks.”<sup>241</sup> Reuben used the opportunity of his published Labor Day Address to take on the issue directly:

Forces of evil...(who) with a good deal of sarcasm refer to the trade unionist, the doctor, the educator, the small business man, the farmer, and those who wore the uniform of the United States as the 'bourgeois'--a word just as foreign as their twisted ideals...be mighty wary of these alien radicals.

We are striving for brotherhood--human brotherhood--but it must be the American variety where each and every person can arise to any position that his merits entitle him to arise to, unhampered and free of any class distinction. This is America. Labor Day is not May Day, and the labor movement is just as distinctly American as is the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution of the United States.

No worker can be neutral on the question of American or foreign ideals. The American variety has been crystallized by the thought and struggle of the membership of the movement of the workers and represents the hopes and aspirations of humanity for a better day. The foreign variety was born in cellars and garrets of backward nations where unfortunate peoples could find no relief, no avenue of expression except by revolution...Choose! Which shall it be—America or Russia? Ringing loud and clear from every corner of the nation comes the answer:

'Labor Day in September  
And A.F. of L. philosophy tender  
Wage-earners will remember  
With reverence Divine.  
No foreign romance of brotherhood  
Jumbled, flimsy and no good  
Will be sufficiently misunderstood  
To change that day to 'wobbly May'  
Or any other time!"<sup>242</sup>

## REUBEN SURVIVES ELECTORAL CHALLENGE

The effects of the NIRA special session clearly impacted Reuben's standing within his own party. He not only broke ranks with Republicans, but led the largely Democratic charge to institute FDR's policies at the state level. As a result, Reub received fewer votes than any other candidate who won a primary that year.<sup>243</sup> His survival as an elected official in a Republican district began to show some cracks, even though he was the most publicly visible candidate of all due to his dual role as ISFL president. As a result, Democrats took the unusual step of fielding a second candidate, which created a four-man race for the three open seats available under Illinois' minority representation system.<sup>244</sup> Worried that his constituents could be lulled into a false sense of security, Reuben worked hard to sound the alarm; as he wrote in his election campaign flyer:

Some supporters of R.G. Soderstrom are being solicited to vote for a certain candidate on the argument that, 'Reub Soderstrom doesn't need your vote. He will be elected anyway.' Don't be misled—over-confidence has defeated many candidates! R.G. Soderstrom cannot be elected without your vote. YOU MUST VOTE FOR HIM!<sup>245</sup>

After squeaking through his party primary, Reuben cast a wider net for himself as a nonpartisan representative who would appeal to the general electorate. Speaking in Alton, Soderstrom described the State Recovery Act "not as a Democratic political measure, but a government agency designed to be used in the war on depression."<sup>246</sup> At the Annual ISFL Convention that year Bishop Joseph H. Schlarman, keenly aware of Reuben's predicament as a Republican who was very publicly supporting a Democratic president, said:

I am glad to be here for many reasons. One is I have the opportunity of meeting my old friend Mr. Soderstrom.



I don't know to what political party he belongs, but I do know he is keenly interested in the welfare of the people over in Streator and LaSalle County... anything that comes along in any way concerning the interests of the people he is right there. I understand they are going to elect him as permanent representative in Springfield.<sup>247</sup>

It was an incredibly close vote. Immediately following November's election day of 1934, several newspapers declared that Reuben had lost before later correcting themselves.<sup>248</sup> Reuben had in fact won again, joining Ole Benson again as the other Republican representative from District 39, as well as newcomer Edward Hayne, a Democrat. Reub would be heading back to Springfield as both the ISFL president and statehouse representative, where his support for the New Deal was unwavering...and the Republican target on his back growing larger.

# PILLAR VI

## DIGNITY IN RETIREMENT: OLD-AGE PENSIONS

### A HISTORY OF HORRORS

Reuben's struggle for the dignity and respectful treatment of the elderly, regardless of their wealth or station, was a deeply personal one, beginning with his own family. At an early age, his preacher father had instilled within Reub a passion for care of the aged, bringing with him from his native Sweden the conviction that a pension for the elderly, no matter how rich or poor, should be provided "as a matter of right."<sup>249</sup> In America, the elderly were afforded no such relief. Some, like Reuben's mother Anne, were lucky enough to have children able to support them in their later years. Sister Olga recorded in her account of Reuben's life that she and her brother set aside money each month for their mother's care from the time of their father's death in 1912 until her own passing in 1959.<sup>250</sup>

Most of the elderly poor, sadly, had no such help. A 1926 investigation by the federal Department of Labor (DOL) covering four states found a high percentage of those over 70 years of age "are without income, and a large percentage of these persons are of a worthy character."<sup>251</sup> By 1931 the American Bankers Association cited their own figures which showed a full 80% of Americans 65 years of age and older were either wholly or partially dependent on others for their economic support.<sup>252</sup> Instead of living their final years in peaceful dignity, they were banished to the poorhouse.

These poorhouses—also known as almshouses, poor farms, or county homes—served as the final refuge for aged workers and widows left destitute without family, friends, or relatives for financial assistance. It was a tradition as ingrained as it was deplorable; as historian David Wagner explained:

For three hundred years...the choices of poor, disabled, elderly, and others in need were fairly bleak. With no modern social welfare, any hope of aid rested on the Elizabethan Poor Laws developed in England and taken lock, stock, and barrel into American law...If Mrs. Jones found herself widowed...or if Mr. Smith was too old to work his farm and had no children to work it, both would have no choice but to submit themselves to the will of the overseers of the poor.<sup>253</sup>

These overseers dumped the destitute into state-financed institutions widely viewed as wretched and awful. Such conditions were the product not merely of neglect but design. Many conservative legislators and administrators, worried about encouraging poverty, purposefully made life at the county homes meager and punishing. In the words of one poorhouse superintendent, "Our mission is to furnish everything comfortable for the inmates, kindly caring for the sick and performing all the duties which the unfortunate poor are entitled, but in no way to encourage indolence and pauperism and fill the institution with people too lazy to care for themselves."<sup>254</sup>

The poorhouses of Reuben's day were particularly deplorable. Harvey Kailin, secretary for the Illinois Committee on Old Age Security, condemned these houses as "our dumping ground, into which go our derelicts of every description. Living in this mess in insanity and depravity, this prison place for criminals and the insane, are several thousand children and respectable, intelligent old folk, whose only offense is that they

are poor.”<sup>255</sup> An investigation of public poorhouses throughout Illinois in the mid-1920s by investigator Harry C. Evans found the word “poorhouse” had become “the threatening symbol of one of humanity’s great degradations... It is a world of hate and loathing, for it includes the composite horrors of poverty, disgrace, loneliness, humiliation, abandonment and degradation.”<sup>256</sup> Guy Young, a legislative representative for the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) District 12 in Illinois, repeatedly recounted experience of workers forced into the poorhouse. “The degradation of it simply broke their hearts... they loathed the gate of the poor house...a great deal more than the gate of hell.”<sup>257</sup>

## EARLY ATTEMPTS AT REFORM

This state of affairs disgusted and infuriated Reuben. Sister Olga clearly remembered, “One thing that disturbed Reuben greatly was the ‘County Poor House.’ Many were badly managed...believed this was all wrong and hoped someday he could change this.”<sup>258</sup> He had no idea how long a fight it would prove to be.

Reuben’s mentor, John E. Williams, was one of the earliest campaigners against poorhouses. Like many other reformers, he started by pushing for the creation of mothers’ pensions. Explicitly created “so that mothers (of a good moral character) would not have to abandon their children and go to the poorhouse, but could stay at home and keep their children,” these early pension efforts served multiple purposes.<sup>259</sup> While Williams and his compatriots wanted to provide support for those in need, they also sought to destigmatize the idea of pensions. One of labor’s most important missions was shifting public perception of such support. They held the then-radical view that financial support for the elderly was a duty of government. In the words of Frank E. Hering, brother of the Fraternal Order of Eagles and chairman of their Old Age Pension Commission, “The trouble is that all forms of poor relief are based upon a fundamentally false assumption... they are credited to charity, while most of them should be promoted by the simple sense of justice.”<sup>260</sup>

As a state representative, Reuben wasted little time continuing his mentor’s cause. In 1927 he helped expand the debate from pensions for mothers to all elderly with his introduction of the Old Age Pension Act. For months, Soderstrom worked tirelessly in the Illinois House to pass what was, for him, the most important piece of legislation since his Injunction Limitation Act. Opposition was every bit as fierce as when he first attempted to pass that signature reform, with the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association branding it “European parasitism.”<sup>261</sup> Government, they claimed, had neither the need nor the right to create a pension scheme. What gave Springfield the right, they asked, to tax the productive to pay for those who had failed to prepare for old age?

Reuben delivered an eloquent and profound response. Speaking on the floor of the House, Soderstrom masterfully asserted that government had both an interest and a duty in ensuring dignity for the aged and poor:

The home is the unit of our society, the one stabilizing factor of our government. Is the government less interested in its dignified, dependent old citizens than its strenuous youth? Paraphrasing Lincoln’s splendid summary of government: “I hold that government should be by and for men and women.” This implies a humanitarian note into governmental functions. It puts a greater value on human flesh than on the dollar. I find no pride in the poorhouses of our state, into which aged men and women are cast and crowded together as so much worthless refuse. I want less of these scrap-baskets of humanity and more homes...

Sdr2@@@@@FIKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKK

When you pause to consider the chief aim of any true government is the welfare of its people... and the destitution of any class, old or young, is a matter of governmental duty... you will realize I seek to introduce no revolutionary principles... but am merely endeavoring to recognize and to declare in a definite and specific manner this important moral duty.<sup>262</sup>

Government was not only allowed but compelled to do this, Reuben argued. The right to a dignified death was as central to the American ideal as the pursuit of happiness, and the state can and should do all it can to ensure it. Time and again, the Illinois chamber had affirmed that it had such power, from the creation of criminal codes to animal protection laws:

How considerate we have been of dumb animals! Our statutes abound with acts calculated to prohibit and punish cruelty to beasts. But what little attention we have paid to human beings, whose all has been swept away by the ill winds of misfortune, and who face the winter of their lives weak, penniless, helpless and friendless! We leave these people in the isolation of their weakness and poverty until they become a public charge, and then for lack of a better way, herd them together and send them to a Poor Farm...The silver lace of old age touches me more deeply than the flash and color of youth. I claim the right to die comfortably is just as desirable in the hearts of men and women as the right to live prosperously.<sup>263</sup>

Despite his stirring plea and a very modest proposal—Reuben’s proposed bill provided recipients a mere \$260 annually—Soderstrom’s act went down to narrow defeat, ultimately falling two votes shy of the 75 required for a constitutional majority.<sup>264</sup> Undaunted, Reuben brought the bill up again before the legislature as the first piece of labor-backed legislation of the session. This time, he won the vote in the House by a count of 84 to 49, only to see the bill strangled by a series of procedural tricks performed by Senate Judiciary Chair James Barbour and others.

Reuben refused to give up, though he did change his tactics. At the end of the 1931 legislative session, Soderstrom was appointed by the Governor to a committee created by the Senate to conduct a two-year study of “Poverty and Dependency in Old Age.”<sup>265</sup> Unfortunately, the body proved incapable of action, and in 1933 asked for an additional two years for further study. Reuben submitted his pension act regardless and penned a strongly worded dissent from the committee’s ruling, calling for immediate passage of the bill.

Again, Reuben’s call fell on deaf ears. The Senate Committee of Public Welfare voted to send the bill to a sub-committee, guaranteeing it a slow death by discussion. In the House, Speaker F.W. Lewis, who used an endless series of postponements to put most of labor’s legislative agenda on hold, made sure Reub’s bill never saw the light of day. Furious, Soderstrom attacked Lewis in the press, calling the speaker’s actions “either mismanagement or stupidity. Some observers insist that it is a combination of both.”<sup>266</sup>

Hope emerged in 1935, however, with the election of John P. Devine, a political ally of Soderstrom’s, to replace the obstructionist Lewis as Speaker of the House. The new Speaker stood ready to give Reuben—and old age pensions—his full support.

## A BILL WHOSE TIME HAD COME

Along with Speaker Devine came a host of new democratic legislators whose constituents were clamoring for pension legislation. In the wake of Reub’s earlier attempts to pass old-age pensions, the Chicago Tribune sent its *Inquiring Reporter* out on the streets to ask everyday citizens: “Do you approve of the bill introduced at Springfield giving aged people financial aid?” The answers were telling:

“That’s a good idea. Something ought to be done to assist elderly people who are in need.”  
-George Prince, salesman

“I don’t see any reason why some scheme like that would not be practical.”  
- Mrs. Bessie H. Anderson, advertising

“I am heartily in favor of that bill.”  
-*R.B. Higbe, real estate and a veteran of the Spanish American War*

“That bill is a sign of respect by our state for our needy aged people.”  
-*H.E. Williams, president of McCoy Healthway Motor Company*

In fact, the only opinion voiced against Reuben’s bill came from a broker, Mrs. C.E. Snyder, who didn’t want the bill “if the rest of us are to be taxed for it.”<sup>267</sup>

Those who claimed to worry about cost had precious little ground to stand on. Investigations by both federal and state agencies documented the relatively high cost of operating a poorhouse as compared to a pension system. An official report from the state of Illinois calculated an average cost of \$250.57 annually to keep a person in an almshouse in Cook County, and \$441 per resident downstate.<sup>268</sup> These figures did not include the cost of land, facilities, or equipment. Operations, staff salaries, wages and other overhead represented 69% of costs with only 31% left for maintenance of inmates. The most exhaustive study ever conducted on the cost of an inmate at a poorhouse by the Pennsylvania Old Age Commission found “for the sum expended annually upon almshouses... more than three times as many persons could be cared for by the pension system.”<sup>269</sup>

Another argument commonly raised by outside opposition groups like the Civic Federation of Chicago—that a pension system would lead to widespread fraud and abuse—proved equally as hollow. Abraham Epstein, the executive secretary for the American Association for Old Age Security, pointed out that of the 7,000 pension applications in California, only 400 had been rejected, most for simple technical mistakes. “Old age pensions have not proved burdensome to the taxpayer,” he stated, citing numerous surveys. “The number of persons who have tried to take advantage of these laws is negligible.”<sup>270</sup>

California wasn’t alone. Partly in response to a concerted campaign by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), seventeen states had passed an old-age pension law by 1935, all of them without major incident. Reuben decried the fact that Illinois had failed to protect its aged poor. He thundered against the do-nothing Illinois congress that would sooner talk his bill to death than take action. As the 1935 legislative season began, Reuben promised those he represented, both as a legislator and as President of the ISFL, that this was the year they would see their right to security and stability in their final days come due. This was the year he would pass his greatest accomplishment—the Old Age Pension Act! As Soderstrom declared from the House floor:

Each step forward has come through united action, by intelligence and reason, and the labor movement bears the marks and scars of this endless conflict. The trade union movement, in spite of all prejudice, all opposition, all persecution, is leading the way to a better and brighter day for every man and woman who of necessity must work for a livelihood. Lead the way ye brave unionists, ye men and women of honest toil... keep the flaming torch of freedom, liberty, equality and progress burning constantly. Step by step, week by week... we are coming closer and closer to that promised period of peace and plenty... Our dreams of justice, right, power and happiness are coming true. I want liberty instead of imprisonment for the old... I ask it in the name of Illinois, I ask it in the name of Christianity, I ask it in the holy name of Labor, Justice and Right, and destitute aged humanity.<sup>271</sup>

Soderstrom’s exhortation, while dramatic, was well-suited to the moment. Indeed, the 1936 fight for dignity in old age would prove the greatest—and costliest—struggle of Reuben’s political life.

# CHAPTER 24

## 1935

### REUBEN PASSES PENSIONS

*“I am proud to have the pleasure and privilege of announcing... the Old Age Security Act, which the Illinois State Federation of Labor has sponsored all these years, finally adorns the statute books of this great state of Illinois.”*

-Reuben Soderstrom  
1935 ISFL Convention

#### CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT OF A LEGISLATIVE CAREER

##### *Winning at Any Cost*

When Reuben bought his tickets for the 1935 University of Illinois Homecoming football match, he'd pictured a bright, sunny Saturday afternoon spent with his son Carl in the marching band and daughter Jeanne in the student section, cheering on the fighting Illini as they tore into the hated Michigan Wolverines. Sitting next to her was Carl's love, Virginia Merriner, outfitted in wool coat and cap, along with her girlfriends from the Theta house. Reuben imagined later celebrating Jeanne's success joining her brother in Champaign after graduating Streator High with honors.

But November 9, 1935 was dark, rainy, and cold. Everyone was wrapped tight in heavy winter overcoats and furs, draped in raincoats and capes trying (and failing) to keep dry. Reub watched in frustration as the Illini, who had yet to score a touchdown in Big Ten competition, failed again and again to carry it home, with not one but two fumbles on the five-yard line. But they finally scored a 22-yard field goal by Illinois Sophomore halfback Lowell Spurgeon.<sup>272</sup> It was a wet and grinding game, and Reub was sure to stay afterward and watch Carl play his trumpet with the band. Two happy co-eds, Virginia and Jeanne, joined Reuben arm-and-arm and followed the band back to the band house to hear one last rendition of the Alma Mater.

Just like Homecoming, 1935 for Reuben had been a nasty, brutal, grinding experience, full of fumbles and frustrations. It was the flash point of the fights and divisions that would nearly tear labor apart, rifts Reub would spend the next 35 years trying to overcome. But it would also deliver Reub some of his biggest wins, victories he'd spent a lifetime trying to accomplish. And of course these successes would carry a price from the enemies of labor, always lurking around the edges of his political life and ready to pounce at any time.

##### *Attacked from All Sides*

1935 was a rough year for organized labor. After the Great Depression, pro-union Democrats had taken control of the Governorship and General Assembly for the first time in a generation. Unions had done even better in the 1934 elections, picking up two more friendly seats in the Senate and another five in the House.<sup>273</sup> By 1935, however, dark clouds had begun to gather. Reuben's re-election in the Republican primary had been unexpectedly close—the political price for furthering the Democratic President's policies. Meanwhile, the National Industrial Recovery Act, the centerpiece of FDR's New Deal, was under renewed

assault by industry, congress, and especially the courts. Even the President's own officials stood feebly by as predatory industrialists ignored the law, refusing to recognize duly elected unions and choosing to "negotiate" with company-appointed union representatives instead. These officials had "driven a knife into the very heart of labor," the fiery John L. Lewis thundered in testimony that year before the U.S. Senate. "I say that [they] betrayed the President!"<sup>274</sup> The AFL President Green agreed, warning the President that employers were disregarding NRA codes with impunity while blaming all negative outcomes on the very policies they defied.<sup>275</sup>

Worst of all, unemployment continued to hang around the nation's neck like a lead weight. By the beginning of 1935 the national unemployment rolls had swelled by 5,000,000 people, while the cost of relief had doubled.<sup>276</sup> Re-employment figures stubbornly refused to show any gain, holding flat despite increased manufacturing production.<sup>277</sup>

The recovery had stalled, and the public was starting to blame the New Deal for their troubles. Attacks on the President's agenda started coming from all sides. On the right, America's industrialist elite formed the American Liberty League, a political organization dedicated to undoing FDR's reforms restraining millionaires and protecting laborers, the elderly, and the unemployed.<sup>278</sup> On the left, demagogues like Louisiana Senator Huey Long called for a radical plan to "Share Our Wealth," while new parties like the Farmer-Labor Political Federation demanded "a fundamental program striking at the roots of the profit system."<sup>279</sup>

In the face of such opposition, the common wisdom among New Deal politicians was to keep your head down. Reuben (perhaps predictably) did just the opposite. If the threat against the New Deal (and him) was growing, then this, he believed, was the time to strike—now, while labor's influence was at its peak and before his enemies could take their revenge at the ballot box. He announced an aggressive legislative agenda for labor, one that included bills for a 30-hour week, unemployment insurance, an eight-hour day for women, and a six-day week. At the center of Soderstrom's efforts, however, was the Old Age Pension bill. It would prove one of the hardest—and costliest—fights of his political life.

## THE FIGHT FOR OLD AGE PENSIONS

### *Reuben Versus the Governor*

Emboldened by the President's Social Security proposal to Congress in January of that year, Reuben again introduced his most treasured legislation, the Old Age Pension Act—a bill which sought to bring "a note of humanity" to the impoverished elderly by enabling them to live out their final years in comfort with their loved ones. Many otherwise friendly politicians, however, worried about the impact of such an ambitious agenda, starting with the man who had undone the Pension bill in the last session—Illinois Governor Henry Horner.

A former probate judge, Horner was locked in a fight for his political life with Chicago Mayor Ed Kelly, who (together with Cook County Democratic Chairman Patrick Nash) ran the powerful and corrupt Chicago political machine. By 1935 Kelly had developed an intense personal hatred of the Governor, whom he viewed as too independent, and rumors circulated that the Mayor wanted a more pliable replacement. The news plunged the Governor into a bitter depression. According to biographer Charles Masters, Horner's once "remarkably kind nature" turned "depressed, disillusioned, and cranky...Once conciliatory and cordial, Horner now seemed to have almost given up trying to get along with other politicians. Instead of working to smooth over disagreements, the tired and disillusioned governor now often uttered bitter and cynical responses in the direction of his political critics."<sup>280</sup> The bachelor Governor had locked himself away to brood

over his options, “submerged in melancholy.”<sup>281</sup>

It was in the midst of this struggle that Soderstrom met privately with the embattled executive to secure his support for old age pensions, a meeting he later recounted in a colorful letter to his brother and confidante, Lafe. He recalled being surprised by the dark mood that permeated the Governor’s office as his assistant and confidant Ella Cornwall led him back to where Horner sat, absorbed in a piece of Lincoln memorabilia. With a half-hearted gesture, he offered Soderstrom a seat.

They briefly shared pleasantries, lingering for a few moments on talk of the film “Bright Eyes” and its breakout star, Shirley Temple. When the conversation shifted to talk of labor’s agenda, however, the Governor grew terse. Pressed for support, he flatly repeated what he’d already stated publicly. “I believe this principle is sound and that eventually it must become a part of our general economic plan,” he told Reuben, but “whether this is the opportune time in view of the present financial condition of the state is questionable.”<sup>282</sup> Besides, Roosevelt had already promised to bring a Social Security bill before Congress, and “we should await a presentation of his plan before final consideration of this question.”<sup>283</sup> Reuben protested vigorously, insisting that the President’s plans made his bill all the more urgent. This was Illinois’ last chance to shape the conversation; if they failed to act now, any political will for Reub’s pension plan—which was almost certainly stronger than anything that could come out of congress—would fall apart.

Horner remained unmoved, and Reub could guess why. Although he viewed himself as a man of the people, the Governor was notoriously miserly, and not the least bit inclined to support new spending. After all, he’d just pulled the state out of debt by a politically costly sales tax—a measure Kelly was now using against him to great effect.<sup>284</sup> “I’d be for an old age pension bill if it didn’t cost anything,” the Governor had said the last time they’d discussed the matter. “Governor, it is going to cost something,” Reub had replied through gritted teeth, “But it will be the best money you can spend.”<sup>285</sup>

Reuben realized he could argue the merits of pensions until he was blue in the face and still not change the Governor’s mind. Undaunted, Reuben tried a different track, telling Horner:

Governor, you’re a high-minded personality, fine and decent in your personal humanitarian attitude. But you’ve failed to keep with the President of the United States. There’s a lot of social vision down in Washington but no corresponding vision of a social character in Springfield. The President is making many fine declarations on behalf of labor and humanity, but no corresponding declarations have been made by the Governor of Illinois. People are beginning to believe we have a New Deal in Washington and a mis-deal in Springfield. Now, look at President Roosevelt. He is absolutely immune to all successful political criticism. No mud-slinging politician can successfully attack Roosevelt. It’s more of a disadvantage to do so than an advantage to attack him. You could make yourself immune to all unsuccessful political criticism by getting in step with the President of the United States through the simple process of declaring for organized labor’s legislation. It wouldn’t only be a good humanitarian policy, but a good political policy, because it’s a successful one.<sup>286</sup>

Soderstrom watched as the wheels began to turn in Horner’s head. If he adopted Reuben’s plan, he could use it to insulate himself against Kelly and restore his public image. Further, it might help him gain the President’s endorsement in the upcoming primary fight. The possibilities began to percolate. If he supported the Reuben’s agenda, the Governor asked, could he count on Labor’s support in the primary? Soderstrom replied that the Joint Labor Legislative Board had a long-standing policy of supporting the incumbent, provided he proved himself friendly to labor. Coming out in support of pensions, Reub mused, would certainly be seen as friendly act. The Governor gave Soderstrom his support.

### *Battling Public Opinion*



With the support of the Governor in hand, Reuben turned his attention to the General Assembly. Again, he faced a crucial problem—party affiliation. Although pro-labor, Reub was a Republican, and the Democratic Assembly would not bring a bill from a member of the opposing party up for a vote, no matter its merits. Selflessly, Reuben removed his name from the bill he'd spent his political career crafting, opting instead to orchestrate behind the scenes. As he described:

I urged many members of the legislature to draft an old age pension bill and introduce it. The result was that the name of nine state representatives appeared on seven proposals...A subcommittee was appointed to select the best features of the seven bills and draft them into one measure. I served on the sub-committee and stuck pretty close to every move made.<sup>287</sup>

Learning from his mistakes, Reub also decided to remove the revenue section and pass it separately to secure more votes. "I knew that if members of the House and Senate would vote for it without a revenue producing section," he later revealed to brother Lafe, "that they would be committed to the legislation—sort of tied to it—and could not consistently run out on the appropriation bill when it came up for action."<sup>288</sup> When the President's Social Security bill offering up to \$15 per recipient per month in matching funds to states with pension plans was announced, it lent further strength to Reuben's efforts. After sixteen fraught years, victory finally appeared within sight.

As Reuben inched closer to victory in Springfield, however, he had to fight off a surprising new foe: progressives pension supporters. In recent years Dr. Francis Townsend, a retired physician, had been pushing a radical pension plan of his own. His "Townsend Plan" called for paying every person over the age of 65 a monthly pension of \$200, well over the \$30 maximum payment Reuben was advocating. Millions were enticed by the plan—as much as 56% of the American public, according to some surveys.<sup>289</sup> This included a large number of union workers, many of whom pulled Reuben aside at local meetings and Eagle lodge dinners, warning him to "plump" his bill or risk losing their support. Reuben pushed back hard; any attempts to exceed Federal matching funds would give his more reluctant votes in the legislature the excuse they needed to pull their support. "Finally I decided that it wasn't important to have a bill that met with the views of organized labor or the view of the lodge of Eagles, or any particular group," Reub said. "It was important to draft a bill that was consistent with the views of the federal authorities down at Washington, because the federal government in the pending social security legislation was offering to pay up to half of the expense to maintain an old age pension system up to \$15.00 per month per pensioner."<sup>290</sup>

Other opposition came from more traditional quarters. Many in the press pounced on Reub's efforts. The conservative editorial page of the Bloomington *Pantagraph* in particular savaged Soderstrom's Pension bill and the proposed national Social Security Act. "It is questioned whether this measure is in fact a 'social security' program, or one tending in an opposite direction," they wrote. "A less ambitious and tumultuous start on a far reaching program which may take years to perfect would come nearer suiting the present conditions, in which the business and industry of the country looks in vain for signs of governmental encouragement, but sees instead frequent political attempts to penalize and stultify it."<sup>291</sup> Reuben wasted no time responding to the charge, writing back to the editors:

The editorial writer of the Bloomington *Pantagraph* does not seem to understand the full meaning of these two words 'social security.' The cold-blooded truth is hungry men are dangerous men and it is my honest judgment that there is more social security and protection for employers in the enactment of an old age pension law than they will be able to find in the military department or all the police departments in the state combined. For more than 400 years, legislation, almost all of it, has been designed to help the big fellow and big businessman, and the time has come when legislation designed to help the ordinary man must be enacted into law...

I am personally moving heaven and earth to get this kind of legislation out of the Industrial Affairs committee at the earliest possible date, and I trust that the Bloomington public press will refrain from doing everything they know how to do, to discourage the enactment of this sorely needed piece of legislation.<sup>292</sup>

Soderstrom would not sit idly by while a newspaper board smeared his noble efforts.

### *Sacrificing for the Win*

Despite all odds and over any opposition, Reuben's Old Age Pension Act was signed into law that summer. The vote was a testament to Soderstrom's political acumen; it passed the House and Senate without a single vote cast against it.<sup>293</sup> Reub had to sacrifice much for such a win, including any official public acknowledgment of his success. However, Reub's lifelong friend and ally, University of Chicago Economics Professor (and eventual US Senator) Paul Douglas, wrote an editorial for the Decatur Herald trumpeting Soderstrom's role, writing in part:

The battle to get an old age pension law through the legislature has been a hard and bitter one and it has taken sixteen years... Representative Soderstrom and the State Federation of Labor introduced and improved the bill. In order to get the majority party behind it, Mr. Soderstrom gladly consented to have his name taken off the bill and those of three Democrats substituted. In doing this he showed that he cared for the old people of Illinois and not for his personal glorification and for this he deserves the gratitude of all those who care for the welfare of the state.<sup>294</sup>

Soderstrom himself described the bill's passage as "the crowning achievement of my legislative career."<sup>295</sup> While aware of the bill's shortcomings, he was nevertheless proud and relieved to bring this sixteen-year struggle to a close. As he wrote in the pages of the *ISFL Weekly Newsletter*:

The bill is not perfect. No legislation ever is when first passed, but it has been established- and that is something- and can be improved from time to time in future sessions of the General Assembly. Even \$30 per month, while not enough, compared with nothing now, is looked upon as a mighty blessing by many penniless and helpless old men and women who have had more than their share of anxiety and worry during the past five years of hopeless unemployment. This legislation will bring smiles to their faces and the aged people of Illinois will be happy and contented with the comfort, peace and security that even this small sum of money paid periodically, can and will produce. I rejoice with them in the wonderful promise that this fine beginning offers.<sup>296</sup>

Illinois organizations representing the aged celebrated the bill's passage, and while Reub's name may not have been on the bill, those who had followed and fought for this bill through the years knew who was responsible for its success. Some, such as director Michael Whalan of the Association for Pensions for the Aged, invited Reuben to share in their revelry. Lightheartedly tweaking Reuben for his relative youth, he addressed his correspondence:

Dear "Boy":

I hope that you will receive and accept this letter as a special invitation to be present and to appear on the speakers' platform as one of our principal speakers at our Old Age Pension celebration over the victory of the passage of the Old Age Pension law by the recent General Assembly. This celebration will be held at the Water Works Park, Peoria, Illinois, on Sunday, September 29th, 1935. Let me say that the rank and file of our membership will be very much disappointed if anything should occur to prevent your presence on this

important occasion. Now my dear 'boy,' please notify me at the earliest possible date whether or not you can accept this invitation so that we may be able to have your name inserted on the program.<sup>297</sup>

Unfortunately, Reuben was unable to attend; the national AFL convention instead drew him to Atlantic City for one of the most memorable meetings in the organization's history.

While the passage of the Old Age Pension Act was an historic win for Soderstrom, he didn't stop there. He oversaw a flurry of bills at the start of the fifty-ninth General Assembly, including legislation on Unemployment Insurance, Workman's Compensation, Occupational Disease, and a variety of wage bills. By session's end, Reuben had passed a record number of pro-labor bills through the Assembly. He won extensions of the Minimum Wage Law for Women and Minors and an expansion of the Mother's Pension, securing appropriations for their funding. He also passed legislation establishing a six-day work week, which he'd been fighting for since his first term in office. Even Reuben's earlier legislative victories enjoyed renewed success during this time. The Soderstrom Injunction Limitation Act—a litigious target for manufacturing interests for a decade—was declared constitutional by the United States Supreme Court.<sup>298</sup>

## **POLICE BRUTALIZE WOMEN WORKERS**

Reuben took his aggressive agenda outside the halls of Springfield as well. In February of that year, a strike by the Ladies Garment Workers of Decatur, Illinois, turned violent when local police, acting as armed escort for strikebreaking employees, fired tear gas into a crowd of 25 singing and shouting female picketers outside the Decatur Garment company.<sup>299</sup> "There was a lot of police brutality over there," Reuben later explained. "One of the girls was hit in the eye with this tear gas. Well, it blinded both of her eyes, and she was in the hospital."<sup>300</sup> The courts responded to the chaos by issuing an injunction against the brutalized workers. Undeterred, the striking garment workers vowed to protect themselves by any means necessary. "Our pickets have been instructed to carry on their duties in an orderly manner," union president Carolyn Burke told the press, "But if those workers who have not joined our ranks begin a battle, we will protect ourselves."<sup>301</sup>

With tempers aroused on all sides, one of the business's representatives, fearful that the tense situation might explode, sought out Soderstrom in search of a solution. As Reuben later recalled:

I requested him to call a meeting, and call it tonight. Call it in City Hall. "Well," he said, "there's an injunction over there." "That's good," I said, "You call the meeting and make sure that you've got a big crowd. Call it where the police are close because I'd like to defy that injunction!"

So I got over there at eight o'clock and the place was jammed. People were sitting on window sills and hanging out the doors. I gave them a rousing talk on strike matters, inflamed the crowd, and then I finally made up my mind to defy the injunction. I announced from the platform that I was defying that injunction. "I hold that court in contempt, and I hold that injunction in contempt!" I felt that they were going to fight me before I got out of the building, but nothing happened, and I returned to Springfield.

But about four days later, Victor Olander called me over the phone and said, "Were you in Decatur the other night?" I said, "yeah," and he said "What the Hell did you say down there?"<sup>302</sup>

Victor had been called by judge who'd issued the injunction, and he wasn't happy. He drove straight to Chicago for a meeting with the two labor leaders. In the hours-long negotiations that followed, the judge agreed to drop the injunction. Reuben, however, didn't stop there. He wanted release for the workers jailed during the strike. The judge finally relented, agreeing to probation if the ISFL would send an attorney to file a proper motion before the court.

There was a problem, however. The ISFL had no attorney. Olander was a great legal mind—one consulted and even offered jobs by the likes of Clarence Darrow—but he was not qualified to file the motion. It was then that Reuben remembered a law professor from Northwestern University that he'd met through his work in the House, a lawyer by the name of Dan Carmell. Carmell was happy to help, going to court and freeing the imprisoned protesters on Reub's request. It was the first act of what would soon prove to be an important and fruitful relationship.

## LABOR SPLITS AND STUMBLES

### *Black Friday Shocks Illinois Workers*

Not all of Reuben's struggles ended in victory, however. One of his most stinging losses that year came at the hands of the infamously conservative courts over the important question of worker health and safety. On April 17, 1935, legal protections against occupational disease took a leap backwards when the Illinois State Supreme Court declared large swaths of the Occupational Disease Act unconstitutional.<sup>303</sup> Reuben deplored the "Back Wednesday" ruling, writing:

The effect of these decisions is to wipe out the right of workers to sue for damages under the Occupational Disease Act in cases of industrial ailments contracted while at work, a right which they have had since the passage of the Act in 1911. At the same time, through the decision of the court against Sections 12 and 13 of the Health, Safety, and Comfort Act, they lose the protection afforded them by that law since its enactment in 1909 and revision in 1915...What is the Illinois legislature going to do about it? Are the workers in Illinois to be set back a full quarter of a century in the matter of protection from occupational diseases and safeguards against industrial hazards?<sup>304</sup>

Unfortunately, the legislature failed to act on these important protections; three House and two Senate bills aimed at restoring the act went down in defeat. In reaction, ISFL Secretary-Treasurer Olander resigned from Illinois Emergency Relief Commission, stating:

This action on my part is in the nature of a protest against the failure of the administration and the legislature to provide remedial legislation necessary to guard against the legal effects of the "Black Wednesday" decisions of the Illinois Supreme Court...I and my associates have worked almost incessantly since the very hour of the court decisions in an effort to bring about the necessary remedial action before the adjournment of the legislature. The action of the Senate in defeating the bills today is a very plain indication that little attention has been given to our pleas...The subject has been made into a political football, as between factions in both political parties. It has been made a political issue, not because I desired it, but through the maneuvering of the Illinois Manufacturers Association and members of the legislature which that association and its allies succeeded in bringing to the support of the reactionary employers of the state. Very well, I can play that game, too.<sup>305</sup>

For the moment, however, the only move left to Reuben and his faithful partner was to register and remember this defeat. The IMA had won the current battle on occupational hazards, and Soderstrom would soon need to place his full attention on a growing storm within labor itself.

### *Death and Rebirth of the New Deal*

While Reuben was fighting for workers within Illinois, labor suffered several setbacks nationally. The first crisis came that May, when the US Supreme Court dealt a near fatal blow to the New Deal by declaring the National Industrial Recovery Act unconstitutional. The decision was disastrous to labor. Reuben took the

decision particularly hard, writing in his column at the time:

What now? Before the passage of the Act, in June 1933, labor and business alike found it impossible to make any progress. Conditions had been growing steadily worse since 1929. After the passage of the Act business improved and labor began making substantial gains in organization and consequently in wages and working conditions.....Is labor and industry now to be plunged back into the chaotic condition which prevailed prior to the passage of the national recovery act in June, 1933? That is Unthinkable! It is idle to quarrel with the decision of the court which, under all circumstances, has the last word. The thing to do now is to seek a way to restore the recovery program in a constitutional form.<sup>306</sup>

Reuben didn't have to wait long. That July, the President signed the National Industrial Recovery Act. Commonly known as the Wagner Act (after New York's Senator Robert Wagner), the bill was a huge boon to labor. At the heart of the Act was Section 7, which affirmed "Employees shall have the right to self-organization, to form, join, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in concerted activities, for the purpose collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection."<sup>307</sup> Finally, labor had the force of law to fight industrial opposition. "The passage of the Wagner Act revealed not only governmental favor but a willingness to form a partnership with labor," writes labor historian Joseph Rayback. "To ensure the right of organization, and the correlative right to bargain, governmental aid was needed. The New Deal announced itself ready to grant that aid."<sup>308</sup>

Reuben cheered the signing of the act, declaring in his Labor Day message, "This legislation definitely outlaws the company union and compels recognition by employers of labor's right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing."<sup>309</sup> At the annual ISFL convention in Belleville, Illinois, Works Progress Administration Director Carl Bauer gave the keynote address, reaffirming the government's support of organized labor, including higher wages and a 30-hour week. Reuben, who followed Bauer on stage, expressed his appreciation for the show of solidarity:

Just think of it, friends! A representative of the Government of the United States in a convention of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, willing to help us make the contracts comply with the provisions of the rules and regulations which provide for a six-hour day, a thirty-hour week and the prevailing union scale. I have always believed that government ought to make things favorable for those who live under it, and the Government of the United States, through the Public Works Administration, is making things favorable for those who work for a livelihood, and those who happen to belong to the trade union movement— and all this has come through the efforts and through the mental energy and through the dynamic leadership of one great, outstanding citizen, the President of the United States!<sup>310</sup>

Reuben had good reason for such praise and optimism. This "Second New Deal" had arrived by forging a meaningful and muscular partnership between government and agents of labor. Just who those agents would be, however, soon became an issue of dispute as labor took its new power and looked inward.

### ***Riot At The Convention***

Chaos. That was the only word to describe the scene on the floor of the AFL Annual Convention in Atlantic City on October 19, 1935. A sea of delegates swarmed atop one another, the hall ringing with shouts as AFL President Green angrily beat his gavel in a futile attempt to regain order. At the center of the scene were two men, John L. Lewis of the United Miners and William Hutcheson of the Carpenters Union, trading blows after what had been a heated exchange. It didn't last long (only a few minutes, by most accounts), but by the end Hutcheson's face wasn't the only thing to emerge bruised and bloodied. Union solidarity—and the Federation itself—had suffered an irreparable breach, and nothing would ever be the same again.

Reuben, attending as a delegate from the Illinois Federation, watched the events in shock. He was well aware of the contentious issue behind the fight: the question of industrial unions. For years, Lewis and his supporters had tried in vain to convince the AFL to allow mass-production industries like steel, lumber, and automobiles to unionize as a whole. Traditional trade unionists, who dominated the AFL leadership, insisted that such unions undermined the character of organized labor by allowing workers “not yet prepared for the trade unions’ institutions of self-government” to build “cheap unions with no effort.”<sup>311</sup> Of course, underneath the argument of trade vs. industry lied dangerous social and racial tensions. Proponents of industrial organization were often poorer and from immigrant populations, and many of the criticisms of the “virtue” of industrial workers were thin proxies for attacks on the moral character of these groups.

As long as the AFL had the power to decide what was and was not a valid union, there was little industrial unionists could do. The 1935 Wagner Act, however, changed everything. Now the National Labor Relations Board, not the AFL, had the power to define jurisdictions and certify worker representation.<sup>312</sup> This led Lewis to launch a new push at the AFL Convention to create a plan for the organization of industrial workers. The call went unheeded, however, and the AFL-affiliated craft-union principle of organization was upheld by a vote of 18,024 to 10,933 after a heated and impassioned debate.<sup>313</sup> When Hutcheson tried to silence a protesting delegate on the convention floor, Lewis stormed down the aisle and pulled the AFL Vice President aside, launching into a war of words that ended in fisticuffs.

Hutcheson’s and Green’s hopes that the convention vote had ended the debate over industrial organization were soon dashed. In the weeks after the convention, Lewis gathered the heads of eight major unions, including president Howard of Reuben’s own Typographers’ Union, to chart a possible course of action. The result was the creation of the Committee for Industrial Organization, or CIO. While it maintained that it was working within the framework of the AFL, the CIO promised to promote industrial unionism, an action Green had expressly forbidden. Lewis ended 1935 on a collision course with the Federation, an earthquake that would split the American labor movement for many years to come.

Reuben thought the entire affair “foolish.”<sup>314</sup> While he personally preferred trade organization, he felt that there was “room for both kinds of unions” within the AFL.<sup>315</sup> What mattered to Soderstrom was unity. This was why for the past year he had been fighting on Lewis’s behalf against the Progressive Miners Association (PMA), a rival to the AFL’s United Miners. The “mine war” had devastated Illinois miners when

it turned violent, claiming numerous lives, including twelve members of the Illinois National Guard and a woman in the small town of Taylorsville, Illinois.<sup>316</sup> While no fan of Lewis’s divisive and dictatorial style, Reuben pulled no punches in his fight against the PMA, speaking out strongly as recently as that September:

The American Federation of Labor is the greatest power for good in our country, and wage earners everywhere ought to stop their bickering and work together unitedly, in closer unity than ever before, and those Progressive Miners ought to drop their indefensible policy of fighting organized labor and come back to the legitimate Mine Workers’ organization where they properly belong...it is their moral duty to help advance the common interests of all those who toil to live and who ask not “What has the union ever done for me?” but “What can I do to help the other fellow?”<sup>317</sup>

Now Lewis, president of the United Miners, was the one threatening the unity that Reuben held so dear. Soderstrom clearly saw the threat such defection posed; what could not be foreseen, however, was how deep and devastating the divide between the industrial unionists of the CIO and the traditional trade unions of the AFL would become, or the monumental effort it would take to eventually heal the breach. It was an issue that Reuben would spend the next 23 years wrestling to resolve.

## PILLAR VII

# WORKPLACE SAFETY: THE RADIUM GIRLS

### WORKPLACE SAFETY IN ILLINOIS

To Reuben, access to a safe and secure working environment was a laborer's right. After all, a worker's health was not just a matter of well-being; it was their chief asset, the key to providing for their families. "All we [workers] have to sell is our labor," Soderstrom explained. "If we are injured, our earning power is jeopardized. We know that the toll of accidents is not only one of suffering but one of economic hardship."<sup>318</sup> Many in organized labor, including Reuben's mentor John E. Williams, made great strides in securing compensation for injured workers, but the fight to prevent injury proved more difficult. Workers in union shops used their combined power to negotiate for safer conditions. As Reuben described, "In a union shop the wage earner has something to say about working conditions. Collectively, he is the greatest factor in freedom's cause."<sup>319</sup> Workers in non-unionized shops, however, faced an employer whose power was absolute. They often suffered deplorable conditions, including malfunctioning equipment, exposure to dangerous chemicals, and a lack of even the most rudimentary safety measures.

In the early 20th century a series of sadly preventable tragedies, including the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York and the Cherry Mine fire in Illinois, awakened the public consciousness to the need for comprehensive safety legislation. Organized labor used this popular support to overcome employer resistance and pass legislation setting uniform safety standards. In Illinois, the most important of these were the Occupational Disease Act, which required employers to "adopt and provide reasonable and approved devices or methods for prevention of industrial or occupational diseases as are incident to such work."<sup>320</sup> Although inadequate—the laws did not cover some common work-related diseases like silicosis, for example—these laws at least protected workers from the worst abuses, and provided a path for future reform.

That framework came crashing down on April 17, 1935—later referred to by organized labor as "Black Wednesday"—when the Illinois Supreme Court issued a series of four rulings that held the state's safety law unconstitutional on the grounds that the legislature had failed to establish clear standards for employers to follow. Reuben's early attempts to replace the Occupational Disease Act failed spectacularly, with only nine senators voting in support of his emergency bill (the greatest legislative defeat in ISFL history).<sup>321</sup> Unprotected, workers in Illinois found themselves at the mercy of their employers. While some owners acted out of a sense of moral duty, many more demonstrated a callous indifference to the safety of their workers. Others went even further, going to elaborate (and disgusting) lengths to disguise the danger to which they had exposed those in their employ.

### THE SOCIETY OF THE LIVING DEAD

Of all these cover-ups, none was more outrageous or insidious than the case of the Radium Girls, a group of women and girls from Reuben's own LaSalle County who had been knowingly poisoned by their employer through repeated exposure to radioactive materials while working for the Radium Dial Company in Ottawa, Illinois. Their story is one of courage, a struggle to overcome intimidation, slander, and legal manipulation at the highest levels to seek justice for themselves and their families.

Discovered in the closing years of the nineteenth century, Radium was originally seen as a wonder drug that could cure anything. It was initially used to treat everything from cancer to arthritis, and could even be found in some local water supplies.<sup>322</sup> Luminous and possessed of powerful (if poorly understood) radioactivity, this seemingly magical material was soon used for a variety of industrial applications. One of the most common was as a luminescent paint for watches, switches and dials so they could be seen in the dark. The Radium Dial Company (RDC) was one of the largest companies to use radium for this purpose, hiring women for its east coast factories to coat watch faces and hands with a radium-based paint. Of course, such detailed work required a fine brush point, so the girls were advised to lick their brushes after each stroke. Hundreds of times each day, Radium Dial employees pointed the fine brush with their lips, repeatedly exposing themselves to radiation. Eventually, of course, the women workers grew ill. Death posts appeared in papers across New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, and suspicion that the use of Radium was to blame steadily grew. With negative stories mounting, Radium Dial owner Joseph Kelly decided to move his operation out to the Midwest.<sup>323</sup>

In 1922 Kelly set up a new factory in an abandoned high school in Ottawa, Illinois, a small town located in the heart of Reub's LaSalle County. Luring workers with high wages—as much as \$17 dollars a week—Kelly soon employed a large number of local schoolgirls, some as young as 15, who brought the money home to desperate families still reeling from the recent depression. Despite his earlier experience, Kelly continued to instruct his employees to lick the brush. “They learn ya to put the thing in your mouth, that's the first thing they taught ya,” one survivor later recounted.<sup>324</sup> Ignorant of the risks, the girls often played with the leftover paint. “We used to take a sneak, go into the dark room. Paint our faces up, paint eyebrows and mustaches. And one time we even had one girl who painted her teeth.”<sup>325</sup>

Like their counterparts out east, women at the Ottawa plant eventually became sick, suffering a variety of disfigurements and disease. Dubbed the “Radium Girls” by the press, many of these young girls shared their stories in the hope that they could expose the what was going on at Kelly's plant. The details of their physical tortures were as compelling as they were gruesome; one after another, the girls told of crippling pain and exhaustion, of losing teeth, jaws, and even limbs. In an interview shortly before her death, one former worker casually told the reporter “I had all my teeth out a year ago. They didn't decay, just chipped to the roots. Some were filled six times, but they just wouldn't stay—just dissolved. My jawbone has holes in it.”<sup>326</sup> Others suffered internal injuries. “I used to get the funniest feeling in my legs,” Helyn Much, another of the girls, later recounted. “From knees to ankles, they felt as if they were hollow...” Helyn later discovered that the bones in her legs had been reduced to a honeycombed mess.<sup>327</sup>

Just as horrifying were the lengths to which Kelly and his men went to hide their culpability. Radium Dial, by now fully aware of what was causing these deaths, hired company doctors ordered to claim that the employees had died of pneumonia, typhus, and even syphilis. They whisked the sick away from their families and attempted to dispose of their bodies before independent doctors could examine them. Kelly frequently used bribes and intimidation, buying off potential whistleblowers and threatening to end the careers of anyone who attempted to reveal the terrible truth. The story of one victim's family, recorded in the 1987 documentary *Radium City*, was an all too common example:

(Our sister) worked there about six years. And when, oh, it must have been about a year that she was so really bad...My parents took her to a doctor in Chicago, and he confirmed what they thought it was, but he said, “I cannot speak out and tell you, because this would be the end of my career.” Daddy went to a lawyer, but evidently the lawyer was bought off and couldn't do nothing for us, so daddy said, “just forget it, we won't go any further.”



And so she was put with the company's doctor, his hospital, and we had no say whatsoever about that. They wouldn't let us there. I went there one time and they wouldn't let me into her room. I had to stay in the hall, and visit from the hall. And she was there for about two weeks and passed away. And when she passed away, it was about two, three in the morning, and they wanted to take her body out, put her body into something, what I don't know. They wanted to bury it right now. And my brother-in-law happened to be there and he says, "No way is she going to be buried that way. She's a good Catholic girl and she's going to have a Mass and a whole funeral." They had this autopsy set for a certain time, and when our doctor went the autopsy had been performed an hour before he got there. And they said dyptheria. So, what does this tell you?<sup>328</sup>

By 1934, several of these Radium Girls—now ghosts of their former selves—had come to be known by a different nickname: "The Society of the Living Dead." One reporter gave the following account of his interview with one member of the Society:

"Do you feel the threat of death?" I asked Mrs. Purcell (one of the members).

"I don't think of it," she said in her frightened way. She acted like a woman seeing ghosts. Her eyes stayed open with uneasiness...

"How long does the doctor give you?"

"He won't specify. It may take some time yet, maybe years...I don't know."

"Does such a sentence worry you?"

She took a little bottle of red medicine out of her handbag and drank from it greedily. She made a face. "That's better," she said, then went on: "You were asking? Oh, it's not so bad. You become reconciled. No, I have no plan. You've too much suffering, are too weak, to make any program. Of course, I don't want to give up. I want to live. Who doesn't? I'm only 20. There's much to live for. I used to dance, run around, loved it. I want to drive a car, travel a bit."

"Would you ever marry again?"

"I suppose I would if someone would have me. No one would have me, I guess." And she smiled bitterly.<sup>329</sup>

## FIGHT FOR JUSTICE

One member of the Society, Inez Vallat, did have a plan. Once a bright and vivacious 19 year-old girl, Inez had been emaciated by radium poisoning. "She was eight years ill," her father later said. "It showed at the ankles first. Then the hips locked. She got so that she had to walk upstairs backward. Then the teeth fell out and pieces of the jawbone broke loose."<sup>330</sup> Undaunted, Inez sued Radium Dial under the Occupational Disease Act. Her case went all the way to the Illinois Supreme Court, where Kelly and Radium Dial, no longer able to credibly plead ignorance of the danger in which they placed their workers, instead claimed the legal requirement that they provide a safe work environment was itself unconstitutional. According to historian Claudia Clark:

Among other complaints, the company's lawyers claimed that the phrases charging businesses with employing "reasonable and approved devices, means or methods" to prevent industrial diseases were "vague, indefinite, and did not furnish an intelligible standard of conduct." Thus, the act was unconstitutional because "it fails to set up an intelligible standard of duty and violates the due process clauses of the state and Federal constitutions."<sup>331</sup>

Astonishingly, the Justices agreed, and on Wednesday, April 17, 1935—“Black Wednesday”—the Illinois Supreme Court found Radium Dial not guilty of turning Inez into one of the “living dead.” *Vallat vs. Radium Dial Company*, along with three other rulings issued on the same day, was used by the conservative Illinois Justices to invalidate the entire Occupational Disease Act.

Reuben and his Secretary, Victor Olander, were beyond furious at the ruling. Olander resigned from his posts on the several State Commissions in protest of the decision, as well as the legislature’s and administration’s failure to correct this wretched wrong. Reuben worked tirelessly to pass a new Occupational Disease Act. After his initial attempts at emergency legislation failed, Soderstrom bypassed the normal legislative process entirely, negotiating directly with the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association (IMA) to craft a bill agreeable to both parties that re-established protections for Illinois workers (later referred to as the “agreed bills” process). The new bill passed and was signed into law in March of 1936, allowing 15 of the Radium Girls to again seek restitution from Radium Dial. Unfortunately, Vallet would not be among them; she died one month before the bill’s passage.<sup>332</sup> Catherine Donahue was the first to have her case settled by the new law’s Industrial Commission, which in April of 1938 awarded her a little over \$6,000 in damages. Catherine died three months later; Radium Dial appealed the award the following day.<sup>333</sup>

In attempt to escape paying restitution, Joseph Kelly closed his company, only to re-open it six weeks later under the name Luminous Processes, Inc. After a series of legal battles, he was eventually forced to pay a total of \$10,000 for his actions. The sum was a pittance to Kelly, who made millions as a war profiteer by reprocessing radium into polonium for America’s Atomic Bomb.<sup>334</sup>

Although Kelly escaped justice, the tale of Ottawa’s Radium Girls had a lasting impact, both on the town itself and in the broader American psyche. The workers and their stories have been memorialized in poems, plays, short stories, books, and documentaries. In 2006, Madeline Piller, an 8th grade student in Ottawa, began a campaign to erect a monument to the fallen workers. After years of hard work and advocacy, the Radium Girls memorial was dedicated in 2011.<sup>335</sup>

For Reuben, the girls’ plight was powerful inspiration, a rallying cry used to usher in a new era of workplace safety in Illinois and beyond. In the decades that followed, Soderstrom used the direct ISFL / IMA negotiation process he pioneered to radically expand the Illinois Occupational Disease and Workmen’s Compensation Acts, both in the variety of ailments covered and the amount of compensation received. During World War II, he used his position on the Illinois’s Industrial Safety Committee and Health and Safety Committee to institute a wide array of proactive safety measures, including increased employee training, higher factory and equipment standards, and work-hour limitations to prevent laborer fatigue. In the post-war era, Soderstrom was repeatedly called to Washington to serve on committees advising the President on national safety standards and practices.

Reuben’s reforms drew crucial attention and effort to the need for workplace safety. Still, another abuse highlighted by the Radium Girls tragedy—the exploitation of female workers—was yet to be definitively addressed. The journey to right that wrong soon led Reuben to establish yet another of his pillars of labor: the rights of women in the workplace.

# CHAPTER 25

## 1936

### REUBEN ENDORSES FDR, SACRIFICES STATEHOUSE SEAT

*“There is something unchanging and fixed about principles. It is something like mathematics; two and two was four fifty years ago, two and two is four now, and will be for fifty years hence. The principle of unity was a good thing fifty years ago, the principle of unity is a good thing now, and the principle of unity in our movement will be a good thing fifty years hence.”*

-Reuben Soderstrom  
1936 ISFL Convention

#### LEADER BLAZES NEW PATH

##### *Assembly Assails Pensions*

Reub was furious. Trudging home from the Santa Fe station through the deep January snows, his imposing frame—usually alight with abounding energy—barreled through the busy Streator streets like a bullet, propelled by an anger that grew with every step. He still couldn’t believe what his friend and colleague, Vic Olander, had confided to him after his last meeting with the State Senate leadership. For over sixteen years, Reuben had led an uphill struggle for the Illinois Old Age Pension Act, a law designed “to help that old couple, gray-haired, bent with age, to live together and dream their dreams out under their own roof, at their own table, by their own fireside.”<sup>336</sup> After a legislative lifetime of fighting, he’d finally won that battle, crafting and passing a bill that meant real relief for the impoverished elderly. He’d banished forever the gruesome specter of the county poor house, placing Illinois at the country’s cutting edge with protections more progressive than its contemporaries, and ahead of national action. And now the State Senate wanted to gut it.

A year earlier, Reuben had struck a deal with the embattled Governor Horner—he would pass Soderstrom’s Old Age Pension Act in return for labor’s support in his re-election fight against Chicago Mayor Ed Kelly’s hand-picked challenger. Horner dutifully lent his support for the bill (taking much of the credit in the process).<sup>337</sup> By January of 1936, however, Reuben’s prized legislative achievement was already in danger of becoming a victim of the Horner-Kelly feud. The Mayor, eager to undermine Horner and gain leverage, had his men in the State Senate team up with the Republicans to propose a series of surprise amendments during a special session of the General Assembly to take control of the pension funds away from the State administration and into the ready hands of county officials (who were in turn controlled by the Mayor’s political machine).<sup>338</sup> Not only did these “home rule” amendments expose the pension payments to likely corruption, but it put the bill at odds with national standards, jeopardizing federal subsidies that were to constitute half of the Act’s funding.<sup>339</sup>

When Reuben heard the news he was beside himself with anger. These amendments were “not for the purpose of doing something for the aged people, but for the purpose of doing something to them,” he bitterly mused, “and the first special session has been working very hard to destroy the Illinois old age security bill,

which was enacted into law during the regular session of the general assembly.<sup>340</sup> His dismay only grew as the General Assembly further undermined his bill's funding, benefits and protections. Of course, all this had nothing to do with serving aged citizens and everything to do with politics. Republican vs. Democrat, upstate vs. downstate, Illinois Governor vs. Chicago Mayor—political factions were simply using the pension fight to beat each other bloody, grinding away at the bill in the process. The end result was a near-endless carnival act of late-night theatrics, pandering, and chaotic roll calls which House Speaker John P. Devine called the worst he'd ever experienced, complaining "I've never seen a session that accomplished so little. You've spent three months quarreling about nothing!"<sup>341</sup> In the end, the naked horse-trading produced an overwhelming alliance of Kelly-backed Democrats and Republicans who passed the "revised" Old Age Assistance Act over the Governor's veto by a vote of 35 to 1 in the Senate and 122 to 8 in the House.<sup>342</sup>

Reub was one of those eight votes. Frustrated and outraged, Reub publicly warned that the new legislation wouldn't pass federal muster, delaying and limiting benefits.<sup>343</sup> His warnings proved prescient. That summer the federal government found the new Illinois Old Age Pension Act insufficient, sending the legislature into a financial panic.<sup>344</sup> Reuben used the opportunity to campaign for a new bill undoing the worst damage. "If you fail to pass this bill," he warned his fellow representatives, "it simply will mean cutting in half every old age pension in the state and there's no sense in that."<sup>345</sup> While Reuben succeeded in restoring funds, he was far from satisfied. Many of his most innovative measures, such as his \$5,000 estate exemption, remained cut from his groundbreaking bill. He vowed to continue the fight, declaring that August that "the old age pension act must be restored to what it was before the raid that was made upon it in the first special session of the General Assembly. That raid practically reduced the original act to half of what it was."<sup>346</sup>

The entire fiasco left Reuben disgusted and physically ill. This was not the Assembly that he knew. The legislators he'd known were statesmen. Yes, he'd fought fierce battles and faced committed opposition, but at least those were ideological fights and opponents. This Assembly, in contrast, appeared awash in petty jealousy and avarice, torn not just by partisanship but what Soderstrom called "the struggle for supremacy between Democratic party factions."<sup>347</sup> They argued over nothing and traded for less, using the rights of citizens as their coin. By the end of the session Reuben had become convinced that this was no longer his chamber. If he was going to effect change, he realized, it wouldn't be from the House floor.

### *Reuben Works With IMA*

With the House descending into factional bickering, Reuben began looking elsewhere for an effective partner. He found one in the most unlikely of places. Since the beginning of his life in labor, Reuben had been plagued by the Illinois Manufacturers' Association (IMA). From the era of JM Glenn and the fight against injunctions to the current days of Donnelly and his crusade against the New Deal, Soderstrom had seen the IMA and its parent organization, the National Manufacturers' Association (NMA), as implacable foes. It was a fight that had developed an increasingly fervent tone, as the Association took to attacking the patriotism of labor and even the President. In speeches and op-eds, they repeatedly attempted to smear New Deal and pro-labor legislation as "nothing but collectivism, Fascism, Socialism, Nazism, or Communism—all members of the same family."<sup>348</sup> According to historian Alfred Kelly:

In the eyes of the Association, these measures considered as a whole constituted a concerted attack upon the American system of government and the American institution of private property, which it was determined to resist with every means at its disposal. It was its conviction that Congress might better concern itself with some plan "for suppressing Communistic and other subversive propaganda," and in accordance with this view it recommended in May, 1935 the adoption of a "rigid anti-sedition law." The Association also rallied all its members to the support of Constitution Day in October, in the belief that the constitution was the chief guarantee against the "tyranny of dictatorship."<sup>349</sup>

Labor pushed back, calling the Association's dispersions the true attack on the American system. The NMA's statements were "open declarations of war" on the President, and the unions of America were ready to come to his defense. As the United Mine Workers of America editorialized in their Journal:

Big business has openly declared war against President Roosevelt. It is not a veiled threat on the part of big business. Instead, it is an open declaration that anyone can understand...leaders of the National Manufacturers' Association declared that the association was now at war against the President and that it would be at war to the hilt. The National Manufacturers' Association is the most notorious anti-union labor aggregation in the United States. It is opposed to all labor unions and opposed to unionism in general. Among its members are practically all of those captains of industry and big employers who have tried for years to kill the organized labor movement...

All right, gentlemen. You have declared war on the President and all those who approve of his policies. You have declared war against labor and against the entire mass of common people of this nation. Labor and the common people accept the challenge. There are more than 11,000,000 people out of work in this country, and you have declared war against them, too, because in your declaration of war you make no provision for them to work and live. Under the leadership of President Roosevelt, these 11,000,000 unemployed are being cared for and kept from starving. You propose to take away that relief and let these people go hungry. Now, you just wait till Election Day and see what those 11,000,000 people do to you at the polls.

Gentlemen of the National Manufacturers' Association, you have made a colossal blunder in declaring war against the President, against labor and against the common people.<sup>350</sup>

Still, despite the animosity and name-calling (particularly at the national level), there were budding signs of local cooperation. The first occurred after the passage of the national Wagner Act. Donnelly and his counterpart at the Chamber of Commerce reached out to Reuben, hoping to gain his support in working to modify parts of the national legislation. There were some pieces of the Act that the IMA knew labor was opposed to, and they sought a conference to discuss the possibility of finding common ground. Reuben agreed, provided he could bring his trusted friend and advisor, ISFL Secretary Victor Olander. Donnelly approved, and shortly thereafter the parties met in Peoria. Reuben later described the encounter:

Well, the conference was underway and Olander was in attendance and they began to talk about this labor relations act. Olander outlined the situation, stated that it was based on the Railway Labor Act, and the objective was to minimize strikes, don't you see. And of course it had many good points. He talked to them about the possibility of having things run smoother in industry because of this type of legislation in that delightful Olander-esque way of talking. He seemed to have them hypnotized. And finally he said, "of course the day is coming when we'll want a small Wagner Act in the State of Illinois and when that time comes, of course we'd like to discuss the features of that act with the representatives of the employers. Until such time, however, we in Illinois have very little to do with federal legislation, it's in the hands of the AFL and their officers. But until such time, there isn't much that we can do about it. We'll be delighted and happy to sit with you folks to work out the proper kind of little Wagner Act in the state of Illinois." Olander had this way of almost hypnotizing people, and I could see them nodding their heads and agreeing with him, because he was reasoning, constantly reasoning. And his type of reasoning was so engaging that he had the floor about all the time we were in the conference.

And so the meeting finally broke up and I thought I'd be polite to the people that represented the Chamber of Commerce and the Manufacturers' Association and I walked them down to the door of the hotel to say goodbye. When I got down there the leader of their crowd, he began to laugh. He said, "Well, this is great.

We came down here hoping to make use of the representatives of labor to get rid of a portion of the Wagner Labor Relations Act on the national level, (but) I'm damned if we don't sit here and agree to extend the darn thing into the state of Illinois!"<sup>351</sup>

The conference failed to form any lasting alliance on the issue of the Wagner act, either nationally or on the state level. It did, however, start an important precedent. A door had opened between the representatives of labor and their employers. They had stopped demagoguing and began a dialogue. These meetings instilled a mutual respect, a new cordiality that led IMA Director Sewell Avery to formally invite Reuben to their thirty-eighth Annual Dinner. "We would very much like to have you attend this dinner as the guest of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association," he wrote to Reuben that year. "We will be grateful if you will notify us at your earliest convenience whether we may have the privilege of your presence at that occasion."<sup>352</sup>

Warmer relations eventually led to important action. In 1935 the State Supreme Court had undone 24 years of safety legislation by ruling the Occupational Disease Act unconstitutional. The decision to peel away this basic protection was devastating to working men and women, and soon righting the wrongs of "Black Wednesday" (as the day of the ruling came to be called) became a top priority of labor. Shortly after the regular legislative session ended, Reuben spoke with Governor Horner about the possibility of working outside the confines of the Assembly to reach a solution. Horner agreed, and had Director of Labor Martin Durkin establish a joint committee. Reuben negotiated for labor while Chairman Angsten of the Industrial Commission represented the administration's interests. To sit for the employers, Soderstrom suggested the representatives of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association. The IMA agreed to the talks, and before long this joint committee quietly began to get to work. "While it is not generally known, representatives of industry have been holding conferences for approximately seven months, trying to agree on adequate occupational disease and health, safety and comfort legislation," Reuben later reported to his fellow laborers. "Representatives of the employers and their legal counsel, representatives of the Illinois State Federation of Labor and their attorneys in the above mentioned conferences were able to draft legislation designed to meet the objections of the Illinois Supreme Court."<sup>353</sup>

When Governor Horner called a third special session of the Illinois legislature that February, Soderstrom took advantage of the opportunity, passing new occupational disease legislation based on the joint negotiations. The main bill, House Bill 10, provided for a "Workman's Occupational Disease Act" very similar to the Workmen's Compensation legislation. To satisfy employers, the Act was elective, meaning companies could choose whether or not they wanted to be covered. If they chose not to be, however, they could be subject to suits and damages, and would be deprived of the common law defense that employees assumed a level of responsibility for workplace risk. It also improved upon the old law by doing away with lists of approved and non-approved diseases. As Reuben wrote, "The act is thus a combination of the compensation theory and the right to sue. It provides for general coverage of occupational diseases and is not limited by any schedule or list of diseases."<sup>354</sup> At the ISFL convention later that year, Reuben was quick to focus on the benefits the act would bring to the working men and women of Illinois. "It will put thousands of dollars into the pockets of workers that could not reach their pockets without it. It means that those who might become afflicted by an occupational disease will receive the same benefits in the future as if they actually suffered an accidental injury. The minute a doctor says a patient is disabled he will receive the same compensation as if he were injured."<sup>355</sup>

Even more importantly, the dialogue started between Reub and his counterparts at the IMA, moderated by government representatives, had helped to create a new process that brought order to an increasingly broken legislative system. It helped labor and employers to find common ground where they could. Despite the dysfunction in Springfield, Reub had found a new way forward.

## ILLINOIS UNITES AS NATION DIVIDES

### *The CIO Is Born*

While relations with employers were coming together (at least on the state level), the ties binding labor continued to tear. Long simmering tensions had come to a boil the previous year at the AFL conference in Atlantic City, culminating in the creation of the Committee for Industrial Organizations. The struggle was both ideological and personal. While there unquestionably was a divide between those who wanted to continue organizing by craft and those seeking to unionize along industrial lines, it was the personal fight between the upstart United Miners President John L. Lewis and the AFL establishment led by William Green that drove the argument to the brink of secession. “The split between the CIO and A.F. of L. flowed from substantive issues,” explains historian Melvyn Dubofsky, but “the clash between Lewis and Green derived from more personal and psychological roots. Lewis had cast aspersions on Green’s manhood, no small insult to an ex-coal miner... Thus Green’s intransigence about the CIO perhaps derived more from a need to assert his manhood and equality with Lewis than from the substantive issues in dispute.”<sup>356</sup>

By 1936 this feud threatened to rend labor in two. In the wake of the 1935 AFL convention, Lewis and his CIO had vowed to take any industrial union it organized and “bring them under the banner and in affiliation with the American Federation of Labor.”<sup>357</sup> Green and the Federation’s leadership, however, distrusted Lewis, and quickly moved against the organization. In January of 1936, the AFL Executive Council took action against the CIO, sending a memorandum to all AFL members that read in part:

1. That, in accordance with the laws of the American Federation of Labor, you are required to recognize and support the organization plans and policies adopted by the Atlantic City convention of the American Federation of Labor.
2. The authority of the American Federation of Labor over state federations of labor, city central bodies and directly chartered federal labor unions is supreme. For this reason these organizations, chartered directly by the American Federation of Labor, cannot give allegiance, assistance or support to the Committee on Industrial Organization or any other organization which attempts to usurp functions of the American Federation of Labor.
3. The Executive Council cannot and will not permit division and discord to divide the forces of the American Federation of Labor represented in state federations, city central bodies and federal labor unions which are subordinate to and directly under the supervision and control of the American Federation of Labor.<sup>358</sup>

The heavy-handed nature of the Executive Council’s decree underscored the personal animosity at play. In relying on their authority, and not on the merits of their argument, Green and his cohort played right into Lewis’ hands. He wanted to portray the AFL leadership as dictatorial and out-of-touch, and by issuing statements stressing their “supreme” authority and what they would and would not “permit,” the Council only fed that perception. Lewis took advantage of the moment, using Green’s scorn as fuel for his growing fire. In the summer of 1936 the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel, and Tin Workers rejected a proposed organizing campaign from the AFL Executive Council and instead accepted an offer from Lewis and affiliated with the CIO. The Automobile Workers and Rubber Workers soon followed. Outmaneuvered, the Executive Council again fell back on its legal authority, holding hearings on the charges that:

1. The CIO is a dual organization within the AFL. The specified 12 organizations are engaged in supporting that dual organization.

2. By doing so each of the organizations has violated the contract it made with the AFL when it accepted a certificate of affiliation.
3. The CIO is acting in violation of the policies established at the AFL's 1935 convention.<sup>359</sup>

On August 5, 1936, the council formally suspended 10 of the 12 unions, with the exception of the Hatters, Cap, and Millinery Workers and Reub's International Typographers Union, as their Presidents declared they were acting as individuals and not on behalf of their unions.

### *Reuben Unites ISFL behind FDR*

Reuben found the entire drama playing out on the national scene to be small-minded and destructive, driven by personal animosity and hurtful to working men and women. "I've watched this fight develop for years," he told one reporter. "Until recently it was a fight among officers of the federation. Now it is affecting the rights of working people. It is all so foolish."<sup>360</sup> Reub committed to do all he could to preserve unity. Despite the Council's decision, he sat Lewis' UMWA and the other CIO union delegates at the Illinois State Federation of Labor Convention in Quincy and allowed resolutions in support of industrial unions to be heard, reasoning that the Executive Council's expulsion "could have no effect until the suspension is approved by the annual A.F. of L. convention, scheduled for Tampa, Fla., in December."<sup>361</sup>

Reuben knew the national spotlight would be on the convention in Quincy, Illinois. With 500 craft union representatives and another 200 delegates from unions facing suspension, the convention hall was a tinderbox. While Lewis, a Springfield resident and former member of the Illinois Miners Union, cast a long shadow, all eyes (and reporters) would be trained squarely on Soderstrom. Reuben was both a state representative and a member of the ITU, a union whose President endorsed the CIO while the organization itself remained with the AFL. This unique set of circumstances allowed "Soderstrom to act as a mediator between Lewis supporters and those opposed to the Lewis plan, although federation leaders anticipate[d] a knock-down, drag-out fight in Quincy."<sup>362</sup>

Reuben worked hard to make sure that wouldn't happen. While acknowledging that he anticipated "some strong discussion" and a "most interesting" convention, Soderstrom emphasized that he believed the ISFL would emerge united. He laid the groundwork for a meeting of reconciliation, publicly stating before the convention's start:

The strength of any labor organization is unity. If this fight continues we may even go as far as to see two national federations—one for skilled workers favoring craft unions, and the other of unskilled workers favoring organization by industry...There is a place for both industrial and craft unions. There are many makes of automobiles, greatly different in performance, appearance, and ability, but nonetheless they are all automobiles. So in this fight. Whether craft or industrial, labor organizations are still unions and should stay together. If the question comes to the floor of the state convention, I expect to tell the delegates the same views.<sup>363</sup>

The question of course did arise, and Reuben handled it with a mix of soaring oratory and realpolitik. In his opening remarks, the president avoided attacking the CIO or even directly mentioning the conflict, instead calling on the delegates to "hold fast" to labor's foundations:

I have made some sacrifices for this movement. As a spokesman for labor I have heard discussion in high places the question of occupational disease, the problems of accidental death, in an atmosphere where human life seemed to be as cheap as the air we breathe. I naturally have some care for the welfare of the plain people and for the future of my state and nation. And yet I have an abiding faith, I have a dream that when I turn my eyes



to behold my flag for the last time I shall see it still waving over the land, still waving over the sea, still waving over the happiest and freest and most enlightened people under the sun.

And friends, that dream can be realized if we hold fast to the principles of those who laid the foundations of our free institutions, if we hold fast to the principles of those who laid the foundations for the formation of this great labor movement of ours, a labor movement that has been called upon again, and again, and again during this depression to safeguard, protect, and defend our free institutions. God bless the labor movement of our country, because I believe it has done much to save America!<sup>364</sup>

Reuben's efforts did not appease some, most notably Illinois United Mine Workers President Ray Edmundson, who sought to stir trouble with a resolution endorsing Lewis and his actions.<sup>365</sup> A Lewis man through and through, Edmundson was described as a "faithful lieutenant" personally appointed by Lewis in 1935 to "keep the rebellious Illinois miners in line"<sup>366</sup> He shared many of his mentor's attributes, including his ego and belligerence. Unlike Green, however, Soderstrom refused to let his own ego get in the way. Instead, while engineering the rejection of the resolution on Lewis, he accepted another of Edmundson's resolutions—an endorsement of FDR. This was no small act; as Murphysboro's Daily Independent noted, "In adopting the resolution, a copy of which was forwarded to President Roosevelt at Washington, the state federation broke a precedent of 54 years standing which had prohibited endorsement of political candidates."<sup>367</sup> The move was as ingenious as it was bold. By issuing such a groundbreaking endorsement, Reuben not only gave crucial support to the President he idolized at a critical moment; he also electrified labor, changing the narrative from one of conflict to one of unity. As newspapers reported from Quincy:

A demonstration that lasted for five minutes preceded adoption of the resolution endorsing Mr. Roosevelt. During the demonstration President R.G. Soderstrom and Secretary Olander of the State Federation acted as cheerleaders. The resolution stated President Roosevelt "is the real proponent of the real purpose of the American Constitution. His enemies are its enemies." It urged the federation's "consistent membership and all liberty-loving citizens" to aid in re-electing Mr. Roosevelt.<sup>368</sup>

In the end, there was no knock-down, drag-out fight in Quincy. Instead the delegates gave a public show of unity, a message to all those who threatened the unity of labor—whether they be politicians, employers, or their own leadership—that they were singular in purpose. The representatives issued a unanimous declaration "amid the cheers of the delegates in attendance at the largest convention ever held by the Illinois State Federation of Labor" which read in part:

It is our opinion that all concerned within our labor movement are actuated by good motives... It is our judgment that the problem could be worked out within the ranks of the American Federation of Labor...It is our opinion that the whole problem is largely one of administration, daily effort, and work, and management. Discussion and conferences between leaders, the exercise of tolerance and patience, a calm interchange of opinions and views, various possible forms of experimental activities, and in general a closer contact between the leaders of our various organizations within the American Federation of Labor, rather than defiance on one hand and penalties on the other would lead to workable plans to which all might give whole-hearted cooperation....

We not only request, but urge, the representatives of the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor and the trade union officials now comprising the Committee for Industrial Organization to consult and confer with one another for the purpose of developing some agreeable arrangement that will increase rather than diminish unity of the union movement and that will effectuate the desire of all concerned to extend trade union organization among all classes of workers in the United States. In conclusion, we express the opinion that the vast majority of the trade unionists in the State of Illinois desire to and will remain loyal to the American

## REUBEN WINS ACCLAIM, LOSES ELECTION

### *Soderstrom Advances On The National Stage*

Unfortunately, Reuben's call for unity went unheeded by the national leadership of both the AFL and the CIO. Unlike Soderstrom, Green refused to seat delegates affiliated with the CIO at their annual convention that November, where the vote on their ultimate fate was to be held. Reuben, who attended the convention, reported on the event:

At three o'clock in the afternoon the long-awaited report of the Resolutions Committee was begun. John P. Fey, head of the Metal Trades department...accused the rebels of attempting to wreck organized labor. The newspaper guild wanted the suspension dropped. So did the teachers. Some charged the federation with high-handed tactics by not permitting CIO representation in the convention. The discussion lasted from three o'clock in the afternoon until after midnight with two hours out for supper.

It would have continued all night except for President Green who, shaking with emotion, made a final plea for the Federation to stand together...He charged the John L. Lewis faction with flaunting the will of the majority...He told how he had been humiliated "for trying to save a great movement. But, my friends, I would do anything to preserve unity. I have got on my knees. I have silently suffered from insult. I would suffer again if I could save the movement."

As Green spoke the clock crawled past midnight. When he sat down, almost breathless, the delegates rose in a body, milling and shouting "Question-question!" It was fully five minutes before Green, pounding the gavel, was able to restore order.<sup>370</sup>

In the end, the convention delegates (which did not include representatives from unions under sanction) approved the action of the Executive Council, suspending ten CIO unions with a membership of over a million for "insurrection." Labor was now officially at war with itself.

The convention and its actions did bring some good news for Reuben, however. Victor Olander, Reuben's close confidant and a fixture on the AFL's powerful resolutions committee, lost his seat when he resigned as Secretary-Treasurer from the beleaguered Seamen's International Union. In his place, the labor elder nominated Soderstrom, who for the last five years had been serving on the Education Committee. AFL leadership agreed, promoting Reuben for the 1936 convention.<sup>371</sup> It was a huge step; now Reuben would be working intimately with the likes of AFL Executive Council Members Matthew Woll and John Frey, who acted as Chair and Secretary, respectively. He would help set AFL policies, crafting the AFL's agenda and voice.

As Reuben's influence in the national labor movement grew, so did his involvement in the national political landscape. In the heat of the 1936 Presidential election, Reuben took unprecedented steps to demonstrate labor's support for Roosevelt and his New Deal. Of all of his efforts that year, however, one event in particular stood apart—a labor rally for the President that would shift his political fortunes both within the key battleground state and throughout the Midwest in the crucial closing weeks of the election. Reuben's "Meeting at the Madhouse" would prove a political event for the ages.

### *The "Meeting at the Madhouse"*

Olga could barely contain her excitement. True, much had changed since her childhood days in Streator when she sat at the station, eagerly awaiting her big brother's return. At 39, she was now a mature mother and wife, living out her days in the serene quiet of Kankakee. Still, waiting there on the Santa Fe platform with Reuben and his family in the early hours of October 14, 1936, she felt herself transported back to those early days, bounding with excitement as the train to Chicago approached. This was no ordinary trip; today she was going to see the President.

When they finally arrived at the Dearborn station, Olga, Reuben, and his family were warmly (if hurriedly) greeted by brother Lafe and his eldest daughter Esther. A typographer like Reub, Lafe was also a rising star in the world of Chicago labor, a member of that city's powerful Executive Council. He had helped Reuben plan for this, their most ambitious event yet – a gigantic labor rally in the heart of Chicago to welcome their hero, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in these crucial final weeks of his presidential campaign.

The stakes couldn't have been higher. Although the 1936 election ended in a landslide, at that moment a Roosevelt victory seemed anything but certain. "Various pre-election polls and most political forecasters of merit agree that the presidential election is going to be close," noted the Oshkosh Daily Northwestern just the day before.<sup>372</sup> The situation was even worse in the critical state of Illinois, where the polls had Republican challenger Governor Alfred Landon beating FDR by 52%-48%.<sup>373</sup> Landon's choice for Vice President, *Chicago Daily News* publisher Frank Knox, gave the Republicans an added advantage in the state. Just five days earlier, Landon had held his own rally in the Windy City, large crowds braving the heavy rain to cheer his parade along Michigan Avenue as it made its way to the Congress Hotel.<sup>374</sup> That evening the Governor spoke to a packed house at Chicago Stadium (also known as the "Madhouse at Madison"), his audience spilling over into the rain outside, promising to bring an end to the New Deal.<sup>375</sup>

Now it was the President's turn. He had to strike back with an event of his own that beat Landon's showing. If he failed, the perception of weakness could doom his chances of capturing the state and its 29 electoral votes. It was in this crucial moment that the President turned to his greatest ally – organized labor. Reuben's ISFL had already gone to unprecedented lengths to demonstrate its support for FDR, giving a presidential endorsement for the first time in its history that September. Now Illinois labor went even further, taking the lead for the President's reception at Chicago's Grant Park and subsequent parade to the stadium. Soderstrom and his colleagues promised an escort of more than 35,000 union workers "wearing the garbs of their crafts" to accompany Roosevelt on his two-mile march.<sup>376</sup> They boasted to the press that they anticipated a crowd of over 100,000 to welcome him.<sup>377</sup>

They were wrong. As Reuben and his family approached Grant Park that day, they found not a crowd of 100,000, but of nearly 1,000,000 men, women, and children, all eager to cheer the President.<sup>378</sup>

Olga couldn't believe her eyes. Surveying the seemingly endless sea of supporters, she saw a beautifully muddled mix of class, color, and costume, all united in celebration. The rapture was deafening; Reuben and Lafe could barely hear State Attorney Thomas Courtney's welcome as they made their way to the front. She basked in the jubilant circus, the fervor catching like contagion, pushing all differences and divisions to the wayside. Even Governor Horner and Cook County part chairman Pat Nash, longstanding political enemies, cast aside their rivalry in this moment of welcome. Olga watched entranced as Reub and Lafe began making the rounds, shaking hands and setting the final preparations.

Just then a roar unlike anything she'd ever heard overtook the park. "He's here! He's here!" Esther began to shout, her normally reserved manner overwhelmed by a childlike enthusiasm. Olga turned to see the president's motorcade approach, ready to lead the frenzied throng. The crowd began to follow, creating a spectacle unlike anything Reuben's sister had ever seen. According to UP White House Correspondent

Frederick Storm:

All the trappings of a No. 1 political rally were turned loose as [Roosevelt] drove through the streets to the Chicago Stadium...At frequent intervals bands blared "Happy Days" and "Thanks a Million." Customers flocked from taverns, perched on piles of beer kegs and waved foaming glasses and steins. Parade dress varied from Sunday best to overalls. Ariel bombs, colored lights, red fire and placards emblazoned the route.<sup>379</sup>

As the rowdy procession descended upon the Chicago Stadium, it erupted into an ecstatic chaos worthy of the "Madhouse on Madison." Storm continues:

At least 200,000 tried to jam into the stadium with its 25,000 capacity, to the dismay of 1,500 policemen who finally gave it up for a bad job and "let the best man win." Two stadium ushers were knocked unconscious in the crush. Four policemen were cut and bruised trying to control the surging crowd or to rescue men and women who fainted. Ten men and women required first aid after collapsing in the melee. In the end, the stadium was jammed to overflowing.<sup>380</sup>

The pandemonium began to quiet as the opening speakers addressed the crowd. Pat Nash, Governor Horner, Senator H.J. Lewis and State Attorney Courtney all gave rousing addresses to both energize and focus the crowd. Finally, it came time to hear from the evening's host—R.G. Soderstrom, the voice of Illinois labor. Leaving his family in Lefe's care, Reub took a deep breath and pushed forward toward the platform. Olga watched the spectacle in wonder. Decades later, she was still able to recall it with perfect clarity, writing:

The mass of humanity at this meeting was almost beyond anyone's imagination. Reub had difficulty getting through the crowds. People were out in the streets and the hall was crowded beyond capacity. By the time he reached the podium his clothes were ruffled, his shirt torn, hair mussed, and his tie askew. He was greeted by F.D.R. When introduced, he gave a rousing endorsement for the re-election of President Roosevelt.<sup>381</sup>

Of course, Reuben wasn't only president of the ISFL. He was also a sitting Republican legislator. His endorsement of the Democratic nominee for President was sure to cost him in the coming election. Still, Reuben felt a moral duty to stand publicly in support of Roosevelt. "These were depression years," Olga continues, "and we had a brilliant President anxious to bring our nation back to prosperity, and Reub felt F.D.R. could do this deed."<sup>382</sup>

Reuben's rally was an unprecedented success. In the wake of Roosevelt's visit Illinois began to swing firmly into the Democratic column. By the time the ballots were counted, Roosevelt had taken the state with a whopping 57.7% of the vote, beating his Republican rival by an even larger margin than he had in 1932! However, this victory was, for Reuben, bittersweet. His actions on FDR's behalf carried a heavy cost—the seat he had held for nearly 16 years.

### ***Reuben Loses His Seat***

Reuben always knew his support of FDR would cost him Republican votes. In a normal election year, this honestly wouldn't have bothered him much. After all, Reuben had always been known as a political maverick who relied on the independent vote (and even a share of the Democratic) in the general election. By October, Reuben was well past the primaries where he traditionally faced his fiercest opposition. Besides, he had done much for his constituents, earning the respect of those he represented as well as his peers. As his colleague Rep. Thomas J. Lenane, who sat on the Democratic side of the aisle, told those assembled at the ISFL convention later that year, "I have worked in the House... with your President Soderstrom, and I can say this for him, he is one of the finest, one of the most conscientious and honest members of the House. I will say for

Reub..... that whenever I want to know about anything and am a little too dull about it, I can go to the other side of the House and say, 'Reub, how about this?' and Reub will tell me it's all okay."<sup>383</sup>

This was no normal election, however. This year, instead of nominating two candidates for the 39th district as they had always done, the Republicans decided to place three names on the ballot. Publicly, the party professed optimism that they could perform a "clean sweep" of the traditionally Republican district, taking all three seats.<sup>384</sup> The case for this, however, seemed dubious at best. The Democrats were only fielding two candidates, one of whom was an incumbent. Further, the Democrats had nearly taken two of the three seats in the last election, when they faced only two Republican challengers. Spreading their share of the vote amongst three candidates almost guaranteed a loss.

Given this, it seems more likely that the Republican leadership was looking to lose. For the last several years Reuben, always an outsider, had increasingly been viewed by Republican leadership as a "lame duck," a political animal unwilling to fly in formation and unable to take direction. His endorsement of FDR was the clearest signal yet to the establishment that Reub had to go. By nominating three candidates the leadership could do in the general election what they'd failed to do in primary contests for the last fourteen years—defeat Soderstrom.

Their plan worked. For the first time in a generation, the Democrats won two of the three House seats in La Salle County. Reub left the Statehouse as he entered it: an independent, a maverick, beholden to no man or party. He was a legislator no more, nor would he be again. He would have to find a new way forward.

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# INJUNCTION LIMITATION UPHELD

In early 1936 the State Supreme Court reaffirmed Reub's injunction limitation law of 1925 when it upheld the Cook County Circuit Court's decision not to issue an injunction against labor's radio station WCFL for its support of Dental Lab Workers Union No. 19358. Boston Dentists, a non-union firm, had requested an injunction after a broadcast on WCFL informed listeners the company refused to engage in collective bargaining and should therefore not be patronized. The company claimed the broadcast was libelous and intended to intimidate potential customers. Although an initial restraining order had been issued, Judge Klarkowski of the Circuit Court of Cook County subsequently dissolved the injunction on the grounds an equity court has no authority to enjoin a libel claim. The State Supreme Court agreed; as Justice John Sullivan of the Supreme Court stated in his opinion:

Neither the public generally, nor the members or friends of organized labor were coerced, intimidated or frightened by anything contained in the broadcast. No threats of violence were made against either plaintiff, its business or property... it is not unlawful for a labor organization, in a labor broadcast, to express freely its honest opinion as to the fairness or unfairness of the attitude of an employer toward organized labor, and it is not unlawful that such broadcasts contain advice to the public and friends of organized labor not to patronize such employer.<sup>385</sup>

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# MANUFACTURERS BATTLE THE NLRA

1935 had been a good year for Illinois workers. Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) guaranteed employees the legal right to organize for the first time, and Reuben's Federation had used this protection to its fullest advantage. By 1936 Illinois led the nation in industrial activity and union density. According to a report issued by the AFL, 10% of all goods manufactured in the United States were made in Illinois, and 10% of all organized wage earners lived in Illinois. Reuben believed that number hinted at even greater potential:

There are another five hundred thousand wage-earners in Illinois who are eligible to join legitimate A.F. of L. trade unions and who do not belong... We have ten percent of the country's union membership—that is true—but if we had every organizable, employable wage-earner inside of some bona fide Illinois labor union it would mean this state would have nearly twenty percent of the present membership of the American Federation of Labor.<sup>386</sup>

However, these gains brought challenges of their own. A host of lawsuits were launched against the NLRA as companies sought to stop the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) from intervening on behalf of workers' rights. Thankfully, appeals courts upheld the constitutionality of the NLRA, writing, "This act does not hamper the legitimate rights of the employer who may discharge his employees for inefficiency or any other cause agreeable to him, provided he does not use the power to discharge as a weapon for interfering with the right of employees to organize and bargain collectively."<sup>387</sup>

Organized business pushed back hard, with Illinois and its powerful Manufacturers Association leading the charge. Owners took particular offense at the idea that they were legally compelled to treat their workers with dignity. As Gus W. Dyer, a professor of economics and sociology at Vanderbilt University, articulated at a lecture to the Employers' Association of Chicago that year:

Moral obligations have no place in the industrial field in settling industrial questions. When you have paid your men the price fixed by the law of supply and demand for their services, you do not owe them another penny, not another penny. They have no right under the sun to demand a single penny from you when you have paid them that price. But some economists will tell you and reformers will say, "Yes, but when you are dealing with men you are dealing with human beings. Dealing with commodities is another thing." My friends, there is not a single fundamental difference between dealing with men as employees and commodities.<sup>388</sup>

ISFL mounted a strong rhetorical and legal response, charging that Dyer's case was both immoral and illegal. As Olander wrote in the pages of the *Weekly Newsletter*:

The theory that "men as employees" are simply so much raw material, like bales of cotton or bushels of corn, is simply the old outlawed theory of chattel slavery... the hidden philosophy of Dyer and his crowd. It is worse than anything ever advocated by any political dictators, whether communist or fascist. It is as unfair, as ruthless, as immoral, and as un-American as anything I can think of.<sup>389</sup>

As for the constitutionality of the NLRA, Olander pointed to the Thirteenth Amendment of the US Constitution, which barred involuntary servitude. As he quoted from the US Supreme Court:

The plain intention of the labor article is to make labor free by prohibiting that control by which the personal

service of one man is disposed of or coerced for other's benefit, which is the essence of involuntary servitude...The Supreme Court has pointed out that the term "involuntary servitude" has a wider meaning than the word "slavery."<sup>390</sup>

The NLRA—and the reactions to it—drew a clear line between organized business and organized labor, and in the 1936 election voters overwhelmingly chose the side that believed morality did have a role to play in industry. The public affirmed what the courts had proclaimed earlier that year, that working men and women were indeed deserving of dignity and respect. In the words of Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, speaking before the delegates of the AFL Convention in Tampa, Florida, shortly after the re-election of President Roosevelt:

The vote of the people on November 3 is perfectly clear, that the people are committed to a policy of advanced civilization, and it must be an inclusive civilization, to include all people, not one for the benefit of the few at the expense of many... we will have to think of cooperation between employers and employees and they never can be real without an equal bargaining power.<sup>391</sup>



## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# THE WALSH-HEALEY ACT

The Roosevelt administration enacted several important pieces of pro-organized labor legislation during 1936. The Walsh-Healey Act, which went into effect on September 28, set hour and wage standards applicable for those making goods produced under a federal government contract. Any business bidding on a federal government contract had to agree to the 8-hour day, the 40-hour week, had to document that no convict or child labor had been employed to perform the work, and provide a clean, sanitary, and safe workplace. The government set the first industries to be studied as those with an historical record of paying below a living wage.<sup>392</sup> Crucially, the act put an end to the *de facto* encouragement of unfair labor practices by government through the awarding of lucrative contracts to abusive businesses. As Secretary of Labor Perkins explained:

The law fundamentally is designed to prevent the purchase of sweatshop goods by the government...Under the statute which compelled the government to deal with the lowest bidder regardless of his labor practices, the manufacturer who maintained decent labor conditions was at a disadvantage. Under this act a premium is no longer placed upon the exploitation of labor. The benefits to the workers... of a maximum of 40 hours per week, the prohibition of child labor and unsanitary conditions, and the minimum wage as a peg against the tendency of wages to fall below the level of a decent standard of living, will all be carefully safeguarded and developed.<sup>393</sup>

## PILLAR VIII

# WOMEN'S RIGHTS: THE WOMEN'S EIGHT-HOUR ACT

### EARLY ORIGINS

Of all the causes organized labor fought for, arguably none is more misunderstood today than the pursuit of equal rights for working women. For its contemporary advocates, the proposed Women's Eight-Hour Act wasn't just a protection of female health or well-being (although it certainly included those things); it was an active assertion by a vital and underrepresented part of the American workforce that they had a right to the same liberties and securities that their male counterparts already enjoyed. It was also labor's "toe in the door," a precedent establishing the right of laborers to be free from overwork. This fact was not lost on employers, who attacked the bill with more ferocity—and money—than any other single piece of pro-labor legislation. It was the crusade against women's labor protections that first caused employers in Illinois to organize, spawning the Illinois Manufacturers' Association.

For over a quarter of a century, this battle was waged with an uncanny regularity, argued in every session of the Illinois General Assembly from 1909 to 1937. But what was the Women's Eight Hour bill? How did it come to be so important, and what did it mean to the working women of Illinois? And how would Reuben take on this task?

### WHO WAS AFFECTED

It may seem odd to modern Americans that early progressives like Soderstrom sought bills creating special rules singling out working women. For many early feminists and their supporters, however, such legislation wasn't about treating women differently. Just the opposite; these bills sought to ensure fairness. In early twentieth century America, women often failed to receive equal protection under the law (this was, after all, a society that had only recently recognized the right of female suffrage). Many factory owners exploited this vulnerability by working female laborers far longer than men for considerably less pay. Reuben and his fellow progressives, including prominent social reformers like Jane Addams and Agnes Nestor, supported the Women's Eight Hour bill not because they believed that women should work less than men—in fact, Reuben and the Illinois State Federation of Labor (ISFL) supported hour limitation bills for all workers—but because they sought to empower them in the workplace.

From its earliest, the story of women at work in America is rife with tales of discrimination, scapegoating, and abuse. As early as 1820, employers were hiring women and children as a way to cut wages without shorting hours.<sup>394</sup> By 1837, women could be found in the workshops of over 100 different industries, largely forced into factory life by bouts of economic depression.<sup>395</sup> According to their own writings and testimony, these ladies routinely worked fourteen to sixteen hours a day—longer than their male peers—for less than two dollars a week. At that wage, many of them were "forced to abandon their virtue" simply to survive.<sup>396</sup> Social pariahs, these "factory girls" enjoyed few prospects and even fewer protections. The damp factory air was rife with disease, the "constant din of clattering looms" covering the "low, hollow cough [which] told that consumption was busy."<sup>397</sup> Others were maimed by machinery, their hands "mangled so that they could never

use them again.”<sup>398</sup> Those lucky enough to avoid such fates still had to deal with near-constant abuse from the factory overseer. “Oh, it gets worse and worse,” Miss B., a 20-year veteran of the factory system, told a reporter in 1844. “We are worried all the time—we live in fear of his abuse.”<sup>399</sup>

Over time, some working women began to organize. Many of these early unions, such as the Female Labor Reform Association, were formed specifically to establish limits on the women’s workday. Working in concert with working men’s associations, these groups secured 10-hour workday laws in some early states, but progress was slow and unsteady. They also shared a complicated relationship with their male counterparts, who tended to view them as competition. Despite this tension, the male-dominated American labor movement largely worked hand-in-hand with working women, particularly in the push for hour limitation laws. By 1900, thirteen states had laws limiting the hours of women in factories.<sup>400</sup>

Illinois had been one of the early adopters of women’s labor legislation. In 1892, the General Assembly, responding to pressure from the Illinois State Federation of Labor (ISFL) and Jane Addams of Hull House, enacted an Eight Hour Women’s bill. Its success was short-lived, however. Outraged employers formed the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association (IMA) specifically to undo the law. They took the law to court, and two years later the Illinois Supreme Court found it unconstitutional on the grounds that it violated the rights of women—who supported the law in overwhelming numbers—to freely make contracts with employers.<sup>401</sup>

Although the United States Supreme Court eventually reversed the Illinois Court’s decision in a related case, the IMA proved to be a lasting and powerful enemy. When the ISFL and the Women’s Trade Union League of Chicago jointly introduced a Women’s Eight Hour Limitation Bill in 1909, the IMA used all available resources to ensure its defeat. They launched a shrewd campaign, casting the bill as “class warfare legislation” designed to “harm our women employees by denying them the right to use their option in working overtime.”<sup>402</sup> While the IMA defeated the eight hour version of the bill, labor was still able to pass a compromise 10-Hour Limitation Act. Though better than nothing, the law offered precious little protection; a decade after its passage a full 67% of women in Illinois worked nine hours or more a day, and 45% of women worked more than 48 hours per week.<sup>403</sup>

These long hours were particularly burdensome on women, whose work often didn’t end when they left the factory floor. As reported in a study by the Women’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), “The investigation proved conclusively that married women and mothers of families return to their homes at the end of the day... to meet all those duties to which the average housewife devotes most of her day.”<sup>404</sup> The group of affected women was as diverse as it was large. They were young and old, involved in manufacturing, agriculture, and transportation.<sup>405</sup> By Reuben’s time, most of these women had no choice but to work. A 1928 US DOL analysis found that only a small percentage of women reported working out of a desire to follow a chosen occupation or simply to get out of the home. Most labored simply to provide the extra income needed to keep their families out of poverty (though still far below the “American Standard”).<sup>406</sup> Unmarried girls frequently gave their families their entire paychecks, only getting back what was left after the families’ needs were met.<sup>407</sup> For the majority of working women, these jobs were not an opportunity for empowerment but a consequence of oppression. They were forced to work extraordinary hours under terrible conditions for wages they would largely never see.

Such work was not only unfair but dangerous. A 1925 DOL study found that 10% of working women suffered permanent injuries on the job, most commonly the loss of digits. Of those injured, a full 80% had no choice but to return to the same employer that had harmed them, although a quarter of them were forced to do so for less pay. Worse still, a full fifth of those maimed were fired for their loss, as employers estimated they could earn more from “fresh meat.”<sup>408</sup>

Those who survived disfigurement by machines still faced danger from disease. The stale air, dank water, and lack of hygiene pushed communicable illnesses to near epidemic proportions. Women working the mills were twice as likely as their non-working counterparts to die from tuberculosis, and those who didn't die outright from disease frequently succumbed to its complications. The death rate for women in childbirth was several times greater among working women compared to those not confined to factories.<sup>409</sup> Unsurprisingly, these dangers followed women home. When a mother was forced to work grueling hours, the entire family often paid the price. DOL studies found the infant mortality rate among working mothers exceeded that of non-working mothers by over 40%.<sup>410</sup>

These problems weren't limited to urban environments. Although women laboring in big cities like Chicago received a lot of the media attention, small-town women often fared worse. Women who worked for wages in small mining towns, located in isolated sections of the state without access to "traditional" women's work, were largely reliant on factory jobs. A study by the Women's Bureau in 1921 discovered the problem of long hours for women had spread across the state from large cities into smaller areas.<sup>411</sup> Reub's hometown of Streator was not exempt from this epidemic. Many local women and girls worked at the Hoban factory, the telephone company, numerous department stores, and other jobs out of economic necessity. Very few belonged to a union or worked under the protection of a collective bargaining agreement.

## POLITICAL PARALYSIS

Given the burden this lack of women's workplace protections placed on so many Illinois families, it's hardly surprising that politicians of all stripes professed their support for the Women's Eight Hour bill. Various Illinois legislators from 1910 onward proposed various eight-hour laws. Some attempted to forbid any interstate commerce by Illinois companies that employed women more than eight hours a day; others tried to apply the law to selected industries. Both major political parties declared their support for eight hour bills. The 1916 Illinois Republican platform proclaimed, "We favor a further limitation for legal hours of labor for women."<sup>412</sup> Illinois Democrats followed suit with a party plank of their own, announcing, "We favor an eight hour day for all men and women engaged in industrial, non-agricultural employment, as a legal day's work."<sup>413</sup> Every legislative session, a Women's Eight Hour bill was introduced, some by Reuben himself.

Despite this wealth of professed support, the Women's Eight Hour bill failed to pass a single session of the General Assembly. For 27 years, the Illinois Manufacturers' Association used an effective mix of backroom meetings and public theatrics to repeatedly thwart the will of the majority of Illinois citizens. Whenever the bill came up for discussion, IMA Secretary JM Glenn would march a gang of (well-compensated) women up to Springfield to plead with legislators, claiming the bill would force them to work, and earn, less than they had a right to. This was typically followed by a series of employers who asserted such legislation would prove an "outrage on the liberties of the working women of this state which deprives them of the liberty of making a contract and robs them of a fifth of their earnings."<sup>414</sup> It was, they proclaimed, a law with "no practical necessity" that was "simply a professional labor issue."<sup>415</sup> Year after year, the IMA's message—that the Women's Eight Hour bill was a cynical tool of corrupt labor leaders pushing legislation that was radical, untested, unnecessary, and potentially harmful—never wavered.

Soderstrom, of course, rejected this argument outright. He denounced the hypocrisy of manufacturers who had no qualms about untested changes when they furthered their bottom line. "The eight hour day for women is far less radical...than the radical changes in the modern way of operating plants where womankind are employed," he wrote. He also called the assertion that any worker, male or female, was clamoring to work ten hours a day complete bunk. "No thoughtful person honestly believes that there is any need for a longer work day. In fact, the human family does not need stockings, shirts, clocks, telephone, restaurant, or hotel service bad enough to justify the employer working a woman more than eight hours a day."<sup>416</sup> As for dire

warnings that the bill would impact women in unforeseen and potentially disastrous ways, Reuben had a simple answer—the democratic system:

The Illinois legislature meets every two years. What is done in this session can be undone in the next legislative session. Surely an eight hour restriction...is sound enough to be given a trial. If the Women's Eight Hour bill proves detrimental to the womankind of Illinois they can amend the act back where it was before the eight hour proposal was enacted. If employers find the restriction impossible to bear they can fight for its repeal at a future session. Obviously, there can be no grave danger in trying out an eight-hour law for women.<sup>417</sup>

## THE WAY FORWARD

The Women's Eight Hour bill languished in the General Assembly for over a quarter century. Despite the combined efforts of the ISFL and the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), the bill's main sponsor, the General Assembly failed to further this essential protection. Women's Rights advocates struggled their entire lives for this cause, sadly passing before realizing their dream. By 1937, the torch first carried by early luminaries like Jane Addams and Mary McDowell had been passed down to a new generation of leaders such as Chicago WTUL President Agnes Nestor and Illinois WTUL President Mary Halas.

The legislative fight for this landmark bill grew even more complex after Soderstrom's 1936 ouster from the Illinois House. During his time in office, Reuben often worked alongside Representative Lottie O'Neil to pass bills affecting women, scouring the floor alongside her to secure votes. Although they had yet to pass the Women's Eight Hour bill through the Senate, they had successfully passed it through their own chamber. Now, without the advantage of his seat, Reuben would be unable to work the Illinois House floor at those crucial moments. Despite this, there was still much working in Soderstrom's favor. While his seat was gone, the 1937 legislature was more labor-friendly than it had ever been. Democrats held record majorities in the House and Senate, providing a golden opportunity for those seeking to pass the bill. Furthermore, while Soderstrom was not allowed on the floor himself, he still had lieutenants ready to act on his behalf. In many respects, Reuben's loss was labor's gain; free from his responsibilities in the House, Soderstrom could now give his full attention to the more problematic Senate.

Most importantly, Soderstrom had the support of working women across the state. By 1937, the women's movement was more energized and optimistic than ever before. Buoyed by the firm conviction that history was on their side, they acted with renewed enthusiasm and optimism. This "victory spirit" carried through in their speeches and marches, and could even be heard in their rallying songs. Pairing well-known tunes with activist lyrics, these little ditties offered a tongue-in-cheek celebration of the cause. One of the most popular of these, sung to "Working on the Railroad," illustrated both the longevity and wit of the cause:

We've been working down in Springfield  
Twenty-seven years  
We've been working down in Springfield  
Just to get the members' ears  
When the house would heed our story  
Some Senators were goats,  
Twenty-seven years we've labored,  
Just to get twenty-six votes!<sup>418</sup>

This year, Reuben declared, labor would win those twenty-six votes.

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# RALLY SONGS

On July 21, 1937, the Illinois State and Chicago Women's Trade Union Leagues held a celebratory dinner for the Women's Eight-Hour Act. The occasion included little ditties written especially for the event, sung to the tune of well-known melodies. Some of the songs included:

*Tune: "The Old Gray Mare"*

The twelve hour day it ain't what it used to be,  
Ain't what it used to be, Ain't what it used to be.  
The twelve hour day it ain't what it used to be  
Back in nineteen-nine.  
The ten hour day it ain't what it used to be,  
Ain't what it used to be, Ain't what it used to be.  
The ten hour day it ain't what it used to be  
Back in nineteen-nine.  
The eight hour day it ain't what we used to have,  
Ain't what we used to have, Ain't what we used to have.  
The eight hour day it ain't what we used to have  
But this is '37.

*Tune: "On Wisconsin"*

Agnes Nestor! Agnes Nestor!  
Fighting as of yore,  
Just that we may work eight hours  
She'll have time to play,  
We're here to cheer and cheer  
The eight hour day.

*Tune: "A Long, Long Trail"*

It's a long, long trail we've traveled  
Since the time that we knew  
When the weary hours of labor dragged the whole day through.  
Dragged the whole day through.  
'Twas for long, long years we struggled  
But our faith only grew,  
Now the fight is done, the vict'ry won,  
Our dream's come true.<sup>419</sup>

# CHAPTER 26

## 1937

### SODERSTROM CHARTS A NEW PATH FORWARD

*“No human power can permanently stop justice and right from developing, advancing and asserting itself because somehow Divine Power always sees to it that the urge forward, the summons for humanity’s march upward forever comes. It keeps calling and brave men and women of toil respond.”*

-Reuben Soderstrom  
1937 ISFL Convention

#### BUILDING A WINNING STRATEGY

In 1936, Reuben could not turn his back on the President. Under his leadership the ISFL endorsed a presidential candidate for the first time in its history, calling on “all liberty-loving citizens to aid in promoting the re-election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.”<sup>420</sup> When the polls showed FDR losing the crucial battleground of Illinois, Soderstrom didn’t hesitate to answer the call for help. He hosted a Democratic-labor march in the campaign’s closing weeks that drew hundreds of thousands. There he gave a rousing speech calling on all of Illinois to rally around the President. Afterwards, the polls began to shift. In the end, Roosevelt won Illinois; Soderstrom lost his district.

Reuben knew the price of his actions. The endorsement and rally would win him a few Democratic votes but was sure to drive away Republicans. It was political suicide; it was also, he believed, the right thing to do. As he told the labor delegates assembled at LaSalle September following his loss:

I appeared with (Roosevelt) on the same platform in Chicago at a great Democratic rally prior to November 3, 1936; and because I shared the platform with the President of the United States the enemies of labor came into my district and persuaded wage-earners to cut their own throats by voting for someone other than the President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor for the office of State Representative. I was compelled to make a personal political sacrifice, but the cause won.

I wouldn’t want a single delegate in this convention to feel badly about my personal defeat. After all, campaigns are something like a baseball game. Candidates who advocate the same cause are like baseball players who play on the same team. The President of the United States was on third base; nobody wanted him to die on third. I was at bat—it was up to me to make a sacrifice hit. I bunted the ball; they put me out on base, but the President of the United States scored and he carried, not only the State of Illinois, but every other state in the country with the exception of two New England States.<sup>421</sup>

In LaSalle County, the Republicans’ drive for purity cost them one of their most secure seats. In April of 1936, the party leadership, bitter after their failure to unseat Soderstrom in the primary, made the unprecedented decision to field three candidates in the general election for the 39th District’s representatives.

The choice ensured pro-labor Democrat Jeremiah Walsh became Reub's successor, giving that party control of the District for the first time in a generation.

Now Reuben had to decide. Would he spend the next two years preparing a run to reclaim his seat? Given his deep support, legislative connections, and the longstanding voting trends within his district, Reuben had a very good chance of reclaiming his role should he dedicate the coming year to that cause. But it would also mean taking time away from his ISFL Presidency, as well as running against a pro-labor Democrat. It also meant likely succumbing to a political process that had become increasingly factionalized. As the special sessions of 1936 demonstrated, legislation in the House and Senate was increasingly falling victim to petty power struggles. Regional, reformist, and intra-party fighting had stymied the Assembly, so disgusting Speaker of the House John Devine that he decided to retire at the end of the session rather than face it another year. A good friend of Reuben's, Devine encouraged him not to linger on the past but move forward. He saw in Soderstrom a man of both value and values, and advised him to maintain the former by keeping the latter.<sup>422</sup>

In the end, Reub decided not to run; but instead of walking away from the legislative process, he focused on it as never before, fully embracing his role as ISFL President. Reuben fully believed that the future of labor lay in the legislative process. "The status of labor in the United States, and thus also in Illinois, will undoubtedly be determined by legislation in the future to a greater degree than at any time during the past half century," he wrote that year. "The trend in this respect is unmistakable. It is apparent on all sides."<sup>423</sup>

Now released from the grunt work of introducing bills and whipping votes directly, Soderstrom could shape legislation behind the scenes, building and pushing a political agenda on and off the Assembly floor. No longer a statesman, he embraced the role of unabashed agitator, starting by marking 1937 as the year he would pass the last and perhaps most ambitious of his original aims: an 8-hour bill for women. To do that, however, Reub would need more than just increased focus or drive; he would need to build a whole new machine—an entirely new way of doing business.

## LABOR'S LEGISLATIVE SUCCESS

### *Soderstrom Adopts New Team, New Tactics*

First on Reub's agenda was choosing his successor as labor's voice in the house. Instead of picking a single leader, Reuben instead decided on a group of veteran legislators. They included Louis Lewis of Christopher, Frank Ryan and James Bole of Chicago, Hugh Cross of Jerseyville, William Lawler of Springfield, Robert H. Allison of Pekin, and Harry M. McCaskrin of Rock Island in the House and John Lee of Chicago and Richard Barr of Joliet in the Senate.<sup>424</sup> Composed of Republicans and Democrats, downstaters and Chicago boys, Soderstrom's team had representatives from every party and faction.

Reuben's team got an additional boost when one of their own, Louis Lewis, was put forward as a possible choice for House Speaker. Reuben wielded his considerable influence on Lewis's behalf, openly campaigning for his selection. When Lewis succeeded after a late surge of support, the local press declared him "Labor's Speaker" and credited Soderstrom as largely responsible for the win. Reuben did not try to hide his happiness, telling reporters that he was "tickled pink" over the House vote.<sup>425</sup>

As the 60th regular session of the Illinois legislature got under way, labor introduced its most ambitious agenda to date. Bills for a five-day week, unemployment insurance, and an 8-hour day for women were the largest pieces of a broad tapestry of initiatives brought by labor that also included changes in workman's compensation and old-age pensions, the outlawing of industrial espionage, injunction reform, and prevailing wage for public works, to name a few. Of course, introducing legislation was fairly straightforward; guiding it



through the legislature was the real test. Over the coming months Reuben would use a variety of tactics and forums—the press, personal persuasion, and his power over the rules of the legislature itself—to move his agenda through the divided legislature. Despite all odds, he would find a new way forward.

### *Wins Fair Hours for Women*

Of all the Reuben's struggles that year, none was more fraught than the battle for better working hours for women. This was, after all, the very legislation which Illinois labor's greatest nemesis, the Illinois Manufacturers' Association, had been created to oppose. For the last 44 years, the two organizations had danced the same jig; year after year the ISFL would sponsor legislation limiting the hours employers could require women to work to no more than eight per day, forty-eight per week. Year after year the IMA's influential membership wrote to their legislators, threatening, pleading, and warning financial ruin if women could not work endless hours. Year after year they sent carefully selected and well-rehearsed female employees before the Assembly to plead for the chance to work ten hour days without end, while groups of professional and moneyed women like the Illinois Federation of Women's Clubs objected that the proposed law was sexist and discriminatory.<sup>426</sup>

The Women's Eight Hour Bill had originated within the women's movement, specifically Florence Kelley and the female pioneers of Chicago's Hull House. Its strongest and most dedicated supporters included women's rights leaders and organizations like Agnes Nestor and the Women's Trade Union League. Unlike their wealthier counterparts, these advocates for working women understood that the bill was an attempt to create gender equality, not undermine it. Labor contracts in most "male" industries provided men with the hours protections that female workers, faced with crippling discrimination and job insecurity, could not win through negotiation alone. "It is travesty in my mind," said the bill's sponsor Senator Ed Laughlin, "That men are permitted to work only eight hours and women ten hours."<sup>427</sup> This was progressive legislation, and its absence was a stain on the state. Illinois was "considered a backward state in women's legislation," testified Illinois Director of Labor Martin Durkin. "Machines have speeded up work but Illinois legislation has never kept pace as far as women are concerned."<sup>428</sup>

Over the decades the WTUL and ISFL had been able to slowly chip away at the IMA's charade. In the past few sessions both houses had passed the bill, if not in the same session. Meanwhile, the IMA had turned its full attention to national legislation, giving Reuben even more opportunity to press his agenda. With IMA influence waning, success was so close Reub could taste it. This would be the year, he promised, that he would pass hours legislation.

The first challenge was the "committee graveyard," where powerful opponents attempted to smother popular bills by refusing to release them for a vote. Reuben shattered that obstacle with ease, going to the press that March to publicly call on the House and Senate committee chairmen to release labor's bills and allow an up or down vote.<sup>429</sup> When the chairmen meekly protested that there simply wasn't enough time to properly review the legislation, Speaker Lewis responded by extending the House work week so the committees could meet their obligations.<sup>430</sup> Outmaneuvered, the chairmen sheepishly recommended Soderstrom's bills for a full vote.

Next came the infamous "absentee challenge." Under the Illinois constitution, it was not enough for legislation to win a majority vote—a majority of *all Senators and Representatives* had to vote in the affirmative for a bill to become law. That meant that most bills could be killed by a faction of legislators simply refusing to vote, reporting themselves as "absent." This became a particular problem for Soderstrom in the Senate; as the Women's 8-Hour Bill came up for a vote that April it became clear that although the "yeas" outnumbered the "nays" by 25 to 9, Reub was still one vote shy of a full majority of the Senate.<sup>431</sup> He raced

up and down the halls, calling favors and pulling ears in the desperate hope that he could sway a single Senator off the sidelines, to no avail. The best Reuben could do was get the vote postponed by one week, giving him time to build a new voting block.

The following days were full of horse trading as Soderstrom and the IMA's Donnelly jockeyed for votes. Reuben picked up some new votes – Carroll, Kean, Thomas, and Smith – but lost others – Beckman, Bensen, Ewing, and Heckenkamp – in equal measure. Even a personal appeal to Governor Horner to use his influence failed. By the time of the second vote, despite all his efforts and additions, Reuben had the exact same number of votes as he had the first time - still one frustratingly vote shy.

On the day of the vote, Reub made one last push. He stood outside the chamber hall, pulling aside Senators in a desperate, forceful appeal. One of those Senators was former House colleague T. Mac Downing. A first-term Republican from the agriculturally focused western portion of the state, Downing was a former attorney who had actually represented the Illinois Manufacturers before joining the legislature. Over the years the two had developed a mutual respect and genuine regard for one another, despite their political differences, and Reuben hoped that association would help him now in this most desperate hour. “I know you have no organized labor in your district,” Reub told Downing, “But we are fighting with our backs against the wall. If you can give us that one vote, we can pass the Women’s 8-Hour bill.”<sup>432</sup> Mac wanted to help, but this wasn’t his fight, and the farmers he represented had a tumultuous relationship with labor. A move to help them could hurt his re-election, especially if the IMA aligned against him.

Reuben was heavy with apprehension as he ascended the Senate galley stairs to watch the vote. The adrenaline of the last several hours finally relented to exhaustion, his strength seemingly leaving him in a loud sigh as he fell into his seat. Just then, out of the corner of his eye, Reuben saw a familiar face—it was Mac, brimming with mischievous energy and wearing a wry grin. He crossed the nearly empty galley, sat next to Reub, and whispered in his ear, “When the roll is called, my vote will be for the bill.”<sup>433</sup> He left without another word, leaving Reub with a feeling he’d almost forgotten: hope. Could it be? Could the bill have a chance? He watched in growing anticipation as the yeas were read—Carroll, Crisenberry, Downing! Soderstrom could hardly contain himself as the results were announced: the Women’s Eight Hour Law was passed by a vote of 26 to 8!

Labor’s victory was heralded throughout the state. “Thus there has ended in victory for organized labor in general, and the working women and girls in Illinois in particular, a legislative struggle that has been carried on persistently for nearly a quarter of a century,” Soderstrom proclaimed. “The passage of the bill takes Illinois out of the class of low standard states and places it high in the ranks of progressive states in relation to working women.”<sup>434</sup> The Illinois State and the Chicago Women’s Trade Union Leagues held a dinner at the Chicago Women’s Club to celebrate a victory more than 40 years in the making. Invited to speak to the assembled crowd, Soderstrom was introduced to the podium with a song written specifically for him. As the crowd began to sing, “How do you do, Mr. Soderstrom, how do you do?” the Happy Warrior shambled up to the stage, blushing with pride. It was a moment he would remember with pride for the rest of his long and storied life.

### *Protects the Unemployed*

While the Women’s Eight Hour bill demonstrated Reuben’s skill in outmaneuvering the IMA and big business, his passage of unemployment insurance was a classic example of his ability to work with them against a common enemy. The Unemployment Insurance bill was a response to section III of FDR’s Federal Social Security Act, which called on the federal government to work with states to collect and provide unemployment insurance. It was a law the IMA had bitterly opposed. In 1934 James Donnelly of the Illinois

Manufacturers' Association had traveled to Washington to fight such legislation, testifying that "it would undermine the fabric of our economic and social life by destroying initiative, discouraging thrift, and stifling individual responsibility...It would result in further and unnecessary intrusion of the Government into the domain of private enterprise, thus aggravating the hardships which have already been caused industry by extensive government regulations, restrictions, and competition."<sup>435</sup> In an editorial to the Los Angeles Times later that month, Donnelly continued, "Such a law would inevitably operate to hold down the number of employees on the pay roll as well as to prevent and minimize increases in the rate of pay, so that the burden of the tax could be reduced to the minimum. These bills are contrary to the spirit of the Constitution of the United States and inconsistent with the many decisions of the Supreme Court on analogous questions of taxation."<sup>436</sup>

Reub, surprisingly, didn't entirely disagree. He preferred employment over the public dole, which he called a "miserable makeshift."<sup>437</sup> He worried intently about the long-term consequences of idleness; speaking about the Great Depression twenty years later Reuben recalled, "Well, I'd say that unemployment caused the greatest trouble that we were confronted with. In fact, I sincerely believe...if we can keep our people employed, everything else seems to work out some way, in a fairly satisfactory way."<sup>438</sup> This was one of the reasons Reuben fought so hard for the 30-hour week. "The 30-hour week would create jobs for the 400,000 jobless in the state and solve the relief problem," he repeated in speeches, testimony, and interviews throughout the year. "[It] would absorb all employees now out of work...It is the only sensible solution to the unemployment problem."<sup>439</sup>

However, the IMA thoroughly refused to work with Soderstrom on such legislation, killing his 30-Hour bill in the Senate by a vote of 9 to 12.<sup>440</sup> Given this, Reuben saw unemployment compensation as the only viable alternative. And if someone had to bear the cost, he thought it only fair that it should be business, not the taxpayer. He didn't buy Donnelly's argument that unemployment insurance would lower employment; he believed employment was driven by demand, and believed that the payments would ultimately raise employment through increased spending. Besides, if Illinois failed to enact an unemployment insurance bill, the state would lose its share of the \$18,000,000 the federal government had already collected from Illinois businesses.<sup>441</sup>

It soon became clear that the fight would not be over whether the state would adopt unemployment insurance, but what shape such legislation would take. The battle lines between the ISFL and IMA were soon drawn around a key issue: how would it be paid for? Donnelly and his ilk wanted "Employer's reserve accounts"- a series of individual funds held by each individual company. This model was especially desirable for large companies producing stable goods, as their relatively low unemployment rate would translate into lower insurance rates. Reuben, meanwhile, pushed for a "pooled fund," a common account paid into by all businesses and administered by the state. This way, the volatility of a given business or industry would not impact workers' security, should they lose their jobs. The sides also butted heads over how much employees should contribute (the IMA wanted a 50/50 split, while Soderstrom wanted employers to pay in full) and how long benefits should last (13 weeks or 16 weeks).<sup>442</sup>

Freed from the constraints of the legislature, Reuben sought to move the fight out of the Assembly and into private conference. He soon got his wish, with Governor Horner calling for private consultation between his men and representatives of the Federal Social Security Board, followed by "joint conference committee" constituted of ISFL and IMA reps.<sup>443</sup> For weeks the two sides battled it out, with Reub and Olander on one side of the table facing off against Donnelly and his men. The IMA pressed hard, first for private accounts, then for a "hybrid model," and lowering the employment contribution to roughly 25%. Reub held firm, refusing to give an inch and promising to fight "as far as I can go." He would not abandon workers in smaller companies, and denounced employee contributions as "paying a double tax. The employers will pass on the

cost of the insurance to the consumer even if paid for by the workers.”<sup>444</sup>

For more than a month they went round after round, neither side gaining the advantage. For a while it appeared as though the joint committee process, which had worked so well in crafting the Occupational Disease Act, was doomed to failure. Finally, days before the end of session, Reuben had a breakthrough. Calling the committee together one last time, he put forth a new theory of the case: labor and manufacturing, he argued, had a common enemy: the insurance companies. After all, it was fear of their exorbitant rates that was driving the IMA’s opposition to a common fund. What if, instead of fighting each other over how to pay these unreasonable rates, labor and manufacturing united to push for legislation limiting the rates insurance companies could charge? And there was no reason to stop at unemployment insurance; Illinois employers had been forced to spend \$22,000,000 a year on liability insurance, yet only \$7,000,000 was ever paid to injured workmen. This stank of extortion, Reub exclaimed, and together they could prevail upon the legislature to lower the rates on employers *and* increase employee benefits.

Donnelly was pleasantly stunned. He loved the idea; after all, an ISFL/IMA alliance, at least on this one issue, would be unstoppable. They quickly crafted an Unemployment Insurance bill with a pooled fund that required insurance companies to charge lower rates to companies that had lower rates of unemployment. The IMA also agreed to 16 weeks of payment and no employee contributions.<sup>445</sup> Reuben, true to his word, lent his full support to a legislative investigation into insurance companies “making excessive profits out of the misery and suffering of maimed and crippled people.”<sup>446</sup>

Soderstrom’s ability to craft an alliance with a traditional enemy without a single concession was an incredible feat in and of itself. Even more remarkable, Reub had achieved all this outside of the legislative process. Once again, as they had with the Occupational Disease Act, the ISFL and IMA were able to reach an accommodation when politicians had failed. Reuben’s new way of doing business was proving effective.

## LABOR’S CIVIL WAR

### *Soderstrom Calls for Unity*

While Reuben was able to unify labor and advance its cause at the state level, he was unable to prevent the fissures occurring on the national scene from splitting labor in two. Over the past year the unions of the CIO, led by United Miners of America (UMWA) President John L. Lewis, had embarked on a massive enrollment drive, scoring major victories for labor along the way. They successfully organized the steel industry and the automobile industry and made significant advances among textile workers, longshoremen, and others. By the end of 1937 the rival labor organization had grown to over 3.7 million members, including over 600,000 miners, 400,000 automobile workers and 375,000 steelworkers!<sup>447</sup> The AFL responded with a push of its own, incorporating 801 new labor organizations and adding 666,363 new members.<sup>448</sup>

Back in Illinois, Reub worked hard to limit the damage. In public speeches and events, he downplayed the severity of the division, describing it as “a parting of friends...We hope for and confidently await their return.”<sup>449</sup> Expressing confidence that there was room for “both kinds of organizations under the American Federation of Labor,” he worked with his CIO counterpart Ray Edmundson to bridge the divides their national leaders had breached. They continued to coordinate through the Joint Labor Legislative Board to make sure labor’s pending legislative program was not endangered.<sup>450</sup> That May papers were still reporting that the Illinois UMWA was “sticking by” the ISFL, with Edmundson publicly praising Reuben and Vic for their efforts.<sup>451</sup>

Behind the scenes, Reuben pleaded with national leadership to adopt what he called the Illinois Plan: Ignore

the belligerent rhetoric, listen to legitimate concerns, and make accommodations for the sake of unity. Don't vote for the outright expulsion of the CIO unions. If the AFL followed this advice, Soderstrom maintained, the tensions driving this conflict could be diffused. "It may appear to be a vague hope," he said that year, "But I think the situation should be allowed to help work itself out. I see within the last 60 days a chance. I think Lewis is stopped. The excitement of his revolt is diminishing—like the interest of the crowd when the circus parade has gone by."<sup>452</sup>

Unfortunately, Green and his lieutenants did not listen. They moved ahead with their plans to eject the CIO unions, going so far as to invite the Progressive Miners Association (PMA), the UMWA's bitter rivals, to join the AFL. The move had major implications for Illinois, as the state was home to both the PMA and the UMWA's largest district. The move infuriated Edmundson, who railed against the move as the act of "frantic fear and desperation and the natural consequence of such fear in binding together two dying institutions... we consider the action of the executive council of the American Federation of Labor as a furtherance of their nefarious scheme to divide rather than to link the workers of the nation."<sup>453</sup> He called on Soderstrom to refuse to admit the PMA in the name of labor solidarity.

Reub was torn. After all, the PMA was accused of numerous acts of violence, and Reuben had spent the last years repeatedly disavowing the organization and its tactics. His mentor, John Walker, had already left the organization in disgust, and there is little question Reuben found the PMA's inclusion without any kind of reform problematic to say the least. Still, the PMA was willing to submit to AFL leadership, something the UMWA refused to do. They also lent the Federation considerable numeric strength; the PMA was 22,500 strong, more than replacing the 17,000 member hole left by the UMWA. In the end, Soderstrom told reporters, when the ISFL received notification from the AFL to oust the UMWA and recognize the PMA, "there will be no alternative except to comply. The situation is a bad and regrettable one. I hope it will be short-lived and eventually all organized groups will be in the same parental fold."<sup>454</sup> Edmundson was not appeased. He led the rebel unions out of the arms of the ISFL embittered, claiming betrayal and swearing revenge.

With the exit of the CIO, the 1937 ISFL convention was a subdued affair, described by reporters as "one of the quietest in many years...The calm demeanor of the convention was best illustrated by the fact that the biggest controversy involved selection of Peoria as the 1938 convention city."<sup>455</sup> The 750 delegates in attendance demonstrated none of the animosity toward their CIO brothers that had characterized the national split. "One of the things very noticeable at the Federation of Labor convention at LaSalle, was the lack of bitterness on the part of the majority of the officers and delegates toward the Committee for Industrial Unionism," wrote one reporter. "This writer interviewed many of the delegates and their attitude toward the CIO and found many of them in sympathy with the main purpose of the committee, which we understand is the organization of workers into industrial unions, where that policy is found to be the best for the workers concerned."<sup>456</sup> In his opening address, Reuben set the tone for a constructive conversation, both in the convention halls and across the nation. Opposed to the vitriolic attacks on the character of rival union leaders, Reuben reiterated his belief that both sides could find reason to reconcile:

I never believed that organized labor could become stronger by dividing its strength; I never quite believed either, that David Dubinsky, Sidney Hillman and John L. Lewis were rogues and rascals...A Ford car is an automobile, a Packard car is also an automobile, and there is room for both of them on the highway. An industrial organization is a union composed mostly of unskilled workers; a craft organization is a union composed largely of skilled workers, but there is room for both of them within the American Federation of Labor.<sup>457</sup>

While he held out hope for unity, Soderstrom left no doubt in the minds of the audience as to what he

thought of the insurgency within labor's ranks. For Reuben, while honest men could differ on trade or industrial organization, the real sin was in disunion. To him the CIO rebels were no better than the Confederates who attempted to break the American Union 70 years before. Referring to the Lewis loyalists inside the Mining and Steel unions, Reuben exclaimed:

Sometimes I think there is a similarity between even the leaders of the rebellion movement within the American Federation of Labor and the leaders of the rebellion during the Civil War. I can see a resemblance between the activities of Jefferson Davis and Van Bittner; I see a resemblance between the activities of Stonewall Jackson and Phillip Murray; I can see a resemblance between the activities of Robert E. Lee -- perhaps I had better say it this way; if there isn't a resemblance between the mythical Simon Legree and John L. Lewis in creating trouble, then I am a Chinaman! The rebel leaders within the labor movement are dancing today to the rebel tune of 'Dixie.' I say to you I believe it is a dance of death.<sup>458</sup>

Soderstrom did not take the comparison lightly; to him this was a war for labor's very existence, and he was prepared to fight it to the bitter end. Yet, like his hero Abraham Lincoln, he looked forward to reconciliation over reckoning, and remained ready to forgive his brothers the moment they asked for peace:

It took four years of civil warfare to convince the belligerent elements of the South that there was room enough under one flag for both the North and the South. It may take four years of civil warfare within the American labor movement to convince the belligerent elements that there is room enough for the industrial union and the craft union under the banner of the American Federation of Labor...I am going to predict that while these rebels are dancing recklessly and singing to the rebel tune of Dixie today, inside of four years they will be forced back into the protecting folds of the American Federation of Labor. When that time comes we will welcome them. We will again teach them to sing, not the rebel tune of Dixie, but "My Country 'tis of Thee," and "The Union Forever."<sup>459</sup>

### *Competing Conventions*

In stark contrast to the Illinois Federation's measured tone, AFL President Green seemed to come almost unhinged with anger at the National Labor Convention in Denver that October. Reub's written report to the ISFL illustrated in graphic terms the deep level of resentment:

Ouster of the insurgent Committee for Industrial Organizing unions became secondary to the aggressive warfare against them as William Green, president of the American Federation of Labor, bending forward, shaking his closed fist menacingly, his face wet with perspiration, and red with anger and emotion, shouted a declaration of war against John L. Lewis and his Committee for Industrial Organizing that brought the convention to its feet when the bristling, fighting mad president declared, 'Our patience is gone. Our labor movement will now change to the greatest fighting machine that was ever created within the ranks of labor.'

The delegates pounded fists on the tables and stamped their feet on the floor, breaking in to President Green's speech with shouts of approval, yet above all the acclamatory noise rose the angry voice of the federation president, driving in his verbal steel to the hilt, and initiating a campaign that will drive the insurgent unions to oblivion when he roared; "The clock has struck. The hour is here. You are here to make a momentous decision, and if my judgment is correct, you will order your board of directors to revoke the charter of these international unions which have split American labor into two camps. And when you give those orders, I can assure you upon my sacred word of honor your instructions will be carried out."<sup>460</sup>

While Green prepared to rally his troops in Denver, Lewis oversaw the planning for the CIO's first national conference in Atlantic City - the very city where Lewis had announced the start of the CIO with a fist to the

face of AFL Executive Council member William Hutcheson. Members poured in from across the country in a show of strength. While Lewis was unable to attend due to the flu, his absence actually served the convention well, as coverage focused less on him and his rivalry with AFL leadership and more on the size and diversity of the conference itself. While the message from the AFL Conference had been one of war with no quarter, the story from Atlantic City was one of CIO calls for reconciliation. The CIO leadership sent a telegram to the Denver convention expressing its wish for 100 representatives of the AFL to meet with 100 representatives of the CIO to thrash out their differences and settle the rift. Reub, now a member of the AFL Resolution Committee, was suspicious of the overture. He considered it, “interesting, but not convincing as to its honesty of purpose. The AFL has had a peace negotiating committee for over a year and the CIO has refused to meet this group. If the Lewis faction is on the square and sincere in its desire for an adjustment or settlement they should meet with the peace committee already appointed by the AFL. The CIO proposal looked like a “red herring.”<sup>461</sup>

Reuben’s instincts proved correct; although the AFL and CIO agreed to talks, neither side was willing to compromise. But in calling for rapprochement, Lewis had come across as the “bigger man,” especially in contrast to Green’s vitriol. AFL leadership, consumed by personal animosity, had ignored Soderstrom’s sage advice, and in so doing ensured that the CIO was not going away any time soon.

## A BETTER DAY

### *Soderstrom Raises National Profile*

While Reuben’s approach to the CIO fight went unheeded, his contributions to the conflict drew much attention. Using the current crisis to his advantage, Soderstrom’s powers of persuasion convinced many painter, plumber, and mail carrier unions to join his fold. These efforts, combined with his push to unionize workers and industries which were previously unorganized, led to an increase of 43,000 new members over the previous year despite CIO losses, bringing the ISFL’s total membership to 400,000.<sup>462</sup> He had more than doubled his membership rolls in seven years.

Reuben’s ability to increase his Illinois numbers despite the CIO split had earned him a reputation as an epic organizer. Even more importantly, his successful integration of the Illinois-based Progressive Miner’s Union meant needed numbers not just for the ISFL but for AFL affiliates across the nation. PMU President Joseph Ozanic was invited to speak at the AFL convention, and he brought the crowd to its feet when he declared “I pledge to you the whole support of my 35,000 members and, if necessary, our entire financial resources, to stamp out the plague—the so-called CIO—from the American labor movement once and forever. I will give you everything in me and in my organization to help your splendid cause.”<sup>463</sup>

The brothers of the American Federation weren’t the only ones who realized Reuben’s importance. Recognizing his abilities, Governor Horner sent the ISFL president to Washington, DC for the 4th National Conference on Labor Legislation. Reub, along with CFL Secretary Joseph Kennan, Chief Factory Inspector John M. Falasz, and Director Martin P. Durkin of the Illinois Department of Labor, spent three days bringing the needs of Illinois labor to the nation’s capital. In the discussions that followed, Soderstrom—a Republican who had stumped for President Roosevelt—impressed the Administration, particularly in regard to his review of labor legislation enacted in the past year and ideas on how to better enforce existing labor laws. Before the conference ended, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins presented a certificate to Reub and the Illinois delegation thanking them “for outstanding progress in the enactment of labor legislation.” The award was no customary honorific. “This is the first time that an agency of the federal government has recognized the efforts made by the ISFL in the legislative field,” Reub’s colleague Vic Olander noted, “And the certificate of recognition will be received with a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction by the officers and legislative

representatives of the Illinois labor movement.”<sup>464</sup>

### *Looking Ahead*

By the early snow falls of 1937, Reuben had grown optimistic about the future. Not only had he survived the loss of his political seat, he'd grown stronger in defeat, using the experience and relationships he'd gained during his tenure as a Representative to pass major reforms as president of the ISFL. While saddened by the split within labor, he'd taken advantage of the CIO defection by bringing in unions and organizations that had long stood outside labor's tent (many of them because of Lewis himself) to grow his ISFL to over 400,000 members. Above all he demonstrated a practical approach to leadership, working with adversaries like the IMA and CIO where he could while standing strong against them when necessary, building a national profile in the process. Through it all, he'd kept to his principles, never backing down from labor's vision.

Soderstrom's optimism extended to his national outlook as well. As he stated with pride in his annual Labor Day address:

We have reached the threshold of an era of great reforms. Wage-earners, during the past twelve months, have had their first taste of the 'better day' that organized labor has been striving for, and struggling for, since the unparalleled business depression began with a world-rocking stock market crash in the fall of 1929. The year 1937—this year—will, no doubt, see the turning point in unemployment improvement, which all thoughtful labor officials agree, is the greatest problem of the present century.<sup>465</sup>

Reuben was excited for the future, fully confident that the economic worst was behind him and his nation. He was in for an unpleasant surprise.



## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# LOUIS LEWIS

One of Reuben's staunchest allies in the 1937 Illinois House was its Speaker, Louis Lewis. In his speech at the Chicago Women's Club dinner in the summer of 1937, RG Soderstrom paid high tribute to the Speaker, praising his hard work as the ISFL's strongest voice in legislature. Though new to his role, Lewis was a fearless fighter for labor's cause. During the sixtieth session of the Illinois State General Assembly, Lewis made history when he became the first presiding officer to step off the rostrum and personally take to the floor in support of an impending labor bill, the Workman's Compensation Act Improvements Bill HB286. As Reuben's ISFL Weekly noted at the time:

[HB286] was bitterly opposed by the Illinois Manufacturers' Association and other groups of employers. The opposition was of such a powerful character that the labor forces faced defeat in the House until Speaker Lewis, risking personal defeat, came to the rescue.<sup>466</sup>

Like his predecessor, Lewis's time in the Speaker's Chair was short; by the sixty-first session, Lewis had moved on from the House to become Illinois State Treasurer. Despite its brevity, however, Louis's leadership was crucial in helping RG Soderstrom realize Labor's legislative goals.

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# CIO TACTICS AND TRAGEDY

## THE CIO SIT-DOWN AND POLITICAL FALLOUT

Amidst the infighting and expansion of organized labor, there was a growing unease within the nation regarding the CIO's aggressive tactics, including a new method of protest—the “sit-down.” This new twist on the classic strike was as simple as it was ingenious; instead of walking out of the plant, workers just sat at their workbenches, preventing others from taking their place. Its most famous use was during the General Motors strike of 1937 in Flint, Michigan, after the owners refused their legal obligation to recognize their workers' union. Caught off guard, GM didn't know how to respond. First, they cut off the heat to no avail. Then they sent in police, who were fought off with a barrage of coffee mugs and pop bottles. When the cops returned with tear gas, the strikers used the plant's fire hoses to push the police back in what became known as the “Battle of the Running Bulls.” In the end, the company had no choice but to negotiate as their plant sat idle and surrounded by thousands of national guardsmen. The Associated Press described the scene in Flint on February 12, 1937, as the agreement was declared:

An armistice spirit, exuberant and joyous, held full sway today...Cheering crowds watched jubilant strikers march from three General Motors plants late yesterday and looked forward to another march next week—a parade of 43,000 idle workers back to jobs. Col. Joseph H. Lewis, commanding the 3,300 national guardsmen that have been on strike duty here, said demobilization of the soldiers would begin tomorrow with the evacuation of the 106th cavalry and the 119th field artillery.<sup>467</sup>

While effective, these new aggressive tactics carried a toll, especially in the arena of public opinion. People disturbed by the violent encounters increasingly began to blame all involved for letting the situation descend into shows of force. As historian Joseph Rayback writes:

The sit-down, however, had brought a public reaction. Employers who feared the effects of the weapon and their spokesmen among newspapers condemned it as an invasion of property rights. The United States Senate attacked it as “illegal and contrary to public policy.” The widespread condemnation had its effect. During 1937 the public, which only a short while before had been demanding validation of the Wagner Act, began to make demands for new laws to curb labor.<sup>468</sup>

Reuben condemned these acts even as the CIO's revolutionary strike techniques spread. He worried that CIO leader John L. Lewis was crystalizing public sentiment against not only the CIO but labor as a whole, at the very moment the movement needed support the most. In his opening remarks at the 1937 ISFL convention in LaSalle, Soderstrom denounced Lewis's tactics generally and the sit-down specifically. “The public press of the United States, because of the illegal sit-down strike, has turned against the CIO,” he declared. “The government, because of the revolutionary tactics employed in sit-down strikes, is quietly developing sentiment against the CIO.”<sup>469</sup>

## THE MEMORIAL DAY MASSACRE

AFL leadership likewise opposed Lewis's hard-edge actions, not least of all because of the increased chance for violence. Such concern proved warranted. One of labor's darkest moments that year occurred in Reuben's own Illinois during the CIO's strike against “Little Steel,” the smaller steel companies (including Republic Steel) that were not included in the union contract signed with larger producers. On May 30, a giant crowd

of union men and women—reports vary from 300 to over 2,000—were marching from their headquarters toward a Republic Steel Mill in Chicago when they were met by a line of Chicago police. What followed was an impossibly brutal attack that would later be known as the “Memorial Day Massacre.” Ralph Beck, one of the men in attendance, later described the scene:

In twos and threes they pounded backs and cracked down on skulls...Three policemen surrounded one falling man and while two held his hands and legs, the third kicked him hard in the groin. Two others stopped an old man with his hand held to his bald head trying to stop the blood, only to kick him and beat him across the back and tell him to hurry back to his mob.<sup>470</sup>

In a frenzy of violence, the police assaulted the crowd with tear gas and bullets, firing indiscriminately. Nick Kruga, a Republic crane man and World War veteran, told reporters from a hospital bed:

I was in the war and I fought in France, but I never heard as many bullets as those policemen fired. Women and children were screaming. Clouds of tear gas hung over the prairie. It was just like a war battlefield. The mob was like a herd of cattle. I ran till they got me.<sup>471</sup>

As many as 500 shots were fired. By the time the smoke had cleared, five were dead and another 60 wounded, including children. In the coming days another five would die of their wounds. Of the ten shot dead, seven were killed by bullets in the back.<sup>472</sup> Incredibly, much of the assault was captured on film by a Paramount News crew on the scene.

The horrific details of the attack initially shocked the public, and in almost any other context organized labor would have been able to look to such an event as a rallying cry, a clarion call for the nation. Lewis’s ready use of aggressive tactics, however, had poisoned the well. Owners pushed back effectively against the initial reports, referring to the massacre as the “Republic Street Riot.” The conservative *Chicago Tribune* took to its editorial pages, telling a radically different tale than earlier accounts (including those featured in its own pages):

A murderous mob which on Sunday sought to storm the Republic Steel Corporation’s mill in South Chicago was hurled back by a detail of police. The mob had been inflamed by the speeches of CIO organizers. Its members were armed with an assortment of weapons including firearms, clubs, chunks of steel, and pepper to throw into the eyes of police...

There can be no difficulty in fixing the blame. The police behaved on Sunday with scrupulous correctness...all the provocation came from the mob...the leaders of the mob, those who led it into action and especially those who inflamed it, should be made to pay the penalty for their deliberate act.<sup>473</sup>

Just as Reuben had feared, anti-labor organizations were able to use Lewis’s earlier actions to cast blame for the massacre on its victims. When the combative Lewis snarled to the press in mid-June that “labor will await the position of the authorities on whether our people will be protected or butchered,” President Roosevelt tersely replied “The majority of the people are saying just one thing, ‘a plague on both your houses.’”<sup>474</sup>

In the wake of the violence, Reuben issued a message of restraint, stressing that the path to lasting change was through non-violent protest and political participation. He pleaded for peace, calling for the “restless” CIO unions to join with the Federation in its fight for reforms through the legislative process.<sup>475</sup> Chicago Mayor Ed Kelly echoed that sentiment, telling the ISFL president, “I think you and I are of the same mind on one important point—that the principles of mediation and arbitration achieve more than hasty and unorganized walk-outs—that ballots and not brass knuckles represent the democratic way.”<sup>476</sup> Still, Soderstrom did not

turn his back on CIO workers even as he condemned their tactics, vowing the day after the Massacre to stand for all laborers “whether inside or outside” the ISFL.<sup>477</sup>

# CHAPTER 27

## 1938

### REUBEN BATTLES RECESSION, VIOLENCE

*“I feel inspired...because the Illinois State Federation of Labor has surpassed, in beneficial activity and legislative accomplishment even the fondest hopes and wildest dreams of those who were responsible for the formation of this great state organization. In spite of all prejudice and all opposition...I am proud to be able to report to you that the Illinois State Federation of Labor is today emerging from the business depression and subsequent business recession, stronger numerically and more powerful politically than it was ever before in all of its history.”*

-Reuben Soderstrom  
1938 ISFL Convention

#### THE GREAT RECESSION SACKS STREATOR, NATION

Reuben brimmed with optimism. 1937 had been a powerful year for labor, both in Illinois and across the nation. Despite its split with the Committee of Industrial Organization, the American Federation of Labor was able to grow its numbers, reaching corners of the working world that had never before been organized. In Illinois, Soderstrom had grown the Illinois Federation (ISFL) to nearly 400,000 souls, even making peace with old foes like the Progressive Miners along the way. As Reub boasted at the ISFL convention:

A vast number of district councils, central bodies and independent locals were visited, and those who were not affiliated were cordially invited to enroll their memberships in the Illinois State Federation of Labor. The response to that request and that invitation was most satisfactory and most gratifying. Over three hundred local unions not formerly affiliated with the Illinois State Federation of Labor responded to that appeal. Those three hundred additional local unions will enroll approximately fifty thousand wage earners into our state body. A close check-up will show that the Illinois State Federation of Labor today, numerically, is the strongest state federation of labor in America.<sup>478</sup>

Across the nation, however, a new panic had begun to take hold. Facing political pressure and believing the worst was over, President Roosevelt drastically cut New Deal spending, including work programs such as the Works Progress Administration. The Federal Reserve, meanwhile, pursued monetary policies that reduced money stocks. The results were disastrous, sending shockwaves through the American economy in the second half of 1937. Soderstrom tried to calm the public, writing that December that “this year will, no doubt, see the turning point in employment improvement, which all thoughtful labor officials agree, is the greatest problem of the present century.”

His hopes were soon dashed. Real GDP fell by more than 5% between 1937 and 1938, while stock prices plunged by 25%. Most devastatingly, unemployment exploded from 12% in 1937 to over 20% at the height of the crisis.<sup>479</sup> Reub’s native Streator was hit particularly hard. Of the 3,354 unemployed in LaSalle County, 778 were from Soderstrom’s hometown. The WPA did what it could, employing 140 men to work on the Streator Armory that spring and hiring others for school and park projects. It also established a sewing center in the city employing 35 women, who earned \$44 a month producing everything from pajamas to work

uniforms. The center also purchased all materials locally, adding \$250 to \$300 a month to the local economy, and gave what they manufactured to needy families once a month.<sup>480</sup>

But it was a drop in the bucket. Scores of unemployed did what they could to fight off poverty and starvation, growing subsistence gardens and learning to bake without “luxuries” like eggs. The federal surplus commodity corporation also established a food warehouse in Streator, stocking and distributing grapefruit, oranges, cabbage, celery, rice, navy beans, peas and potato flour to those most in need.<sup>481</sup> Sadly, the strongest support for those in need—the Unemployment Compensation Act which Reuben had fought so hard for—wasn’t scheduled to go into effect until 1939. At a hearing at the State Department of Labor, Reuben called for government action, offering the support of both the Illinois State and Chicago Federations of Labor.<sup>482</sup> But as 1938 wore on, it became clear to all that no support or single piece of legislation could counter the complex and deepening crisis; a “Great Recession” had settled in, dashing the dreams of Reub and others for an easy end to the Depression.

## AFL AND CIO BATTLE FOR LABOR’S SOUL

### *CIO Sit-ins Turn Violent*

Not everyone deplored the new state of affairs, however. The CIO in particular seized the growing crisis as a recruitment opportunity, branding the AFL as part of the establishment and partly to blame for the ongoing crisis. For many CIO leaders, especially President John L. Lewis, unionism was anti-establishment by nature. A union leader’s primary responsibility, in their view, was to relentlessly press employers as aggressively as possible. This contrarian approach to labor relations mirrored Lewis’s own personality. Described by Reub as someone “willing to take on a scrap with almost anybody,” Lewis was infamous for his aggressive tactics, and towards the end of the decade this trait, so instrumental in Lewis’s rise, began to drive a wedge through his most important alliances. By 1938 his initially friendly relationship with FDR had begun to sour, at least in part to due to personal disdain. “More fundamental [than policy] was the clash of personalities and of roles,” writes New Deal historian Irving Bernstein. “The styles of the two men were completely different. Lewis was dour, angry, direct, and demanding. Roosevelt was cheerful, chatty, effusively vague, a master of indirection.”<sup>483</sup>

This personal fissure was compounded by widening policy divides. The CIO’s predisposition for conflict had given rise to questionable tactics, including sit-down strikes which were characterized by violence and repudiated by Roosevelt. When the President responded to the events of the Memorial Day Massacre by declaring “a plague on both houses,” Lewis warned Roosevelt in a radio address that “It ill behooves one who has supped at labor’s table and who has been sheltered in labor’s house to curse with equal fervor and fine impartiality both labor and its adversaries when they become locked in deadly embrace.”<sup>484</sup> Lewis’s increasingly bellicose approach cost him with the public as well. Something of a media darling in 1936 and early 1937, Lewis had become widely disliked by 1938. A Gallup poll released in October of that year asking “Which labor leader do you like better: [AFL President] Green or Lewis?” found that Americans preferred Green by 78% to 22%.<sup>485</sup>

Of course, these numbers had as much to do with the AFL’s actions as it did the CIO’s. Unlike the CIO, the AFL had painstakingly sought peaceful and democratic solutions to labor’s problems, negotiating with its enemies and largely working through the legislative process rather than direct confrontation. No one exemplified this approach more than Reub. In the last few years, Soderstrom had crafted complex protections like the Occupational Disease Act and Unemployment Insurance through a careful mix of threat, compromise, and innovation. While unafraid to call for a strike, Reuben and his Secretary Vic Olander typically preferred less disruptive solutions, agreements that spared labor and business alike.

### *Soderstrom: "Organized Labor Does Not Want Communism"*

Lewis's unpopularity was also likely linked to the increasing public suspicion of communist influence within the CIO. While Lewis himself was strongly anti-communist, the industrial unionism of the CIO (as well as the confrontational approach it advocated) was attractive to Communist Party members, who held disproportionate sway within the organization. As historian Jennifer Luff writes:

Only a tiny fraction—less than 1 percent—of the CIO's membership belonged to the Communist Party. A substantial portion of CIO union leaders and staff, however, were party members or closely aligned to the party. Unions including Mine Mill, the United Electrical Workers, and the Food and Tobacco Workers were led by Communists, while the TWU, NMU, and the International Longshoremen Workers' Union had officers who were closet party members, and unions such as the UAW and the Office and Professional Workers had sizable Communist contingents among union leaders and staff.<sup>486</sup>

While many within the CIO were worried by this influence, Lewis refused to consider the communists a threat, and his seeming unconcern soon translated into negative press. Formerly sympathetic journalists (including Louis Stark of the *New York Times*) began to write about Communist influence, while Benjamin Stolberg's *The Story of the CIO*, published that year, told the story of an ideal perverted by Stalinist agents.<sup>487</sup> Before the end of the year, concerns over Communist influence had driven the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) to leave and re-affiliate with the AFL and the Sailors' Union of the Pacific (SUP) to break off negotiations with the CIO.<sup>488</sup>

Of course, the presence of communist sympathies within the CIO didn't only threaten Lewis's organization. The CIO's associations threatened to paint all labor with the same the same brush in the public mind, including Reuben's Illinois Federation. This danger prompted a massive retaliation by the leaders of the AFL. Some, including President Green, used the charge of Communism as a weapon against Lewis, engaging in classic red baiting. After attending the AFL conference that year, President Soderstrom wrote of his experience listening to the opening address:

Over half of President Green's address was devoted to denouncing the CIO and its leader, John L. Lewis...He used what he termed was Lewis's own words in branding him Communistic. He read from two pamphlets which he said were prepared by the 'leader of the committee of industrial organization,' delivered to Congress and which warned that agencies hoping to overthrow the American government were attempting to gain a foothold in American labor. 'Isn't it strange, my friends,' President Green shouted, 'that this man who prophesied that communism was seeking to destroy our craft unions is now the leader of a movement which has for its purpose that very objective? He is attempting to do what he prophesied the Communists would do.' It was a blistering attack on John L. Lewis and his CIO by a thoroughly aroused William Green...Green closed his address, which will go down in labor history as most colorful and interesting, within the allotted radio time.<sup>489</sup>

While he may not have approved of the personal nature of the attack, Reub pulled no punches when speaking and writing against Communist influence. To him, Communism was simply one more foreign element inserted into labor by its opponents—particularly employers—in an effort to sow division and disunity. As he wrote in his Labor Day message that year:

Organized labor does not want communism. Its members do not want rebellion within the American labor movement. Communism, division, secession, a terrible trinity originated by foreign agitators, developed partly by foreign dictators, brought into our country and organized by reactionary employers who believed they could

use this combination to destroy the American Federation of Labor. Efforts to develop division and secession are, of course, old tactics. Adding communism thereto, however, is new.<sup>490</sup>

If reactionary and industrialist forces were the chief instigators of Communism, Soderstrom asserted, then the AFL was the nation's strongest bulwark against it:

We, [the AFL's] members, among other things, glory in its fighting qualities. We glory in the successful resistance it has given to communism and all other subversive forces. We glory in the patriotic service it has rendered to America exposing these vicious elements from destroying our government, stopping them from tearing down the starry banner of the nation and substituting in its place the communistic, revolutionary flag of red. Liberty is still liberty here. Equality is still equality. Freedom is still freedom. America is America because the AFL has been resolving, functioning and fighting to keep it that way. So that the whole world might see the seething, festering cesspool of communism that it really is.<sup>491</sup>

### *Dueling Unions*

Despite these concerns, both Reuben and the AFL still sought a united labor front. In the two years that followed the formation of the Committee of Industrial Organization, both sides sought a negotiated end to the standoff. After much discussion, meetings held as part of a "peace conference" in late 1937 reached a workable solution. The potential agreement called for the return of all the original CIO unions to the AFL with no penalty or questions asked. For the CIO organizations formed in the wake of the split, a subcommittee would be created to iron out the inevitable jurisdictional disputes between them and the AFL unions already representing workers in those fields. The only issue left at that point was to select the subcommittee.

Before long, the problem of dualism—two unions representing the same trade—had infected nearly every corner of the working world in America. Oftentimes, the CIO would make a duplicate union to one in the AFL; anxious workers would join both unions because they were unsure which group would win and as a result all hell broke out. On December 21, the CIO representatives decided to insist upon their original offer calling for all CIO "dual" unions—those previously chartered by the AFL and those newly created—to be admitted and chartered into the AFL without any preliminary agreements or preconditions. Any less, the CIO negotiators declared, would be an act of "treason" by the original CIO members committed against their new brethren. To the AFL, however, letting these new unions in without question would create a system of "dual unions" throughout the Federation, as valid existing unions would have to compete against their newly validated CIO counterparts. When the CIO refused to yield, the AFL had no choice but to abandon the conference.

This system of permanent dual unions wreaked havoc on organized labor for years. The de facto dualism brought about by CIO defection had already hurt working men and women, particularly in the mining industry. In a bid to outmaneuver the now AFL-affiliated Progressive Miners Association (PMA), Lewis made a sweetheart deal with the mine owners of Harlan County, offering them major concessions if they recognized his United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), not the PMA, as the only valid union under the National Labor Relations Act. The owners readily agreed, declaring that all mine workers would have to join the UMWA to work in the county. AFL President Green was furious, issuing a statement that read in part:

This deal stated in these simple terms merely means that the employer has selected and chosen the union to which his workers must belong to keep their employment hereafter and the union for which the employer is soliciting members has agreed in advance to the terms of employment under which these employee members are to work. A clearer case of conspiracy to violate the NLRA cannot be found. A more brazen and unlawful



alliance to control workers without their knowledge and consent has yet to be disclosed. A more decisive instance of John L. Lewis using government machinery in violation of law to recruit members and to break down resistance to his will has never been presented to the public.<sup>492</sup>

Even Reuben's own ITU was hit in 1938 when the American Newspaper Guild, a CIO union attempting to unionize the whole print industry, attempted to start a strike in Chicago against the Chicago American and Chicago Herald-Examiner, the Hearst morning and evening papers. When they tried to pressure the AFL to join them in the strike, the AFL responded that they would "not permit themselves to be manipulated into any alleged strike against the Hearst papers or anyone else by a few blundering CIO agitators."<sup>493</sup>

As the war of dueling unions wore on, many workers were tempted to join both unions; that way they could wait on the sidelines, claiming allegiance to whomever eventually won out. In response the AFL initiated a bitter struggle against dual membership, conscripting both Soderstrom brothers for the battle. That January William Schoenberg, head of AFL activities in Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Iowa, dispatched Reub's brother Lafe to the crucial labor city of Decatur to launch the downstate fight against the CIO. In a speech before a full audience at the local labor temple to the city's Trades and Labor Council, Lafe declared "The war is on between the American Federation of Labor and the Committee for Industrial Organization. There will be no straddling of the fence; you can't belong to both."<sup>494</sup> He called for a vote to immediately expel all CIO unions from the Assembly, including the local United Miners. In a scene repeated dozens of times across the state, all opposing unions were cast out from the temple, never to return. The message was clear: you were either with the AFL or against it; there would be no road between.

## REUB REBELS AGAINST INDUSTRY'S ASSAULT ON DEMOCRACY

### *Soderstrom Denounces Chicago "Manager" Plan*

While Reuben and the ISFL were fighting the CIO on one front, a second, deadlier battle opened up in the world of Chicago politics. An unusual coalition of interests—reformers, businessmen, and racists—attempted to eliminate the "Kelly-Nash Machine," a political union between Chicago Mayor Ed Kelly and Cook County Democratic party chairman Patrick Nash. The Machine was widely viewed as powerful, progressive, and corrupt. It rewarded and punished officials based on "loyalty" while often turning a blind eye to gambling and organized crime. At the same time, it effectively promoted and implemented New Deal legislation, helping those in need and undermining the political dominance long enjoyed by business interests. Most controversially, it pushed progressive housing policy with respect to race, angering white homeowners who opposed allowing people of color into their neighborhoods.

By its sixth year in power, the Machine had earned its share of enemies; however, removing Kelly from the Mayor's office seemed impossible. Instead, his opponents proposed a wholly different idea—doing away with the mayorship altogether! In 1938 a Committee of Municipalities was formed in a special session of the House of Representatives to explore idea of a "city manager" form of municipal government for the city of Chicago.

Reuben, like many, had mixed feelings about the Machine. As a leader who valued (and practiced) honesty and integrity, he didn't approve of Kelly's corruption. At the same time, he approved of the Mayor's commitment to FDR's policies and progressive views on race. While he may have been conflicted about Kelly, however, Soderstrom thoroughly opposed the idea of a city manager. He disliked the term 'manger' for a city, believing it to be an industrial term. More importantly, he believed it was deeply undemocratic to appoint an official who should be democratically elected. Reuben brought the full force of the ISFL to bear against the measure in a contentious and raucous public hearing before the committee. As Bernice Van Der

Vries of the Chicago Heights Star reported:

Some of the Illinois State police who were on hand at all of the sessions of the general assembly to keep the relief agitators under control could have been used in the municipalities committee on Wednesday when the second hearing on the city manager bills was held. In the first place many of the committee members were not able to secure seats; in fact some were unable to get inside the door of the committee room...This was the hearing for the opponents and they were there in goodly numbers, but all represented the Illinois and Chicago Federation of Labor. The first speaker and the most violent in opposition to the bills was president of the Federation R. G. Soderstrom.<sup>495</sup>

In his speech, Reuben addressed the nature of representative democracy, articulating the role of the elected official and the reason they, and not an appointed manager, should hold the reins of government:

The will of the people should be the law of the land... I learned rather early in life that a public officer is but a public servant... It is well for the officer himself to remember it, and equally important for the people to remember it. A public officer is simply a hired man employed by the people, at a fixed salary, to do certain work. He is not in office merely because he wants to be. His only reason for being there ought to be that those he serves want him to be there. In other words, he is chosen by the people to do certain work which they must have done and their only reason for choosing him, ought to be that they believe he can do that work for them. A public officer is not supposed to think for people. People are supposed to think for themselves. He is elected rather to act for the people simply because the people are so numerous that they cannot very well act for themselves. But the beauty of our form of government is that instead of acting through somebody who rules by permission... or who rules by Divine Right, the people of our municipalities, and the State of Illinois, act through elected city officials, and elected representatives, whom they have chosen and whom they themselves can turn out of office whenever they so desire.<sup>496</sup>

In the end, Reuben swayed the legislature through both strength of words and show of force. The city manager bills went down to defeat, leaving the democratic principle of elections intact.

### ***Unions: An American Institution***

Ultimately, Reuben's fight against the city manager plan in 1938 led him to articulate a much broader vision of American democracy, as well as organized labor's role within it. America, he wrote, was founded on the principle of democratic governance through representative institutions, formal organizations legitimized by their broadness, resiliency and democratic structure. These institutions included the Congress, the office of the Presidency, and, Soderstrom argued, the American Federation of Labor. The Federation had a history, character, and mission that qualified it to sit alongside government as part of the fabric of American society. It could reasonably be said to speak for a significant and cohesive portion of the American public. Moreover, any attempt to exclude the AFL from its proper place alongside the other great American institutions would expose the country to foreign threat. Communist and fascist ideologies thrived on feelings of powerlessness and resentment within America's working class, and the best way to combat such sentiment was to ensure that the institution which most clearly represented their interests had a seat at the table. As Reuben explained in his annual Labor Day Address that year:

The American Federation of Labor has been honestly representing wage-earners throughout this land for almost six decades. It is a great cohesive economic organization, built on the very bedrock of democracy. Its every action is democratic, its executive council conclusions, its constitution, all of its policies, are subject to the decision of annual conventions..... And so the part of this message which should ring loudest and clearest in the hearts and minds of our citizenship on Labor Day is this: "That the American Federation of Labor and the

government of our country must help each other, must become one and inseparable, now and forever, in order to defeat fanaticism, in order to save America, a land which has proven to be the greatest land in the world for organized wage-earners who desire to promote justice, right, freedom and humanity.<sup>497</sup>

Reuben's view of the AFL's importance in American society was matched by an expansive vision of what a union was and could be. In the press and even within the CIO, a narrative had emerged that held that a union's *raison d'être* was collective bargaining. Soderstrom and Olander, however, rejected such thinking. To them, the right to organize—not bargain—was of primary importance. Yes, unions bargained, but they did and could do so much more. Unions enabled free speech and free assemblage through publications and demonstrations. They were a vehicle for the development of labor law through the legislative process. They provided an opportunity for their constituents to fully and effectively participate in the public sphere. As Secretary Olander wrote:

Having the right to organize in trade unions...the workers will find relatively little difficulty in bringing about collective bargaining with employers. But collective bargaining with employers of itself does not bring the right to organize, does not protect the workers in their rights of free press, free speech and free assemblage, does not protect their right to strike, and gives them no opportunity to engage in activities as citizens necessary to protect their status under the law as workers. Collective bargaining is necessary as a part of trade union activities, but is extremely dangerous as a substitute for those activities.<sup>498</sup>

As Reuben's and Victor's writings demonstrated, the difference between the AFL and the CIO transcended the argument of craft vs. industrial organization. Soderstrom built a vision of what unions were (and could be) that was completely at odds with the mission of Lewis and the CIO. Lewis wanted to lead a rebellion, and saw his membership as troops he could marshal through mutual grievance and sheer force of will. Soderstrom's ISFL, in contrast, sought to create a "fifth estate," a vast federation of individual unions founded on American democratic principles and united in common cause. It was this question—what was the meaning of union?—that was at the core of the fight between the Reuben's AFL and Lewis's CIO. It would not be answered anytime soon.

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# THE FEDERAL LABOR STANDARDS ACT

Organized labor won a major battle in 1938 with the passage of the Federal Labor Standards Act (FLSA), the capstone legislation of the New Deal. Sponsored by Sen. Robert Wagner of New York, the law was signed by President Roosevelt on June 24 and became effective as of October 24, 1938, setting limits on hours, wages, and child labor. The law set a national minimum wage of 25 cents an hour, rising to 30 cents the following year, and 40 cents by 1945. It also set the eight-hour workday, after which employers were required to pay overtime equal to one and a half times the normal hourly rate of pay. Some unions expressed the fear that the minimum wage would become the maximum wage. Fortunately, Section 18 addressed that issue: “No provision of this act shall justify any employer in reducing a wage paid by him which is in excess of the applicable minimum wage under the act.” Children could not work before the age of 14, and those between the ages of 14 and 16 had to obtain permits. They were also forbidden from working in manufacturing, mining, the operation of motor vehicles, helping on motor vehicles, or for messenger services. The FLSA additionally set limits on when students could work: only outside school hours, not more than three hours on a school day or eight hours on a non-school day, and only between the hours of 6:00 am and 7:00 pm.

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# REUBEN'S JOURNAL

In the opening months of 1938, Reuben Soderstrom—typographer, reporter, speechwriter and editorialist—engaged in a very different type of writing: a journal. The project didn't last long; Reuben kept his diary for less than six months. Still, Soderstrom's daily account provides the reader with a unique window into the prolific leader's life, one that his articles and speeches, while eloquent, could never impart. Going beyond his thoughts and opinions, Reub's journal allows us to see him as a man. We experience how he lived—his schedule, habits, and process. It paints the picture of Reub the man: a dedicated father, husband, and friend.

## LIFE IN STREATOR

By 1938 Reuben had three separate bases of operation—his family home in Streator, a main office in Springfield, and a second workplace in Chicago. He was constantly on the move between these three destinations, spending as little as a day or as much as three in a given place depending on the task at hand. This meant that in many ways Reub lived multiple lives, each complete with their own circles, friends, interests and even beds.

Soderstrom spent most of his weekends in Streator. He would typically arrive Friday afternoon or Saturday morning, leaving on Monday. While at home he and his wife Jeanne were active and social, always visiting with family and friends. They began the year hosting Jeanne's sister Maggie for a full month, and entertained her other sisters later that spring.<sup>499</sup> They went out on the town with friends, particularly Dr. and Mrs. Carroll and the Purcells.<sup>500</sup> Together they would go out for dinner at the Plumb Hotel or take in a show at "the Plumb," the historic opera house Reub had studied at as a child, now converted by Publix Theaters into a movie house. Reuben loved the cinema, sometimes catching two shows a week.<sup>501</sup> He took special note of who and what he saw, thrilling at the exploits of Clark Gable or mesmerized by the glamour of Claudette Colbert.

### ENTRY ONE: SNOW WHITE (MARCH 26 / APRIL 1)

*One of the entertainment highlights of the entire year for Reuben was taking Jeanne and her sisters to see the groundbreaking animated film *Snow White* as soon as it came to Streator.<sup>502</sup> The show was an instant success, and in short order a slew of stories and plays sprang up across the nation to take advantage of its popularity. In Urbana, Reuben's own daughter Jean starred in one of these Disney-inspired works, playing the role of *Snow White* in a *Gymkhana* performance play.<sup>503</sup>*

Of all Reuben's and Jeanne's guests, none were more treasured (or frequent) than their own children. Their son Carl, now a young man studying medicine in St. Louis, would make a trip once a month to Streator via Bloomington to visit his family. Of course, Carl was also keen to visit his sweetheart Virginia (even if it was under the watchful eye of her mother, who made the trip into Streator with her daughter to chaperone).<sup>504</sup> Daughter Rose Jean, affectionately nicknamed "sister," proved to be a constant presence in Reuben's life during the first half of 1938. She began the year in Streator with the family before returning to the University of Illinois, and would often come home for a weekend break from her studies.<sup>505</sup> Reuben enjoyed taking his daughter out for a ride or over to the local candy store, Hill Brothers, for some special sweets.<sup>506</sup> When she couldn't visit him, Reub would drive to be with his daughter, traveling every other weekend in the spring months to Champaign.<sup>507</sup>

## ENTRY TWO: SMALLPOX VACCINATION (FEBRUARY 27)

*While most of Reuben's trips to Champaign were merely social, at least one was of a more serious nature. When a series of smallpox cases began to emerge in the Champaign-Urbana area, University President A.C. Willard mandated that all students and faculty be vaccinated.<sup>508</sup> Like many other students, Jeanne was scared - both of the smallpox and the possible side effects of the vaccine itself. Hearing the fear in her voice, Reuben and Jeanne rushed to their daughter's side. By the time they arrived, however, Jean's sorority had already been vaccinated.*

In the warm summer months, Reuben took his family on weekend road trips. He loved driving his Buick on motor rides to nearby Rockford, Dixon, and other smaller towns along the Rock River or near Rock State Park.<sup>509</sup> He also took the family on destination drives, visiting the big city of Chicago that June.<sup>510</sup> He made several trips to see his sister in Kankakee, their mother Anna frequently in tow. Sometimes he would simply pay a visit or take her for a nice dinner at the Kankakee Hotel; other times he would pick his sister up along the way to an outing so she could join in the family fun.<sup>511</sup>

## ENTRY THREE: MOTHER'S DAY (MAY 8)

*Reuben wasn't only a loving husband and father; he was also a dutiful son. By 1938 his mother, Anna, had moved back to Streator after living with Reub's sister Olga in Kankakee. Reuben would frequently make the journey across the local tracks to visit her and take her along on family rides. On special occasions he would take her out for a nice dinner at the beautiful Plumb Hotel.*

Reuben's journal makes it abundantly clear that although his work did not afford him many days with his family, he made sure to make every moment count. These entries give the reader a clear picture of an active and affectionate home life, filled with journeys and enjoyment throughout the year. These days were a sweet and necessary counterbalance to many nights he would be forced to spend far from home, burning the midnight oil in the hotels and back rooms of Springfield and Chicago.

## CHICAGO AND SPRINGFIELD

While Reuben's weekends were grounded in Streator, his working week was split between his offices in Chicago and Springfield. Although he typically visited both cities in a given week, Reuben rarely kept to a set schedule; his journal shows an itinerary driven by the needs of the moment rather than any fixed timetable. He could start a week with one day in Chicago followed by three in Springfield, then do the exact opposite the week following. Interspersed among these stays were visits to other cities for meetings, speeches, and the like.

Although flexible in his schedule, Reuben was still a creature of habit. While where he went on a given day was subject to change, how he got there and where he stayed rarely varied. When traveling to Chicago, Reuben almost always took the Santa Fe train, preferring a leisurely train ride over a long drive. While on the train it was common for Reub to strike up a conversation with his fellow passengers. In entry after entry, Reuben details cabin conversations he had with friends and acquaintances, discussing "many things of mutual interest".<sup>512</sup> He'd even enjoy a good talk with a political opponent, like a representative from the anti-saloon league.<sup>513</sup>

Although he'd occasionally come up just for the day, Reuben's Chicago stays typically lasted three days, with two nights spent at the Eastgate hotel. A fifteen-story building on the city's north side just a ten minutes' walk from Navy Pier, the hotel became a second home (and makeshift office) for the union president.<sup>514</sup> He'd often

pass the windy nights writing letters, preparing speeches or catching a show at the Chicago Theatre.<sup>515</sup>

#### **ENTRY FOUR: MAIL TRAIN (FEBRUARY 25)**

*If Reuben was making a day trip or had to stay late into the evening, he would typically ride the late-night mail train back to Streator.<sup>516</sup> Mail trains and cars were mobile postal sorting stations, using a system of cranes to exchange mail at smaller stations without stopping.<sup>517</sup> While some mail service ran mail exclusively, most—including the Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe Baggage Mail Combination Car No. 2055—combined with passenger trains for late-night redeye travelers. This service allowed Reuben to leave Chicago as late as 10:30 at night and still make it home to Jeanne.*

Like his days in the Chicago office, Reub's Springfield visits were usually multi-day affairs. For these journeys Reuben most often preferred to drive his beloved Buick. Unlike his Eastgate Chicago stays, however, Reuben's nights at the Springfield Leland Hotel were far from solitary affairs. He spent many evenings meeting with labor and political leaders in the lobby, or in the adjoining tavern over "horseshoes" (the hotel's signature dish).<sup>518</sup>

#### **ENTRY FIVE: HITCHHIKING (JANUARY 13)**

*To pass the hours, Reuben would occasionally drive with a companion or pick up a hitchhiker.<sup>519</sup> Unlike today, most people "thumbing a ride" on the road were people Reub knew - locals making a trip into or out of town. Even when the hitchhiker wasn't known, it was still common practice to offer a ride. As Reuben's friend Bob Gibson later recounted "My dad hitchhiked...he commuted like that, he'd stay all week with his brother and then he'd hitchhike home on Friday evening and back on Sunday evening...people picked up hitchhikers without even thinking about it. Wouldn't dare now."<sup>520</sup>*

#### **ENTRY SIX: THE LELAND HOTEL (FEBRUARY 1)**

*In Reuben's day, the Leland was no ordinary hotel. It was the epicenter of Illinois political life, the place where everyone and anyone who wanted to make a deal would stay or meet. When it opened, books of the day described it as having "no superior in the Western States. There is no State capitol in the Union that can boast of a finer house."<sup>521</sup> When the hotel burned down in 1908, the city considered it so important that its leaders rebuilt it, fearing they would otherwise lose its position as the Illinois capital. It was here amongst the hotel's "Olde English" décor of rich leather and velvet that Reuben held meetings with Judges, Senators, and more.<sup>522</sup>*

Whether in Springfield or Chicago, Reuben's days were typically filled with a wide range of ever-changing duties. Some days were filled with public hearings and commission meetings.<sup>523</sup> At other times Reuben spent hours engaged on correspondence, reading a never-ending flood of mail and dictating responses.<sup>524</sup> Most of Reuben's time, however, was spent receiving callers to his office. They would come with all kinds of petitions; many approached seeking his blessing (and help) running for higher office. Others came with pleas for help. Reuben was an influential and powerful figure on the Illinois legislative scene. From state representatives to Supreme Court justices, Reuben worked to secure and extend support to those who he believed could advance the cause of labor.<sup>525</sup> He expected results, however, keeping a close and conspicuous eye on the politicians to whom he'd extended his hand.

#### **ENTRY SEVEN: A POLITICAL MIND (MAY 31)**

*When the Illinois legislature was open in a special session that spring and summer, Reub attended every vote, watching the count from the galleys.<sup>526</sup> Under his instruction pro-labor legislators introduced bills on old age*

*assistance, unemployment insurance, housing, and more.*<sup>527</sup>

#### **ENTRY EIGHT: ADVOCATE FOR THE POOR (JANUARY 15)**

*While many of those who called on Reuben were powerful and influential, Reuben also met with those in need. Many like the widow in this letter sought and received Reuben's help in receiving their just due for the wrongs and injuries they suffered.*<sup>528</sup>

While he was clearly a political player, Reuben's chief duty was and remained acting as the leader of the Illinois State Federation of Labor. Reub brought several existing locals into the ISFL fold while helping to create new unions as well.<sup>529</sup> He was an in-demand speaker, criss-crossing the state in his Buick to deliver speeches to unions, clubs and councils across the state.<sup>530</sup> During this six-month period alone, Reuben addressed over twenty organizations in a variety of forums, from low-profile local meetings to radio programs and banquets held in his honor.<sup>531</sup>

#### **ENTRY NINE: RADIO PERSONALITY (MARCH 27)**

*One of Reuben's favorite forums was radio. On several occasions, Reub participated in panel discussions on the WCFL radio station, sharing the microphone with other labor luminaries and old friends like Father Maguire.*

### **GONE TOO SOON**

Reuben's journal shows us a man on the move, acting with boundless energy as he steadily worked to grow the Illinois labor movement and protect its interests in law, all the while remaining a loving and engaged husband, father, and son. Unfortunately, the journal proved one burden too many; by early June Reuben's entries began to taper off, with his last entry made June 23. While the journal had run its course by 1938, the man these entries allow us to know had decades more work ahead of him before his story would be complete.



# CHAPTER 28

## 1939

### “WE DON’T WANT FASCISM, WE DON’T WANT COMMUNISM, WE DON’T WANT WAR!”

*“All the necessities and luxuries—material things in life—are produced by the magic hand of labor. All liberty, freedom, equality, recognition of justifiable rights of toilers—spiritual things—that human beings naturally desire, are created and protected by the magic power made possible by united action of wage-earners within unions and through the movement of labor.”*

-Reuben Soderstrom  
1939 ISFL Convention

#### NATION ENTERS UNCERTAIN TIMES

##### *The Middle Class Rises from the Extremes*

Reuben surveyed the economic scene with a wary eye. Illinois and the nation had just begun to inch past the darkest days of the Great Recession, but the damage it caused continued to linger. Over the past year the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), its budget gutted 36% by national austerity measures, had curtailed projects like building locks on regional canals and rivers. Soderstrom’s Streator was hit especially hard; the beleaguered city accounted for nearly a quarter of total unemployment in LaSalle County.<sup>532</sup> For Reuben, and the state, the message was clear; federal support could no longer be counted on. If citizens wanted legislative solutions to their economic grief, they’d have to turn to the halls of Springfield, not Washington.

Relief would not come easy. The state house had been rocked by the same political storm that swept the country. 1938 had been a wave election for the Republicans as voters blamed those in power for the Depression’s resurgence. Nationally, FDR’s Democrats lost 72 seats in the House and 7 in the Senate, although they retained the majority. In Illinois, however, Republicans took control of the State House of Representatives after the Democrats lost 11 seats in a wave election. The losses included a sweep in Reuben’s old 39<sup>th</sup> district, where both Reuben’s Democratic successor and the ISFL-endorsed Republicans lost to J. Ward and Elmer Hitter.<sup>533</sup> In one sudden movement the political pendulum had swung from one extreme to the other.

In so many ways, the close of the 1930s was a time of extremes, of devastating poverty and conspicuous wealth. For nearly a third of the nation, life was defined by bitter misfortune. Floods sunk the fortunes of nearly a million men, women, and children along the Ohio River while dust storms buried the hopes and dreams of entire towns in the American southwest. On the other extreme sat the rise of “Café Society,” populated by glamour girls and men about town like Brenda Frazier and Alfred Vanderbilt. While the former lived “ill-housed, ill-clad, and ill-nourished,” the latter reveled in garish nightclubs and balls, downing drinks and filling gossip columns. In fact, the biggest difference between the lavish lifestyles of the Café class and

their gilded-era counterparts was the conspicuousness of it. These new “celebutantes” were plastered on everything from the cover of LIFE to soap ads, their every move covered breathlessly.

In between these two extremes, however, rose a new emerging group; a class that was neither high nor low, but in the middle. Empowered by labor’s efforts, this group—which by some estimates was two-thirds of the American populace—had the work, income, and most importantly the leisure time to enjoy life’s simple pleasures.<sup>534</sup> They took family trips and indulged in hobbies like bingo and collecting. They spent evenings listening to Benny Goodman’s band and the adventures of Amos ‘n’ Andy. They bought their children Flash Gordon disintegrator guns and Shirley Temple dolls. Neither rich nor poor, they knew enough to want for more and had enough to believe it possible, if not for themselves then at least for their children. They were the laboring, emerging middle class, and they were the people Reub was fighting for.

### *Soderstrom Finds New Ground with Old Foes*

The return of Republican rule was of clear concern for labor. Still, there was reason for Reuben to hope. The Illinois Republican party had won largely by wooing Democratic constituencies rather than opposing them, including labor. The Republican Party platform promised \$30 monthly minimum pensions and a raise in occupational disease pay, and Reuben intended to hold them to those commitments. Before the 61st session of the Illinois General Assembly even began, Reub went to the press declaring “the AF of L would support the Republican party platform pledges” as the new majority advanced its agenda.<sup>535</sup> It was a canny move; by swearing to work with the new majority, Reub was likewise leaving no doubt that Illinois labor remembered the promises made to it.

Soderstrom also attempted to strike a conciliatory tone with the CIO. Formally the Committee of Industrial Organization, Lewis’s insurgent unions had formalized their split with the AFL at their 1938 convention, renaming themselves the Congress of Industrial Organization. Despite the national split, Reuben hoped to maintain a working relationship with the state CIO, especially with regard to legislative policy. Although he and Ray Edmundson, State Regional Director and Reuben’s CIO counterpart, did not meet directly, they held a dozen major legislative proposals in common. Those proposals included increased relief for the unemployed, higher old-age pensions, two weeks’ paid vacation, a state wages and hours law, a shorter work week, wage guarantees, an increase in injury compensation, and a “little Wagner” act applying the protections of that national legislation to intrastate commerce.<sup>536</sup>

Most important for Reub, however, was the Government Housing Act. This bill, which would give property tax exemption for government housing projects, was for Reuben a matter of smart policy and social justice. The exemption would make it possible to clear away slums and replace them with public housing, providing affordable homes for the poor while creating new jobs for the building trades in the process. The exemption would also open the state up to over \$100,000,000 in federal funds, bringing national dollars into the state when it needed it most. Despite these obvious benefits, many conservative congressmen feared the loss of tax revenue, and were skeptical about any project with “progressive” overtones.

Luckily, labor received a boost from an unexpected source. The Illinois State Supreme Court, which so often ruled against progressive legislation, found in February of 1939 that the city of Peoria’s proposed \$2,500,000 housing project was of a charitable nature, and was hence exempt from taxation. This ruling made additional legislation unnecessary. Reuben was jubilant, proclaiming at the time that the decision “clears the road for housing authorities to go ahead with projects all over Illinois.”<sup>537</sup> In the months to come, Reuben and Olander worked to make sure those housing projects became a reality, with Chicago, Springfield, and East St. Louis all pursuing grants to knock down slums and build low-income housing. “We were successful indeed, in the matter of twisting huge sums of additional money out of government agencies to help working people.”

Reuben proudly told the Illinois delegates later that year. “Just think, \$100,000,000 for housing projects... will mean steady work for a whole year for approximately 120,000 people who make their livelihood in the building industry and industries related thereto.”<sup>538</sup>

In addition to the Republicans, the CIO, and the courts, Soderstrom was also able to work with employer alliances, at least on some issues. By now, Reuben and his legislative team had developed a clear, constructive path for introducing and passing legislation. As Soderstrom later explained to historian Milton Derber:

We worked out a procedure of having representatives of labor sort of get together and incorporate in what I term a very stiff bill all of the things desired by the representatives of labor in the State of Illinois. This rather stiff bill is presented to the General Assembly. We know it cannot be enacted but it's referred, usually to the Committee of the Judiciary, and the employers, they appear before that committee and the representatives of labor appear before the committee and they charge of course that type of legislation can't be passed, that it would be too costly for industry to try to meet the demands provided for in such legislation; and they themselves usually are agreeable to have a committee from the judiciary committee appointed to take charge of the conferences between the representatives of labor and the representatives of the employer.<sup>539</sup>

This “joint committee” process allowed Reuben to negotiate directly with employers, and it had already led to pioneering legislation on several fronts. It had also helped unite labor and manufacturing against a common enemy: insurance companies. For years, Reub argued, these hugely profitable and largely unaccountable organizations had extracted huge sums from business owners for occupational disease and workman's compensation, yet the workers these payments were meant to protect received only a tiny fraction of this money. What if instead of arguing with each other, the ISFL and IMA teamed up on legislation that increased employee payouts by limiting what insurance companies can charge business? This proposition had helped pass unemployment compensation two years ago, and in 1939 the two opponents teamed up again to increase workman's compensation and occupational disease payouts. Soderstrom did his part, publicly supporting Illinois business in their efforts to lower insurance rates. “Illinois employers paid \$22,000,000 for workman's compensation insurance last year while only \$9,000,000 was paid as benefits to workmen,” he told reporters in a story that made front-page news. “It would seem that insurance companies could pay twice the awards they pay now and still make millions. The increase in compensation awards could be made without increasing the rates to employers.”<sup>540</sup> The IMA, meanwhile, helped Soderstrom increase worker compensation payouts from 50% to 66% of a worker's wage – all without burdening business.

It was a major success, and it augured well for Reub. By early spring two of his most important policy goals were already accomplished, albeit through unusual channels and with unlikely allies. Soderstrom had reasoned with his rivals, relying on mutual self-interest to overcome animosity.

### *IMA and CIO Stab at Labor's Back*

It wasn't long, however, before his opponents reminded Reub how limited this partnership was. The Illinois Manufacturer's Association, now under the leadership of Legislative Director Allan Gordon, fiercely opposed the Wages and Hours law, a bipartisan piece of legislation limiting hours and setting minimum wages in an attempt to “eliminate sweat shops, long hours, and insufficient pay.”<sup>541</sup> Gordon had a predictably different take; in a speech before the Illinois Automotive Trade Association, he hysterically warned Soderstrom's legislation would “make the director of labor a dictator over business...If there is to be a ceiling on hours there is apt to be a ceiling on profits.”<sup>542</sup>

Such dire predictions and hyperbolic threats didn't surprise anyone, least of all Reuben. He expected such behavior from the IMA. What he hadn't anticipated, however, were the attacks he received next. When Rep.

Joseph Perry introduced labor's "little Wagner" bill, anti-union forces responded with a deadly alternative of their own which would effectively end labor's ability to strike. IMA Senator Simon Lantz proposed what he called an "Employment Peace" bill. This act, which Reuben thrashed as "reactionary," created a state version of the National Labor Relations Board just as Perry's bill did. However, it also introduced unprecedented restrictions meant to strangle union efforts. In this bill, unions had to file an "intention to strike" notice at least 10 days in advance, then wait until the state labor board formed an "acceptable" bargaining unit before stopping their labor. As Reub explained:

The Lantz bill is the most insidiously dangerous labor proposal ever submitted for consideration in the Illinois legislature...The requirement of the bill for a ten-day notice before a strike is a trick clause...when examined in the light of other provisions prohibiting strike activities until after an alleged 'bargaining unit' satisfactory to the proposed labor board is set up. This is (a) procedure which in some instances has required a year or more under the national labor relations act.<sup>543</sup>

Lantz knew he couldn't get his bill passed out of the normal senatorial committees, so instead he turned to the agricultural committee to move his bill to the senate floor. When questioned why the senator was pushing a labor bill through a farming committee, he told the press that "the agricultural interests of Illinois believe this measure to be of utmost importance as a means of affording both employer and employee the opportunity to insure prosperity and a continuation of that buying power which is based on friendly industrial relations."<sup>544</sup> Reuben, incredulous, replied that the only connection this bill had to farming was that it would "hog tie labor."<sup>545</sup> Still, Lantz was able to marshal several elements of the farming community behind him, including the Illinois Agricultural Association, by arguing that being anti-labor was the best way to keep farming costs low.

Faced with such an existential threat, Reuben turned to the CIO for support. He and Edmundson issued a joint statement declaring that it was time the rival groups provided a "solid front" on the issue.<sup>546</sup> The Lantz bill, they warned, was "designed to support company unions" and "would arouse misunderstanding, fear, suspicion, distrust and hatred on all sides."<sup>547</sup> Though it favorably passed the agricultural committee, Soderstrom was able to rob the bill of enough support to prevent it from winning a full floor vote.

With the bill defeated, Reub returned to Perry's bill, only to be stabbed in the back by his supposed ally. In a last-minute maneuver, Edmundson announced the CIO would oppose the "little Wagner" bill. Jealous of Soderstrom's influence with the Assembly and especially the Governor (who would appoint the state labor board members), Edmundson declared that his organization would not support any "little NLRB" that may favor the AFL.<sup>548</sup> The move infuriated Reuben, who could scarcely believe that a group supposedly representing labor would declare it better to leave workers without legal protection than give them a board which might be friendly to the AFL.

By the close of the session, the turbulent legislative environment had produced decidedly mixed results. The ISFL was able to increase injury compensation, old age pensions and unemployment compensation. It also passed a state employees' annuity and benefit system, without any CIO support. However, the five-day week, two weeks paid vacation, wages and hours bill, and the "little Wagner" act all failed to become law. Reuben couldn't afford to linger on those losses, however; not too long after the session's close he would be called to Washington to help fix labor's apprenticeship system.

## REUBEN TACKLES MODERNIZATION AND EDUCATION

As he had done before, Governor Horner sent Reuben Soderstrom to represent Illinois at the Conference on Labor Legislation in Washington, D.C. Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins, who hosted the event, turned to

Reub to help solve labor's education crisis, appointing him Chairman of the Committee on Training and Re-Training of Skilled Workers. Undaunted, Reuben took head-on one of the most contentious issues of the day within labor: mechanization.

Automation was one of the most troubling issues facing labor. It was, many believed, a primary reason for the Great Depression's persistence. As stated at the ISFL convention a few years earlier:

You know, friends, this business depression is over for the people on the other side. It is over for the great corporations and the great industries...And this depression ought to be over for the men and women of labor, too. It would have been over for them had it not been for the installation of so many speed-up systems and labor-saving devices. Why, friends, even if full-fledged prosperity should return, not more than half the eleven million people no unemployed would be able to find jobs because of the installation of these labor-saving devices.<sup>549</sup>

But while mechanization ended some jobs, it created others—whole new professions, even. Soderstrom had experienced this firsthand; as a linotype operator, his profession was one created by mechanization when complex machinery replaced the practice of hand-setting type. The key, Reub knew, lay in affordable, effective education. Current workers had to be trained on new technologies. To this end his committee urged the formation of apprenticeship programs at the state level. They also formulated a set of guidelines for apprenticeship programs, such as hours of instruction and on the job training.<sup>550</sup>

Of course, all this was something Reub had been working on in Illinois for years. For this very purpose, union building trades had already helped establish the Washburn Trade School of Chicago, where unemployed workers could learn new skills under the supervision of skilled mechanics from the union trades, with the federal government providing half the revenue. Nationally, labor had overseen the introduction of apprenticeship laws in 11 states, apprentice councils in another 23 states and the formation of 400 joint labor and management apprenticeship programs, all thanks to the craft unions.<sup>551</sup>

Reuben didn't stop there, however. Such efforts were, in his opinion, "A step in the right direction, but does not solve the problem. It merely points one way to a solution."<sup>552</sup> It wasn't enough to re-train workers; Soderstrom wanted to actively end employment in obsolete occupations. He encouraged all employees under the age of 40 in a threatened trade or industry to switch careers. At the ISFL Executive Board Meeting later that year, he further adopted a resolution encouraging efforts to prevent young workers from entering a trade or industry "on its way out."<sup>553</sup> Soderstrom was determined to turn Illinois into a state on the cutting edge of labor, and that meant modernizing the workforce as well as the machinery.

## SPRINGFIELD HOLDS CONVENTION FOR THE AGES

### *Soderstrom Denounces Fascism, Communism, and War*

While Reuben was working hard improving labor in DC, darker events were unfolding abroad. On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, one week after signing a nonaggression pact with Moscow. Two days later France and the United Kingdom declared war on Germany, but it was already too late. The Nazis and the Soviets divided the beleaguered Polish nation between them, and another World War began.

In the United States, the vast majority of citizens opposed direct involvement. Although they sympathized with the Allies and despised the Fascist and Communist regimes, the general public—made wary by the experience of the last Great War—were loath to involve themselves in yet another European conflict. Speaking just days after these events at the Illinois State Federation of Labor Conference in Springfield,

Reuben unambiguously denounced the hostile nations which brought this war as well as the ideologies they represented:

The American Federation of Labor stands four-square for Americanism against all dangers which threaten it. In our union halls, at every meeting, our membership is schooled in patriotic devotion to the Stars and Stripes and all that our flag typifies among the nations of the world...No true American, no true member of the American Federation of Labor will support either Communism or Fascism. When Fascism or Communism menaces the government of the United States it becomes the duty of the American Federation of Labor to rally to the support of our government.<sup>554</sup>

Soderstrom made clear his contempt for how these regimes treated their own citizens. He particularly singled out Nazi treatment of the Jewish community as especially hateful. "We have the natural feeling of sympathy today for the Jews," he said. "We would like to stop persecution of the Hebrews, not merely because they are Hebrews, but because persecution is wrong."<sup>555</sup>

"We don't want fascism, we don't want communism, we don't want war!" he told the assembled crowd. Peace, he argued, was itself a moral good, and Germany's and Russia's belligerent actions were an indictment of their respective ideologies, proof of their corrosive and corrupt nature. "These subversive forces are today causing international complications precipitating war between nations across the sea," he told the crowd. "Germany has fascism and is at war. Soviet Russia has communism and the representatives of communism entered into an alliance with Hitler, which became a factor in starting this new world war."<sup>556</sup>

Good actors, in contrast, could be identified by their dedication to peace, even when it was hard. This did not mean inaction; Soderstrom called on the United States to be "vigilant and active that the fascist-communist menace may be definitively stopped while there is still time to cope with them by peaceful means." In the end, though, Reuben declared that "the best way for labor to preserve peace is to follow the leadership of the American Federation of Labor, which is advocating a national policy of strict neutrality in the hope that such a policy will keep our country out of this war."<sup>557</sup>

Though Reuben hewed to the present AFL party line of neutrality, he also prepared his audience for the possibility of war. He encouraged a renewed patriotism among the labor faithful. "Our allegiance, as pledged anew in these presidential addresses at every convention, cannot be too often repeated and emphasized," he declared before Illinois labor. "Let us make the patriotic influence of the American Federation of Labor felt more and more throughout the length and breadth of the land."<sup>558</sup> He also called for increased urgency. "This is no time for star gazing," he chastised. "This is the time for action."<sup>559</sup> If peace did fail despite all efforts, Reub did not rule out military action. As he told the audience in his closing remarks, "Not a single foreign soldier should ever be permitted to set foot on American soil. If they do come to our shores for the purpose of military invasion, I know the men of labor would meet them... and flock to the colors and would help drive such invaders out of our country."<sup>560</sup> Still, the tenor of his message was unmistakably clear. Newspapers throughout the state carried the similar headlines the following day: "Soderstrom Says American Labor Desires Peace."<sup>561</sup>

### ***The CIO: "Counterfeit Industrial Organization"***

While subversive forces attempted to menace the peace abroad, domestic organizations attempting to do likewise at home were, to Reuben, no less destructive than their foreign counterparts. Speaking to the convention delegates, Soderstrom didn't hesitate to link Hitler's actions to those of Lantz, Edmundson and John L. Lewis. For him, these men, working through organizations like the Illinois Agricultural Association and the Congress for Industrial Organization were bomb-throwers, more interested in sowing conflict than

engaging in the hard work of peace. “The Illinois Agricultural Association is interested in having a row with organized labor, in having the farmer fight the worker,” Reub bemoaned. “The Congress for Industrial Organization is even worse because it is interested in having working people fight working people.”<sup>562</sup> Still smarting from the CIO’s betrayal earlier that year, Reuben singled out the CIO for particular condemnation and ridicule:

Last year the CIO was known as the Committee for Industrial Organization. This year it is known as the Congress of Industrial Organization. They have changed their name. Had John L. Lewis asked me how to rename the Committee... and retain the letter ‘C’ in the abbreviation ‘CIO’ I would have suggested substituting the word ‘counterfeit’ for the word ‘committee’ and name it the great ‘Counterfeit Industrial Organization.’ The American Federation of Labor is the only real labor movement in America.<sup>563</sup>

If he wanted, Reub could have gone even further (as many others did) and claim the “C” stood for communist. The well-known connection of the CIO to the Communist Party had spurred a flurry of resignations and revolt within the organization. Communist influence in the National Maritime Union (NMU), a prominent CIO union, had become so pervasive that two New Orleans officials quit in protest. Arthur Thomas, the district executive committee chairman of the Gulf District, opposed the “bureaucratic dictatorship” set up by the “top officialdom in New York” and the union having its “policies formed by the Communist Party.” F.P. O’Donohue, business agent for the Houston branch of the NMU, left due to his conviction that “all the officials in the union who do not go down the line with the Communist Party clique are being hampered at every turn.”<sup>564</sup>

Homer Martin, president of the United Automobile Workers Union of America, formerly affiliated with the CIO and now back with the AFL, called the rival federation’s first-ever convention “a fiasco.” He also charged that John L. Lewis made a deal with the Communist Party to destroy the AFL. Martin claimed to know from first-hand experience that the CIO representatives were instructed to secretly carry on character assassination campaigns against “all sincere leaders” of the AFL.<sup>565</sup> To Reub, CIO stories like these only served to reinforce what he’d already learned during the legislative session—the CIO, in its current form, was more interested in hurting the AFL than it was in serving the workers it claimed to represent.

### *President Green Addresses Illinois Delegates*

The month leading up to the 1939 Illinois Labor Convention had been a chaotic time, to say the least. In that short period the world had witnessed the Nazi invasion of Poland, the British and French declaration of war, the US declaration of neutrality, and—the day before the convention’s start—the Soviet invasion of Poland from the east. Reuben was now used to sleepless nights spent conferring with his advisors, crafting official responses to the latest geopolitical events. By the convention’s eve, he felt no news could faze him; his biggest surprise, however, was yet to come.

The night before the convention was to begin, Reuben received word that William Green, the President of the American Federation of Labor, had decided to leave immediately for Springfield to address the delegates the following day. Reuben was ecstatic. Throughout his entire presidency he’d tried to bring the AFL leader to the ISFL convention, always to be politely turned down at the last minute. Finally, his Federation would not only receive the national organization’s president—a great honor in its own right—but it would do so on the eve of major world events, turning the eyes of the nation to Illinois. With mere hours to plan, the meticulous leader still left nothing to chance. He mapped out the route from the Chicago and Alton Railroad station to the convention hall and positioned every one of his 1,000 delegates to welcome the president as he arrived. They all followed as the Springfield band led the precession to the convention hall, with cabs carrying those unable to walk.<sup>566</sup> Once everyone had settled inside, Reuben took to the podium to introduce the

illustrious guest:

We have a great labor leader in America, a man whose voice rings loudly and clearly in this great labor movement, whose words appeal to the minds and hearts of the people...He is animated, not by considerations of sordid gain nor self-aggrandizement, but by a desire to help raise the standards of the working people of the country. That man is William Green, President of the American Federation of Labor. For nine long years I have awaited the pleasure and privilege of presenting to the convention of the Illinois State Federation of Labor the President of the American federation of Labor. Today that pleasure and privilege has arrived, and I now present to you William Green, the greatest trade unionist in America, the President of the American Federation of Labor!<sup>567</sup>

As Green appeared on stage to wild applause, he took care to stress how important Illinois had become to the labor movement as a whole. "I came all the way from Washington for the special purpose of bringing the greetings of the officers and members of the American Federation of Labor to this wonderful convention," he told the crowd, "And I ask you to interpret my presence here this afternoon as evidence of the very deep interest which I hold, officially and personally, in the economic, social and industrial welfare of the great constituency which you have the honor to represent."<sup>568</sup>

Green continued with a few more customary remarks and platitudes before turning to the heart of his speech: the war in Europe. Like Soderstrom had earlier that day, Green advocated for US neutrality in what he considered a "European conflict." He went much further than Reuben did, however, in calling for strict enforcement of that neutrality. While Reuben "hoped" for peace, he was clearly preparing labor for war, going so far as to tell the delegates "God grants liberty only to those who love it and are always willing to guard and defend it."<sup>569</sup> Green, in contrast, was adamantly against US involvement, willing to punish politicians who threatened it. "We must look to congress to save us and protect us from participating in European war," he declared. "Congressmen who vote to send our young men to war across the sea will hear from us when they come up for re-election."<sup>570</sup> It was a subtle difference, but one that would matter more as the conflict grew.

Still, despite their disagreements, Reuben was filled with pride as he watched President Green deliver his address. For the first time in his nine-year leadership, he had finally succeeded in bringing an AFL President to the Illinois convention, a huge honor for his state and a major accomplishment for his presidency. It was a success that augured well for the decade to come.

### ***Honors Labor's Faithful Past, Road Ahead***

The real highlight of the convention for Reuben, however, wasn't the AFL president's appearance but the honoring of his old friend and colleague, Victor Olander. That year the Executive board presented the Secretary-Treasurer with an engraved gold wrist watch in honor of his years of service. Now just shy of 66, Victor was clearly beginning to show signs of age. He was no longer associated with the International Seamen's Union, and had resigned from all his other posts and positions. He rarely had the energy to travel outside the state. But all this did little to diminish Soderstrom's respect or affection for him; he beamed with adoration as he placed the watch on his old friend's wrist.<sup>571</sup>

Vic was not the only friend that Reub honored that year. In December Father John Maguire, a nationally prominent labor advocate and a close friend of Reuben's, was honored with a testimonial dinner in Chicago. Reuben was among the list of speakers for the event, a group that included Director John Ryan of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, Chicago Mayor Ed Kelly, US Senator James Slattery, and CFL President John Fitzpatrick.<sup>572</sup> In his speech, Reuben spoke warmly of the man who had fought by his side for over 20 years. "His thorough understanding of labor and labor problems, coupled with a strong personal



sympathy for his fellowmen, has endeared him to all who know him, and his work,” Reuben said. “One out of a lifetime, such as he, walks amongst us. He can ill be spared.”<sup>573</sup>

Events like these were opportunities for Reuben to reflect on the long, often bloody road and those he’d traveled it with. By now, he had been the President of the ISFL for nine years; years which had seen the onslaught of the Great Depression, the division of the CIO, and now the start of new world war. Still, despite it all, Soderstrom not only held the organization together but grew it, enhancing its fundamental relevance in Illinois and beyond. As he accepted his ninth gavel at the federation’s annual convention, President RG Soderstrom again reaffirmed his commitment to workers, saying with pride:

This is a sufficient number of gavels so that I could lend one to each member of the United States Supreme Court, so that these justices might not only conduct their court properly, but these union-made gavels might serve as a gentle reminder that they should act fairly and impartially when considering the constitutionality of labor legislation. I say I have a significant number of gavels now to lend one to each member of the Supreme Court. Certainly I would not give one of them away. I would not allow these gavels to leave my possession permanently. I treasure them all too highly for that.<sup>574</sup>

What made Reuben such an inspirational leader was not just his management of labor but his vision for it. To him, labor was not just an organization; it was a calling:

A man or woman who joins the union does so for a noble purpose. The longer they are in the organization, the more they see its benefits. They do not look for favoritism nor privileges over their fellow-workers or co-workers. All that they ask for is a square deal, and an occasional raise in salary, in proportion to the raise in the price of the necessities of life. They are invariably proud of their calling, feel that every penny they get is honestly earned, and in many cases, more than earned, and moreover recognize that they have no right to be satisfied—completely satisfied—until every evil and injustice besetting toilers has been swept from the face of the earth...

A working-man who earns his bread in the sweat of his face, has not done his full duty to himself, to his fellow-workers and to those depending upon him until he has joined the labor union of his calling, and has become one of those who strive for the uplift of mankind. So far as this world is concerned, there has been nothing, no movement, reform or otherwise, in the whole history of the world, that has brought as much happiness into the home as the trade union movement. It has educated the working-man’s children; it has made the life of the wife and the mother cheerful, and has brought an independence into the home which could not, and would not, exist were it not for the trade union movement. A working-man today, who does not belong to the union, would be about as helpless as a new born babe were it not for the men around him who do belong to a union...

Organized labor has been on the firing line, has been a courageous warrior in the field of industrial sanitation and industrial safety and to it belongs the credit for securing the enactment and enforcement of labor laws providing for the installation of safety devices and for regular inspection of factories, and every other place where wage-earners are employed. Children have been taken out of mills, mines and factories and placed in schools where they are given the opportunity to grow up into strong, healthy, fine young men and women with sufficient training and intelligence to organize and protect themselves against the brutalities of a pernicious industrial system. It is carrying on a magnificent struggle today with stubborn and obstinate wealth to insure wage-earners against the tragedy of unemployment as well as protect them against the helplessness of old age.<sup>575</sup>

As the 1930s came to a close, Reuben looked back upon his long tenure at the helm of organized labor in Illinois. As he did in his first speech as president, Reub once again pledged at the Convention his utmost integrity to all members:

I have been your presiding officer for nine years, and in relation to my own faithfulness to the fundamental principles and the highest aspirations of the labor movement I want to here, voluntarily, on the rostrum of our Springfield convention, pledge to you and through you to the men of labor, the women of labor and to the children who will take our places, that I will remain faithful to them. There will be no dishonorable act on my part which will detract from the triumph that will come to labor as long as I remain your presiding officer.<sup>576</sup>

A new decade was about to begin—one which held more surprises in store than even Reuben could imagine.

# CHAPTER 29

## 1940

### AMERICA BECOMES THE “GREAT ARSENAL OF DEMOCRACY”

*“There should be an application of moral principles in relationships between man and man, between union and union—there should be an application of the Golden Rule in relationships between capital and labor, between employer and employees; treat all other men as you wish to be treated; observance of this principle means a repudiation of all false ideas or race superiority, of race and class hatred and of group warfare.”*

- Reuben Soderstrom  
1940 ISFL Convention

#### REUBEN WAGES WAR WITHIN AND WITHOUT

##### *The “Phony War” Ends*

For a brief moment, the world held its breath.

At least, that’s what it felt like to Reuben. The fall of 1939 had been a whirlwind of action overseas, with Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia ripping through Poland, while Britain and France declared war in response. Japan had invaded China. The world seemed on the brink of war. And then...nothing. After the fall of Warsaw on September 27 the Nazis fell silent. The Soviets had their “Winter War” with Finland, but months passed without any signs of military action from Germany. In many ways, the quiet was more disconcerting—it allowed the imagination to run wild with unchecked fear.

Reuben went about his normal activities and entertainments. Regular drives to his Springfield office with Secretary Olander to discuss the upcoming legislative year. Train rides to Chicago for an afternoon with his trusted brother and confidant, Lafe. Often they’d talk union politics over city strolls or dinner at Fred Harvey’s at Union Station. Now a member of the Chicago Federation’s Executive Council, Lafe was deeply involved in the city’s labor scene, and always filled in his brother on the latest rumbings. Other times they’d just relax, spending an afternoon at Wrigley Field to take in a Cubs game. Reub particularly thrilled at watching leftie Larry French (whom he considered the best pitcher to play the game) put away opponents with his patented knuckleball. Reuben also made frequent visits to Champaign to visit his daughter Jeanne, who was preparing to graduate with a degree in Education from the University of Illinois that spring. Sometimes he’d treat her (and himself) with an evening at the movies. “Gone with the Wind” had just hit the theaters, and Reuben, ever the film buff, was eager to see the adaptation of the Margaret Mitchell novel.

And then in an instant the pretense was shattered. On April 9, the Nazis overran Denmark in a matter of hours, destroying any hope of a “phony war.” Then fell Norway, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Belgium. But the biggest shock came on June 22 when France, long considered the best army in the world, was crushed by the German Wehrmacht. The strict neutrality that Americans had called for, including those in the labor

movement, was suddenly a thing of the past. What the future held, however, was far from certain.

### *Reuben Stands with Roosevelt*

For Reuben, 1940 was an inauspicious start for the decade to come. War was looming on the horizon, with events abroad on the lips and minds of every American. In an address to Congress on January 3, President Roosevelt urged unity in the face of such strife. Sensing their importance, Soderstrom recorded the President's words in the decade's opening issue of the Illinois State Federation of Labor:

For national unity is, in a very real and deep sense, the fundamental safeguard of all democracy. Doctrines which set group against group, faith against faith, race against race, class against class, fanning the fires of hatred in men too despondent, too desperate to think for themselves, were used as rabble-rousing slogans on which dictators could ride to power. And once in power they could saddle their tyrannies on whole nations, and on their weaker members...

I ask that all of us everywhere think things through with the single aim of how to best serve the future of our nation. I do not mean merely its future relationship to the outside world. I mean its domestic future as well—the work, security, the prosperity, the happiness, the life of all the boys and girls of the United States, as they are inevitably affected by such relationships. For it becomes clearer that the future world will be a shabby and dangerous place to live in—if it is ruled by force in the hands of a few.<sup>577</sup>

Labor remained broadly in favor of the President, especially Reuben, who worked throughout the year to demonstrate the ISFL's support of FDR and his policies. From statements of solidarity in speeches and articles, to mobilizing labor against the affliction of infantile paralysis as a "birthday present," to the President, Reub did not shy away from FDR even as he undertook an unprecedented (and controversial) campaign for a third term.<sup>578</sup> At the 58th Annual Convention of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, Soderstrom successfully pushed through a declaration "advising and urging our constituent membership and all liberty-loving citizens to aid in promoting the re-election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt" ahead of the AFL convention later that year.<sup>579</sup> Again, Illinois labor was officially all-in for Roosevelt.

### *"Soderstrom Rips Lewis"*

Not all of labor supported Roosevelt, however. While Reuben was working to re-elect the President, CIO leader John L. Lewis sought his defeat. The break between the President and Lewis had been a long time in coming, and was fueled just as much by Lewis's anger and ambition as by any substantive policy differences. According to Labor Secretary Francis Perkins, Lewis had wanted Roosevelt to make him the President's running mate, promising "all objections to a third term would disappear" if he was made the Democratic candidate for Vice President. When Roosevelt refused, Perkins claimed, Lewis became an intractable foe.<sup>580</sup> In a speech at the UMW convention that January, Lewis made his opposition to the President public, declaring "Should the Democratic National Convention be coerced or dragooned into nominating him, I am convinced that his candidacy would result in ignominious defeat."<sup>581</sup> That was just the start; after FDR was re-nominated, Lewis went so far as to stake his leadership on the President's defeat in a radio address:

I think the reelection of President Roosevelt for a third term would be an evil of the first magnitude. He no longer hears the cries of the people. I think that the election of (Republican candidate) Wendell Willkie is imperative in relation to the country's need. I commend him to the men and women of labor...If he is therefore, elected, it will mean that the members of the Congress of Industrial Organizations have rejected my advice and recommendation. I will accept the result as being the equivalent of a vote of no confidence and will retire as president of Industrial Organizations in November.<sup>582</sup>

Lewis's actions infuriated Reuben. It wasn't just his nakedly self-serving opposition to the President that drove Reub to anger; it was his active opposition to reconciliation and readiness to hurt working men and women in his increasingly personal crusade against the AFL. Lewis had already single-handedly blocked previous attempts at labor unity. According to later accounts by George Meany and Sidney Hillman, Lewis was primarily responsible for the breakdown of the earlier AFL-CIO unity negotiations. Meany recounted that when the members of the AFL-CIO unity committee presented a finished negotiated deal to Lewis in his office, "John Lewis walked over to the window, looked out the window for about ten minutes, then solemnly strode back to his desk, tore the proposal up and put it in the wastebasket without reading it."<sup>583</sup> Now Lewis was admitting publicly that he had no intention of seeking reconciliation, taking seeming joy in the division. When FDR blamed Lewis for the break in labor negotiations, he gleefully responded, "Well, that is a remarkable discovery, because I have been willing to admit it all the time."<sup>584</sup>

Opposing labor reunification was, for Reuben, bad enough. By the fall of 1940, however, Reub became convinced that Lewis had crossed the pale, abusing his influence to spur federal investigations of the AFL-affiliated Chicago Building and Construction Trades Council. As Soderstrom explained in his address to the ISFL at their convention on Rockford that September:

All that the Chicago Building Trades Council has tried to accomplish is to carry out the policy of having trade union members work only for contractors who have entered into an agreement with them. These investigators say such an agreement becomes a conspiracy in restraint of trade, becomes the basis for price-rigging or price-fixing, and that it is a violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Law. The Sherman Anti-Trust Law specifically exempts labor unions from coming under the provision act.

There are those who believe that the information upon which these indictments were based was given to the Federal Department of Justice by the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The Federal Department of Justice should not take too seriously the things that are said by the CIO.<sup>585</sup>

Why would Lewis and the CIO do such a thing? Reuben gave two reasons. The first entailed the success of the Council itself; as Reub told the crowd:

The Chicago Building and Construction Trades Council is probably the most active trades council of its kind, not only in Chicago and Illinois, but throughout the entire country as well. It has accomplished more good for its affiliated organizations than any similar trades council of its kind throughout the entire country. This tremendous success has naturally aroused some envy, and some antagonism, and enemies of labor, perhaps representatives of the CIO, certainly some very officious 'governmental tyrants' have appealed to the investigating branch of our government and inveigled the Department of Justice to initiate investigations...<sup>586</sup>

Reub believed the CIO had encouraged the probe in the hopes that they could handicap the successful AFL-affiliated council, replacing it with their own CIO-affiliated organization, and he would have none of it. "I regard this form of anti-union activity as tyranny," he thundered. The CIO was "trying to make crimes out of functions that aren't crimes at all- and trying to make criminals out of men who are not criminals at all."<sup>587</sup>

This went beyond simple jealousy and opposition, however. Soderstrom personally blamed Lewis and his vainglorious pursuit of power. From attacking the President to sabotaging unity negotiations to instigating investigations of AFL unions simply to discredit them, Lewis had done all in his ability to increase his personal stature at the expense of labor broadly, and Reub had had enough. The ISFL president, who just a few years earlier had eschewed Green's heated words against Lewis, tore into the man with rhetorical ferocity:

John L. Lewis has become the most imaginative, the most efficient, the most experienced truth-twisting windbag that this nation has yet produced. When John L. Lewis tells you that the President of the United States will meet with ‘Ignominious defeat’—he’s just dreaming. When Lewis tells you that he will form CIO construction unions and substitute them for the regular AF of L building trades organizations, he is just talking through his hat. When he tells you that he will take those building unions and use them to destroy the American Federation of Labor he is indulging in some more imaginative prevarication.<sup>588</sup>

Newspapers throughout the state covered the fight with relish. Headlines such as “Soderstrom Rips Lewis” filled Illinois papers the following morning. The “Two Titans of Springfield” had staked their claims, and as November approached it became clearer than ever that the 1940 elections would determine not only the fate of the American presidency but the fate of labor’s leadership as well.

## AMERICAN LABOR ARMS FORCES OF FREEDOM

While the AFL and CIO differed on their support for the President, they both shared in their opposition to American military intervention. The official policy of organized labor reflected this attitude, with the 1940 AFL Legislative Program unambiguously declaring “The American Federation of Labor is unalterably opposed to our own nation becoming involved in European conflicts.”<sup>589</sup> Still, the AFL remained strongly behind Roosevelt as he ramped up the nation’s support of the allied powers, asking congress to provide \$4.8 billion for American armaments, and the development of an annual production program of 50,000 aircraft.<sup>590</sup>

This money was soon used to steer the country’s industrial capacity toward the buildup of war materials for the Allies. The British did all they could to warn Americans, especially American labor, of the existential threat the Reich posed. Delegate for the British Trade Union Congress Sir Walter Citrine attended the 1940 AFL convention and spoke to the delegates, urging them not to repeat the mistakes his people had made:

It is of special importance for us to commune together at the present moment. Fascism and Nazism are two names that describe the same basic determination and has plunged the democratic peoples of Great Britain into a new world war. Had the war come as early as 1936 the Germans would have been ready then by the pressing of a button. We, of England, made the mistake of believing that promises were performances. Do not make that mistake in America. The only thing dictators fear is force. Make haste with your re-armament program so that you be just as ready with implements of defense as are the Nazi dictators now menacing the civilization of the world.<sup>591</sup>

All the British needed were bullets, not bodies, Citrine assured:

Let me say this with all the force and sincerity that I possess, that Great Britain is determined to prosecute this war with all the physical power and financial resources possessed by the British Empire...I have seen bombs blast the bodies of our people but I have yet to see the bombs that could blast the spirit of our people. American labor can conquer the Nazi menace by producing implements of war for England—conquer the dictators in this way without firing a shot.<sup>592</sup>

And produce America did. By year’s end the nation had become, in the words of President Roosevelt, the “great arsenal of democracy.” As he told the nation in a fireside chat that December:

For us this is an emergency as serious as war itself. We must apply ourselves to our task with the same resolution, the same sense of urgency, the same spirit of patriotism and sacrifice as we would show were we at war. We have furnished the British great material support and we will furnish far more in the future. There will be no “bottlenecks” in our determination to aid Great Britain. No dictator, no combination of dictators, will

weaken that determination by threats of how they will construe that determination.<sup>593</sup>

This increase in manufacturing generated the biggest reduction in unemployment in the United States since the “Little Depression” of 1936. By the end of the year national unemployment totals had dropped to 8,000,000, with 6,000,000 more jobs predicted in the coming year.<sup>594</sup> Speaking as a guest at the ISFL convention that September in Rockville, US Labor Secretary Perkins detailed the government’s increase in production of war materials to their allies:

On the basis of our present appropriations more than 4,400,000 man-hours of labor will be created by the defense program. Of this 413,000 will be at the site of construction projects, 1,732,000 in factories of final fabrication, and 2,258,000 in the production and transportation of raw materials and semi-manufactured products. Expenditures of this sort increase the demand for consumer goods of all kinds, for food, for clothing, for automobiles, and so on. Increases in manufacturing employment require more workers in trade and service industries to serve those with more money to spend.<sup>595</sup>

While Reuben was excited to see such mass increases in employment, he wasn’t satisfied to sit back passively. It made him angry to see manufacturing interests take credit for the new hiring boom. They weren’t responsible for these gains, he argued; business had a decade to take action, and had failed. It was the war for democracy that had brought this work, and consequently Reuben believed it was the nation’s duty to bring democracy to the workplace. In his Labor Day address, Reuben spoke of the need to apply democratic principles into the world of production:

The principles of democratic organization should be extended to the world of industry. Employers should welcome the suggestion of making room for union representation in their managing and directing groups. The nation is facing a grave emergency and if the world-wide social revolution is to make progress in America, let it be the right kind of American progress. We already have a representative government. The next step is representative industrial management with labor a part of that cooperative relationship...The great industrialists and governmental spokesmen for industry should not only salute the patriotic hosts of organized labor, but in addition to that, invite them to take their place in the driver’s seat with all the other groups that have built and are building up the greatest activity in all the world, our American industry.<sup>596</sup>

This argument—who was responsible for the wartime economic and production gains and, consequently, how those gains should be distributed—would prove to be the single greatest battle labor would wage, and its outcome would have consequences for American society that would last generations. As an established union leader in one of the nation’s crucial manufacturing states, Reuben Soderstrom would play an instrumental role in shaping labor’s voice in that fight, both through his actions as ISFL President and as a member of the powerful AFL resolutions committee.

## SODERSTROM FACES LOSS

### *Father Maguire Dies*

Amidst the chaos and construction that epitomized 1940, Reuben had to face a series of increasingly personal losses. First came the death of his longtime friend and ally, Father John J. Maguire. A professor of economics and sociology at St. Viator College in Kankakee, Fr. Maguire had worked alongside Reub from the latter’s first days in labor, making forceful moral and economic arguments for worker rights before the state legislature and national audiences. Just last year Reuben had spoken on the Father’s behalf at a banquet held in his honor, telling his old friend that he looked forward to many future years together.

Sadly, that wasn't to be. On February 11, 1940, Father Maguire passed away in Miami, where he had gone in an attempt to recover from a heart ailment. Father Maguire's family had asked for his many friends to write their thoughts of him upon his death. In a personal letter to the bereaved, Reub responded with the respect and love earned through shared sacrifice, success and celebration:

I first heard Father J.W.R. Maguire about twenty-seven years ago when he was engaged in the work of lecturing. He appeared in the city of Streator at a Sunday evening course which was held at the Good Will Church and directed by a scholarly and intellectual leader by the name of John Williams. At that time Father Maguire was much concerned about the concentration of wealth in the hands of too few people and that there should be a wider distribution of the Nation's income...

Father Maguire's presence in legislative hearings became an inspiration. The galleries in the legislative halls of the Capitol Building were frequently filled with visitors attracted there by the information that Father Maguire was to participate in the hearings or the debate. He became a sort of counselor to the labor lobby and most easily their most prominent member...

Personally I loved him. His loyalty to a cause was magnificent...Tears well up in the eyes of men when his name is mentioned, prayers are wafted on the lips of those who knew and loved him for the quiet repose of his soul. May he rest in eternal peace in the fraternal hope of every member of the movement of labor in this great State.<sup>597</sup>

### ***Reuben Loses Brother Lafe***

As painful as the Father's loss to Reuben was, the worst was yet to come. Of the members of his family Reuben was arguably closest to his younger brother Lafe. The two had not only grown up together; they both became men of labor. Wanting to emulate his brother, Lafe had become a typographer and a member of the Chicago Federation of Labor, rising to the ranks of that body's executive council. He was also a devoted family man, a faithful husband and proud father, with his eldest daughter Esther prepared to graduate that year from Northwestern University. He was Reub's closest adviser and confidant, the man Reuben knew and trusted more than any other. Reub came to him many nights seeking counsel, including the night of July 26, 1940. Lafe was working late that night in the print shop; he phoned Reuben that evening to let him know he would not be home until one or two in the morning. That was all right, Reub him, he would wait for Lafe at his apartment until his work was done; they could talk then.

It was the last conversation they would ever have. That night Lafe was killed at the corner of LaSalle Street and Chicago Avenue. In a letter to Tom Courtney, State's Attorney for Cook County, Reuben detailed the affair:

My brother was riding with a printer by the name of Mr. Stonecypher, who was driving the car. Stonecypher owned the car. They were headed north on LaSalle Street. Mr. Ralph Ladwig was headed west on Chicago Avenue in another car. Ladwig disregarded the red lights and even failed to stop at the boulevard (LaSalle St.), crashing into Stonecypher's car, ripping off the door and killing my brother. Both cars were wrecked. Police testimony at the inquest showed that Ladwig had been drinking. Other information picked up by my attorney from the police brought out the fact that Ladwig has been arrested several times and on, at least, one occasion served time for grand larceny.<sup>598</sup>

Reub was overtaken with grief, a cutting emptiness tempered by anger at the man responsible. He vowed to do everything in his power to make certain the man that killed his brother could never harm anyone else again. As he told Courtney:



You are the State's Attorney of Cook County and my personal friend. While I am not vindictive and am not actuated by any feeling of revenge I am asking you to take a look at this case so that the mistake of turning loose Mr. Ladwig, who acts like he was defective, will not be added to the wrongs he has already committed.<sup>599</sup>

While working to ensure that the drunk driver who killed his brother remained behind bars, Reuben—ever the family caretaker—simultaneously undertook every effort to see that Lafe's family was cared for. A letter recovered from Reub to Professor William Johnson, Superintendent of Chicago Schools, gives just one example of the many steps Reub took to ensure the security and safety of his dead brother's wife and daughters:

Dear Mr. Johnson,

My brother, L.E. Soderstrom, met with a fatal automobile accident while returning home from work at the Journal of Commerce office in Chicago. He was a linotype operator, and the accident occurred on July 26th, 1940.

His daughter, Miss Esther Soderstrom, 5016 N. Ashland Ave., Chicago, has been employed as a "sabbatical leave substitute teacher" under your general supervision and direction during the past two years. She has successfully handled her teaching duties at the Volta, Schleg, and other public schools in Chicago. She is a graduate of the Chicago Teacher's College and has completed one hundred twelve hours of her work at the Northwestern University, which means that when she has secured eight hours more of training she will be the proud possessor of a Northwestern University B.S. degree. This needed eight hours will be attained this next semester.

The income of a linotype operator is not great and it was necessary for Esther to work before her father's fatal accident and it becomes even more so now that he is gone.

I dropped into your office last week to relate this situation to you personally but you were out of the city. Esther has a younger sister and her mother to look out for so steady employment is the thing which is most needed. Since my brother is no longer here to safeguard and protect his family, I am trying to do it for him the best that I know how. I will deeply appreciate it if you will kindly make sure that steady employment as a teacher is assigned to her.<sup>600</sup>

Reuben wasn't the only one affected by Lafe's loss. The entire Chicago labor movement was rocked by the promising leader's death. The CFL honored him with a moment of silence, followed by a statement by John Fitzpatrick, CFL President:

We are all shocked at the manner in which Lafe Soderstrom met his death. He was coming home from work, in the car of a friend, when another car crashed into him. He sustained injuries which were fatal. Lafe was just in the prime of life. Everybody in this Federation knew Lafe for many years as an active member of the Chicago Federation of Labor. He served on our executive board and on some of our important committees.<sup>601</sup>

Reuben was devastated. Lafe was his confidante and best friend. He most certainly remembered warm childhood memories growing up in Streator, fishing together, playing baseball, celebrating family Christmases, plotting local politics in their 20's and mugging for the camera in plenty of playful postcards they sent back and forth to each other. They were in many ways soulmates, raised by the same Swedish immigrants and compelled to commit their lives to laboring men and women. Reuben wept tears of grief long after his brother was gone. And as he had done once before, he coped quietly with his pain while taking care

of all those around him.

### *Governor Horner Dies*

While Lafe's death was the most personal and cutting to Reuben, another passing in 1940 marked a major change in Illinois labor and politics. On October 6, 1940, Governor Henry Horner died after a long illness. Although their relationship was long and varied, with periods of cooperation punctuated with points of conflict, Soderstrom nevertheless paid a glowing tribute to the Governor who had seen Illinois through the worst of the Great Depression. "His name will be inscribed in the history of Illinois as one of the greatest among those who have served the state as its Governor," he wrote. "He combined the virtues of a strong, capable executive, with a gentle humanitarianism in a manner that compelled the respect of all and the personal affection of every one of his vast host of friends."<sup>602</sup>

Horner's death was a further blow to the Democratic Party in Illinois, which seemed to be on the verge of a major electoral loss. Earlier that year, Soderstrom had tried to warn Democratic legislators. "Generous and helpful as the dominant political party has been to wage earners," he said, "this is beginning to look like a Republican year in Illinois, and the Democrats, in justice to themselves, should let wage earners know what they intend to do for them because only in this way can the party avoid the grave danger of being swamped."<sup>603</sup>

Unfortunately for the Illinois Democratic Party, it failed to listen. Voters, reacting in part to the New Deal and even more to charges of political corruption, voted en masse against the state Democrats, even as they helped with the overwhelming re-election of President Roosevelt. Republicans emerged from the 1940 elections with control of the Illinois Senate, House and Governorship—a clean sweep. It was a result that would prove to have lasting consequences for Soderstrom and labor in the decade to come.

## SODERSTROM LEAVES THE ITU

In 1940 a struggle between the American Federation of Labor and Reuben's International Typographical Union (ITU) forced Soderstrom to withdraw his membership from ITU Local 328, Streator, and join the Chicago Editorial Association Local No. 21690.<sup>604</sup> The ITU, a wealthy and often independent union, had been lukewarm in its support of the AFL ever since its president, Charles Howard, had helped form the rival CIO. Claiming it would follow a "middle of the road policy until labor's civil war was settled," the union refused to pay an assessment levied by the AFL to fight the insurgent group.<sup>605</sup> In response, the AFL Executive Council voted to suspend the ITU at the federation's 1939 convention.<sup>606</sup>

This posed a particular problem for Reub; the ISFL's President had to belong to a union in good standing, and the ITU no longer qualified. In the wake of the ITU's suspension, Reuben turned to the AFL-affiliated Chicago Editorial Association. The move made sense considering Reub's recent history; he had written countless editorials for the *ISFL Weekly Newsletter* and other publications, more than qualifying him to join a union which represented the editors and reporters at the Hearst-owned *Herald Examiner*.

The move to the Editors Union wasn't Soderstrom's only option, however. Widespread respect for Reuben and his efforts (not to mention the prestige of having the Illinois Federation's president in their ranks) led a number of unions to offer him membership in their union. In January of 1940 Secretary John J. Heelan of the Chicago Paper Handlers Local No. 2 wrote a letter extending an offer for Reub to join their local:

In as much as it was your personal solicitation that was responsible for this organization becoming affiliated with the Illinois State Federation of Labor, we are taking this means of offering you the opportunity to carry on the great work you have been doing in the cause of labor in Illinois.<sup>607</sup>

President Soderstrom, who also held a longtime honorary membership in the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of Chicago, responded by expressing his appreciation for Heelan's offer. He was humbled, he said, by the growing number of labor organizations willing to extend their support:

Perhaps a dozen organizations wanted to present me with a paid-up card so that my alignment with the American Federation of Labor would remain perfect... The Boilermakers, Hod Carriers and Building Service Employees were equally interested and concerned about coming to my rescue as your generous letter indicated you were.<sup>608</sup>

Local and even national newspapers took notice of the multiple offers Reuben received. In an article playfully subtitled "Soderstrom Gets Around," the Freeport Journal-Standard traced through all the different unions that Reuben was now invited to join, ending its article with Reub laughing while telling the reporter that "In addition (to the Carpenters and the Editors), I'm a trucker, and eligible to join the truckers union!"<sup>609</sup>

## CHAPTER 30

1941

# REUBEN READIES ILLINOIS LABOR FOR WAR

*“In this crucial time in the world’s history of the human race, men must take their side.”*

-Reuben Soderstrom, 1941 ISFL Convention

### LABOR AT THE READY

It was a rough-and-tumble year. From the very beginning, Reuben could tell 1941 was going to be an uphill battle. At home and abroad, sinister and self-interested forces were actively working to undermine the institutions, protections, and causes that Reub held most dear. Despite professional and increasingly personal threats, Soderstrom held the line against all comers, from foreign Fascists and Nazis to local gangsters and racketeers. He also came out swinging against those who could or should have been allies, including labor leaders in the CIO and even the new Governor, Dwight Green.

To be sure, he made mistakes. Reuben’s actions in the early months of 1941 were meant to show that he would not be cowed. His pugnacious politics, however, also cost him allies and at times landed him in fights that undermined him. His fierce protection of union rights also led him to oppose legislation his own beliefs and principles might otherwise have led him to embrace.

Yet through all the tumultuous fighting of 1941, Reuben never wavered in his support of working men and women across the world. He took meaningful action on both state and national stages that would impact how the country and organized labor approached the conflict creeping ever closer to American shores. He strengthened Illinois labor, and, with his close confidant Victor Olander, was the only official of note to win concrete gains for working men and women in the state. While other officers and politicians relied on self-serving rhetoric and bombast, Reuben used works, not words, as his measure of success.

### FIGHTING RAGES OVERSEAS

#### *The Nazi War on Unions*

As 1940 wound to a close, the war abroad pressed closer to home. It became clear to all that this was not a mere war for dominance between the Great Powers, as the last World War had been. This was a fight of principle, an assault on democratic governments and institutions of freedom by forces determined to impose an ideology of totalitarian rule. As the AFL’s Committee on International Relations reported, “With a totalitarian revolution sweeping the world, with the very foundations of our western civilization threatened by irresponsible military dictatorship seeking to dominate the world by the strategy of terror and ruthless force, mankind faces its most critical hour since the fall of Rome. Barbarism is again on the march!”<sup>610</sup>

This war on liberty and equality was waged on many fronts, including labor. Hitler was as committed to the destruction of organized labor as he was to the extermination of all “non-Germanic” colors, creeds, and

peoples. One of the first actions the Nazis took upon occupying a fallen country was to suppress its unions. From Czechoslovakia to Luxembourg, Nazi occupiers outlawed unions of any meaningful size, confiscating their property. Their leaders were sent to concentration camps or murdered outright. By the start of 1941, France's General Federation of Labor, the last major continental free trade union, was dissolved by the puppet Petain government. The General Federation's destruction left only the American Federation of Labor, Congress of Industrial Organization, and the British Trade Union Congress unbroken by Hitler.

While the United Kingdom persevered in its fight against Nazism, it continued to appeal to the democracies of the world—particularly America—to fund the fight, at minimum, out of both principle and self-interest. As Earns Bevin, the British Minister of Labor, wrote in a desperate appeal to the democracies of the world:

The present struggle for the maintenance of democracy and the right to use reason as against force in the conduct of human affairs should not have to be borne by one nation or commonwealth. It involves the fundamental rights and liberties to the human being, and all who accept these principles as their way of life should rally to the fullest possible extent in support of those who are actually in the battleline. The future progress of labor absolutely depends upon the success of the British arms...My message would be, therefore, to every lover of liberty throughout the world: pour in your arms, your money, your effort to support those who willingly risk their lives to preserve the soul of mankind.<sup>611</sup>

### *Defense Spending Brings Labor Boom*

America heeded the call. In his December 1940 fireside chat the President promised that America would “be the great arsenal of democracy,” and by 1941 Roosevelt's National Defense Program had turned billions of defense dollars into millions of jobs, with more on the way. In Illinois alone, the State Employment Service reported an employment increase of 20% over the previous year. While the report credited some of the rise to increased awareness of the department and its services, it conceded that “The largest percentage of increase occurred after the beginning of the National Defense Program. An almost immediate demand for skilled workers, especially in the metal trades, became apparent when the defense industries began to get underway.”<sup>612</sup>

Of course, an increased demand for skilled labor meant a greater need for training and education. Defense vocational schools were opened across the nation to prepare workers to build for war. U.S. Commissioner of Education John Studebaker estimated that over 1,000,000 workers would be trained by the summer of 1941. The popularity and success of these programs was the result of patriotism as much as opportunity; as Studebaker reported to Federal Security Administrator Paul McNutt:

In this far-reaching program millions of people in thousands of local communities of every state are working with heightened morale because they are actual participants in a great national effort...Patriotic American school boards have joined patriotic American citizens in general in putting both school buildings and personnel at the service of the nation.<sup>613</sup>

The burgeoning defense workforce also created a sudden need for housing. By the early spring congress had already approved over \$6.7 million for temporary housing at industrial centers and power plants.<sup>614</sup> Both in Illinois and across the country, the engines of war powered the American recovery.

Like many groups and institutions across the nation, organized labor called for cooperation and sacrifice at this critical American moment. Although the American Federation of Labor continued to oppose direct US involvement, they did support the National Defense Program, and called on all members to avoid strikes in matters of national defense. In January of 1941, the AFL released a legislative recommendation that read in

part:

America is at peace. We believe with President Roosevelt that the best guarantee of America's future peace is the prompt construction of an invincible national defense, together with the extension of every aid short of war to those democratic nations which have been attacked by aggressor totalitarianism in any form—whether it be Nazi, Fascist, or Communist...The American Federation of Labor will act-and has already acted-voluntarily, as a matter of patriotic policy, to avoid and abjure strikes in order not to impede defense production.<sup>615</sup>

Unions also gave what little they had for the cause. In testimony to the US Congressional Tolan Committee, AFL President Green noted that labor built many Army cantonments—military quarters that were “virtually cities in themselves”—was “furnished by the unions affiliated with our Building and Construction Trades Department without any (extra) cost to the Government or contractors.<sup>616</sup>” As Green noted, union labor worked on these projects without taking double-time, and additionally assumed a 7% voluntary pay cut. Similar contributions had also been made by the Metal Trades Department and the International Association of Machinists in the recruitment of men for work in Naval Yards, airplane plants, and the like.

## REUBEN IN WARTIME

### *Soderstrom Gains New Appointments, Influence*

While war production meant employment, no one, including Reuben, would hesitate to trade that growth for an end to the carnage inching ever closer to American shores. Pouring over the national accounts and local reports spread across the old oak desk in his modest home in Streator, Reuben followed all these developments with a gnawing mix of anxiety and anger. Local papers were filled with terrifying speculation; headlines such as “Nazi Invasion of Ireland Expected Any Time,” “Nazis to March Into Bulgaria,” and “Air Invasion If Nazis Win Abroad Seen” ran on the front pages of Illinois papers in the first month of 1941 alone.<sup>617</sup> Like the majority of Americans, Reuben had become convinced that Great Britain was all that stood between the United States and Nazi aggression. Unlike most, however, Reuben was prepared to publicly commit the full resources of his federation to the fight. As he announced that year:

In this crucial time in the world's history of the human race, men must take their side. No wage-earner can be neutral in this second world war...The Illinois State Federation of Labor is not neutral. I am glad to be able to announce to you that the executive board instructed the officers of the Illinois State Federation of Labor to take all of surplus money and invest it in National Defense bonds. Thirty thousand dollars' worth of National defense bonds was bought by the Illinois State Federation of Labor...Organized Labor believes that our country's best bet is to stay with England. If England wins we win. If England loses, we lose.<sup>618</sup>

Reuben's announcement was ground-shaking; it was a huge buy, more than half of what the entire American Federation of Labor had purchased as a whole.<sup>619</sup> It was clear that the now established labor leader possessed both a political savvy and sincere patriotism that could be of use in Washington. Already, Reuben had been asked by US Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins to join a special committee tasked with reviewing proposed labor legislation.<sup>620</sup> As the year progressed the labor leader was also made a member of multiple national committees, particularly those dealing with health and safety. He also worked with the Department of Interior on their “Americans All – Immigrants All” committee.<sup>621</sup>

Soderstrom also served his state. In April, Governor Green appointed him to the Illinois State Defense Council, a body modeled after the Preparedness Board of the last World War.<sup>622</sup> As the head of the Council's Human Resources and Skills division, Soderstrom chaired the Committee on Labor and served on the Committee for Coordination of Independent Groups and the Committee for National Defense Bonds.<sup>623</sup> He

also served on the Development Council of Illinois, which focused on the advancement and promotion of state industrial, recreational, and industrial interests.<sup>624</sup>

In addition, Reuben served his brothers in labor through the American Federation. That summer Soderstrom was named State Chairman of the American Labor Committee to aid British Labor by AFL Vice President Matthew Woll. Reub was committed to the cause, starting a campaign to raise funds for blankets, clothing, bandages and medical supplies for Britain. As Reuben explained in interviews:

The campaign seeks to mobilize the entire labor movement in this country to come to the aid of its British fellow workers who are fighting so heroically for the defense of their homes, the independence of their country, and the survival of democracy throughout the world...Labor, counted among the worst victims of totalitarian oppression, regards the struggle against dictatorship a matter of life and death. Our aid to British labor may be regarded as part of the struggle against the fifth column and intolerance in this country. These have been the opening wedge used by totalitarians to destroy democracy in Europe, and we do not intend to allow them to develop here.<sup>625</sup>

### *Preparing for the Fight*

While he agreed that strikes were to be avoided if at all possible, Reuben grew increasingly worried about efforts to undermine workers' rights. He bristled at any allegation that labor was using the national crisis as an opportunity for personal gain. In an official message to organized labor in Illinois, Reuben reiterated labor's support for the National Defense Program, writing:

The Executive Board of the Illinois State federation of Labor...is in full accord with the declaration of the President of the United States that there should be no unnecessary strikes. It is the opinion of the Board that strikes should be resorted to only after all other means of obtaining adjustment have been thoroughly tried and have failed...The board is confident that all (AFL unions) have a keen sense of their responsibility in relation to the present national emergency. This has been apparent for some time past, to such an extent that the number of strikes in which American Federation of Labor unions have been involved in this state has dwindled to the vanishing point. A.F. of L. members and activities are not hampering the defense production in any part of the state.<sup>626</sup>

Still, while supportive of the National Defense Program and voluntary sacrifice in its name, Reuben made clear that he and the ISFL would fight with every weapon at their disposal should someone attempt to take by fiat what union members were freely offering for freedom's cause. In a March address, Reuben wrote of working Illinois men and women, numbering more than 3,000, ready to serve as an "army of workers." This army, however, could not be a conscripted one:

The President has not asked for any sacrifice of either legal or moral rights. He has simply requested that such rights be exercised with due regard to the national interest...The American worker is first of all an American citizen. He does not lose an iota of his citizenship rights or duties or responsibilities when he enters the workshop...The workers in Illinois, as in all America, are free men and women. We shall continue to remind those whom we represent that the one great test of freedom is the performance of necessary duties without the application of compulsory law. It is a glorious fact that under the American flag compulsory service in industry and commerce is a forbidden thing. Thus speaks the Constitution!<sup>627</sup>

Reuben didn't stop there. He had an expansive vision for the role of labor in the governance of American industry, with unions treated as equal partners in an industrial democracy. In this and other speeches throughout the year, Reuben took on the role of a general talking to his troops. The enemy was lying in wait,

and just as America could not be neutral in the fight overseas, Reuben was firm in his conviction that no worker could be neutral in the struggle for freedom and fair wages at home. As he told an audience of laborers at Kankakee that Labor Day:

I am proud to stand here in the presence of wage earners—in the presence of some of those whom this Nation is so largely indebted for all that it has been—for all that it is now—and all that it can hope to be...

The working man today who does not belong to the union, would be as helpless as a newborn babe were it not for the men around him who do belong to the union. A non-union man is a sort of grafter on the trade union movement, because he derives benefits for which he does not render and equivalent, and in a National crisis, such as we are in today, he is of no value at all. The man who joins the union does so for a noble purpose...

The American Labor Movement has accomplished more good for wage earners than any other movement, reform, or otherwise in America and the way to strengthen that movement—the way to strengthen industry—the way to strengthen America—the way to keep dictatorship out of America, is to give labor representation on the boards of control of all industrial corporations, and all retail and wholesale corporations, too.<sup>628</sup>

## 1941 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

### *Manufacturers Exploit Impending War*

1941 was a legislative year, and Reub was determined to make it a transformative one. He published an ambitious agenda that included increases in Unemployment Compensation and Workman's Compensation, as well as Occupational Disease and Injury payouts. He called for the re-introduction of a Prevailing Rate of Wage Law (modified after the State Supreme court found the original unconstitutional) and the creation of a new law requiring employers under strike to give notice in employment ads, informing potential workers. Laws touching on everything from state insurance to strip mining to printing contracts were drafted—over 125 labor bills in total, according to the ISFL.<sup>629</sup>

Of all Reuben's legislation, though, two proposals were given special attention. The first, the Anti-Kickback bill, sought to end the practice of forcing employees to "kick back" a portion of their wages as a way to get around minimum wage laws. These kickbacks could be crippling to Illinois workers; "In some instances wage-earners have been forced to 'kick-back' fifty per cent of their wages," Reuben explained in a letter to local unions. "Honest contractors are unable to compete with this brand of competition, while working people are robbed of the fruits of their labor."<sup>630</sup>

Although the Anti-Kickback bill would face strong opposition, Reuben's most ambitious piece of legislation was the Wage and Hour Bill. This law, modeled after the federal Fair Labor Standards Act, was designed to establish a minimum wage and maximum hours on intrastate business. If Reub's bill passed, it would be the first state law of its kind, firmly establishing Illinois at the forefront of labor protection.

While Reub was working to secure Illinois for labor, others were planning to pull it back to its primitive past. Chief among these was Representative Bob Woodward of Chicago. In a move backed by the Illinois Manufacturers' Association, Woodward introduced a series of bills he claimed were "drafted by state officials upon the recommendation of the Federal-State Conference on Law Enforcement (FSCLE)."<sup>631</sup> Reuben had encountered the FSCLE's "model legislation" earlier as a member of the US Labor Secretary's review committee, and he was unimpressed. Seeking advice, he turned to his trusted counsel Victor Olander, who wrote back to Reuben that "I cannot believe that the United States Department of Justice is responsible for the drafting of these measures. Taken as a whole, they seem to be the work of persons rather inexperienced in



national affairs.”<sup>632</sup>

Like the model legislation they were based on, Woodward’s bills claimed to be for support of the national defense, but were in reality anti-labor bills using the specter of war to undermine workers’ rights. His Anti-Sabotage Act was meant, in the words of Olander, “To prohibit strikes in plants and other places of employment having even the remotest connection with the supply of materials called for by the National Government in relation to the defense program.”<sup>633</sup> The Interstate Public Property Act, meanwhile, could be used to “permit private guards of corporations to be deputized as special policemen, designated as employees of the state, thus freeing the corporation from all liability for their acts.”<sup>634</sup>

Then came the real whammy. In addition to all these “national security” acts, Woodward sought to effectively end labor unions by requiring every Local to furnish a bond of \$25,000—an impossible task. He also wanted to prohibit trade union representatives from participating in “any labor issue” unless and until they had been issued an ill-defined “license” by the State for one full year.<sup>635</sup> By the start of the legislative session, it was clear Reuben had a fierce fight ahead of him.

The odds weren’t stacked in Reub’s favor, however. Despite his best efforts, the Republicans, who’d demonstrated a resistance to pro-labor policies, had won control of the Illinois House and Senate. They had also taken the Governorship, with newcomer Dwight Green assuming the role of Illinois chief executive. Still, Reuben was optimistic, at least publicly. In press interviews Soderstrom repeatedly made the claim that “With the Republicans on probation and the Democrats fighting to regain control, both parties are wooing labor.”<sup>636</sup>

### ***Reuben Leads Legislative Blitz***

Privately, however, Reub wasn’t taking any chances. On the eve of the legislature’s first day in session, Soderstrom summoned over 30 labor representatives from across the state to a morning meeting at the Leland, Springfield’s “dealmaker hotel” and Reuben’s residence of choice when staying at the State capitol. From Aurora to Decatur to Chicago, an “unusually large number of trade union representatives for this early in the legislative session” poured into the Leland’s Grand Ballroom, drinking coffee while sinking into their deep leather seats.<sup>637</sup>

Once all were assembled, Reub recited his plan. This was war, he told the assembly, and they were the crucial front line. This was not going to be their normal session of deal making and horse-trading, Reuben said. They were on their heels, with a Republican Assembly and a Republican Governor. Both, however, were raw and untested, and this gave labor a small window of opportunity. Many committee hearings were scheduled in the coming days for a wide swath of labor legislation, and Soderstrom intended to pack them all with his men. He was determined to hit early and hit hard, setting the field of play before any potential opponents could object. If they played their cards right, they could get their bills going before the opposition knew what hit them, and stop Woodward’s advance before it began by denying him a foothold.

The plan worked, at least initially. Time and again, Soderstrom flooded the floor. Through speeches and support, Reuben won favorable hearings and subcommittees stacked with the legislators of his choice.<sup>638</sup> By the end of the first week of March Reuben had secured favorable committee action on nearly all his bills.<sup>639</sup>

Meanwhile, Reuben didn’t pull any punches when it came to the Woodward legislation. In an unsigned message to all labor, Soderstrom warned that “War has been declared against organized labor in Illinois.” Hot with anger, Reub directly compared Woodward’s proposed legislation to Nazi tactics:

The American Constitution is to be disregarded. The principles of American liberty are to be proclaimed

unworkable. American democracy is to be subjected to ridicule as a fraud and a delusion. There is nothing new about this. It's all in "Mein Kampf."

Relying on class prejudice and with a faint pretense of preparing against Hitlerism in America, the Honorable Robert M. Woodward, representing the 29th Senatorial District of Chicago, acting as a 'front' for an unannounced and unidentified force, is apparently attempting to raise the Nazi flag in Illinois.<sup>640</sup>

The bombastic rhetoric achieved its intended effect. Reub further refused any compromise. When asked what amendments could be made to secure the labor president's support of Woodward's bills, "President Soderstrom replied that the bills were all thoroughly bad, that nothing that could be done to them could make good bills out of them, that neither that amendment nor any other amendment would be acceptable to the Federation, and that the Federation would oppose the measures in their present form or in any other form."<sup>641</sup>

Reuben's staunch opposition ensured Woodward's bills went nowhere. In the end, they died in committee without ever seeing a floor vote in either chamber.<sup>642</sup>

Luckily, Reuben was able to pass some reform, despite the political cowardice and opportunism that he saw pervading the legislature. The Anti-Kickback bill, Prevailing Rate of Wage bill, and Strike Notification bill all became law in the closing hours of the session. Even more importantly, Soderstrom was also able to work with Donnelly and the IMA to craft important improvements to Workman's Compensation, Unemployment Compensation, and the Occupational Disease Act. These "agreed amendments" were the product of "a series of conferences...between representatives of employers, representatives of labor, and subcommittees, in accordance with instructions of the House and Senate Committees on Judiciary."<sup>643</sup> In all, these amendments increased the length, benefits and weekly maximums of unemployment compensation, increased workman's compensation by 10%, and payments for fatal accidents by 10%. They also protected the jobs of servicemen, ensuring that those enlisting had jobs to return to when their service was over.<sup>644</sup>

While these gains were important, they did little to wash some of the bitter taste of the legislative session from Reuben's mouth. As he told reporters at the 62nd General Assembly's close:

The new legislative administration can in no way be regarded as progressive. What wage-earners secured aside from 'agreed bills' was meager and grudgingly given. There were a few Republicans, of course, who courageously introduced and sponsored controversial labor bills, but most of the Republican leadership in the legislature was consistently ultra-conservative and disappointing to the progressive-minded people of the state.<sup>645</sup>

## SODERSTROM TAKES ON OLD FOES, NEW INFLUENCES

### *Edmundson and the Illinois CIO*

Adding to Reub's frustration over the stalling of his agenda was the seeming preference given to laws sponsored by the rival Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The first labor legislation to eventually pass the legislature was a less-comprehensive CIO version of Soderstrom's Wage Guarantee bill. In a column that was in turns despairing and threatening, Reuben ruefully noted that the CIO's aggressive bullying tactics seemed to curry more favor with the current legislature than the AFL's more discreet approach. "Some observers have suggested that perhaps President Soderstrom and Secretary Olander of the Illinois State Federation of Labor had better change their tactics, disregard courtesy, throw politeness to the winds, and begin calling names. Queer business!"<sup>646</sup>

The CIO had in fact been gaining strength in Illinois. Under the leadership of Illinois United Mine Workers President Ray Edmundson, the Illinois CIO had by their own account reached a membership of over 300,000 (although ISFL estimates put Edmundson's roll at closer to 100,000).<sup>647</sup> They had done this in large part by poaching AFL unions, even if it meant ultimately undercutting existing union contracts. As Thomas Downie, former editor of the Galesburg Labor News, described in a speech before the ISFL:

I have seen this develop to a point where it is no longer a question of organizing the unorganized. It is a question of raiding those who are already organized...The leadership of the raiding crews are not those fundamental old-time trade unionists who went out on strike with the United Mine Workers. You find that the type of men who are leading organizations to raid the trades... are not men who understand the trades, but men who are out to seek what they think are the benefits that come from trade union leadership. They are out to win anywhere they can, regardless of what they do to this great trade union movement and you have to be on the alert.<sup>648</sup>

Although an effective recruiter (albeit with questionable tactics), Edmundson was poor at passing legislation. By the session's close the CIO chieftain and his legislative representative, Harry Deck, had virtually nothing to show for their effort. The one bill they did sponsor passed only by virtue of being a more watered-down, management-friendly alternative to an ISFL bill that would have otherwise become law. While Reuben could point to specific bills and amendments that he had drafted and passed, Edmundson could only talk about what didn't become law, trying to take credit in the press for the defeat of the Woodward bills (legislation that the ISFL had a much more credible role in preventing).<sup>649</sup> As Victor Olander wrote in a private letter to Reuben:

All things considered, it is really funny. You will remember, of course, that he was prominent in the legislative work during the last session only by his utter silence and complete absence. I cannot recall a single instance in which he appeared before any committee of the legislature on any subject throughout the entire session. There are indications that he doesn't even know what the legislative program was.<sup>650</sup>

Despite this apparent ineffectiveness, the Illinois CIO had grown established enough by 1941 to call their own first statewide convention. Belligerent and paranoid, Edmundson used the opportunity of this announcement to (somewhat bizarrely) take swipes at Reuben's character. Speaking to reporters on the first week of August, Ray accused Reuben of ineffectiveness and personal corruption, claiming his CIO sought to "give relief to oppressed members of the A.F. of L. in racketeering unions."<sup>651</sup>

Never one to back down from a fight, Reuben shot back, calling Edmundson and his men "babes in the woods" who had best tend to their own house before throwing stones. "We don't want racketeers in the A.F. of L. . . and we get rid of them as fast as they are uncovered," he told the press. "The C.I.O. should devote its attention to eradicating communists from its own organization...The C.I.O. industrial union movement has worn itself out, but the A.F. of L. is stronger than ever."<sup>652</sup> Soderstrom went on to tout the 13,840 new members the ISFL had gained in the last year alone. At 520,000 strong, his organization was now bigger than it was before the AFL/CIO split. Most importantly, Reuben said, his organization was built on democratic principles—as opposed to the dictatorial structure of the CIO:

Our organization is built on the bedrock of democracy. All our officials are elected to office, but Edmundson and other C.I.O. officials are merely appointed to their posts...(The ISFL has) transformed Illinois from a backward state into one of the leading labor states in America. Twenty-eight of these proposals bore my personal stamp. That is the best answer I can give to Edmundson's charge that I haven't shown any leadership.<sup>653</sup>

Edmundson didn't take this public spanking well. The following day he returned fire, swearing the CIO would overtake Reuben's ISFL in 12 to 18 months. He repeated his charge of corruption, calling the Chicago building trades unions "racketeering organizations" that charged "exorbitant and outrageous initiation fees...Chicago is the last stronghold of reaction, racketeering and collusion between employers and employees. We expect to break the stranglehold that this collaboration means to workers."<sup>654</sup>

Edmundson didn't stop there. In public statements and private correspondence, he continued to blame the ISFL generally and Soderstrom specifically for every CIO failure, while taking credit for the passage of legislation he had no hand in. A letter from Edmundson to CIO president Philip Murray is just one such example. Without providing any example or evidence, Ray boasts:

Illinois has made more advances in behalf of labor than any other state in the nation...the CIO of Illinois played a major role in securing enactment of important labor and social legislation and in defeating every single anti-labor proposal...The bottleneck of labor's whole legislative program was lack of cooperation by Reuben G. Soderstrom, president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, with all elements of labor as well as other liberal forces of this state.<sup>655</sup>

Ray went on to actually accuse Reuben of "doing everything possible to sabotage" pro-labor legislation.<sup>656</sup> When Soderstrom, despite these attacks, called at the ISFL convention for the rank and file of labor to "force peace" between the AFL and CIO because "the welfare of every working man is at stake," the disgruntled CIO leader churlishly replied, "As long as Soderstrom retains his post as a protector of racketeers, we don't want unity with that kind of organization. When the A.F. of L. gets new leadership and gives its rank and file some sort of democracy, then it will be time to sit down and talk unity."<sup>657</sup>

It's unclear what exactly spawned Edmundson's ire. It could have been an inability to get as good as he gave, taking too personally Reub's tweaking in response to racketeering charges. It could have been anger at being left out of negotiations between labor and business over serious legislation like workmen's compensation or occupational disease. What was clear, however, was that Edmundson knew how to goad an enemy and nurse a grudge. It was this talent that would continue to thrust and parry with Reuben all year.

### ***Corruption and Racketeers: "Drive the Rascals Out"***

Edmundson's charge of corruption was made all the sillier by the fact that Reuben had literally put his life on the line to fight corruption and organized crime. Twice already, attempts had been made on Reuben's life.<sup>658</sup> In spite of this (or perhaps because of it), Soderstrom refused to be cowed, doing all he could to root out abuse. He was continually wary of wayward locals who misused the rights and freedoms of unionism. The challenges of corruption became all the worse as the quickly escalating needs of wartime production created new opportunities for abuse and graft. In a stern warning to members that February, Reub wrote:

The moment has now come, however, to sound a warning. Rights that are abused are eventually lost. The trade union movement must now, more than ever, safeguard itself against the misuse of its organization by adventurers who are concerned mainly about their own personal interests and those who have little, if any, regard for others.<sup>659</sup>

Reuben continued this fight as the year progressed, guarding against what he called the "intrusion of gangsters and other disreputable characters" into labor unions. In his convention address that year he condemned the presence of "evil men in some trade unions." A man of action as well as words, Soderstrom severed affiliation with one corrupt union and held the affiliation of several others in abeyance in an effort to combat

“racketeering influences.”<sup>660</sup>

Reuben wasn't alone in this fight. Working alongside with him was John Fitzpatrick, President of the Chicago Federation of Labor. Together, Soderstrom and Fitzpatrick had worked for over a decade to “drive the rascals out.” When the *Chicago Tribune*, a conservative paper, conducted an expose in 1941 exposing union corruption, its staff received anonymous threats. Fitzpatrick quickly and loudly condemned the threats and defended the paper:

While the Chicago Federation of Labor and the Chicago Tribune do not always agree on what is best for labor, there can be no difference between us on the urgency of driving the rascals from the labor movement in Chicago and everywhere else...These pilferers of the trusting and innocent workers are the most dangerous enemies labor has today. There is no place in organized labor for the racketeer, the chiseler, the fixer or the terrorist.<sup>661</sup>

The *Tribune* returned the favor, writing the following day:

Pious declarations by other labor leaders on the subject of racketeering have become a tedious commonplace in the nation. What makes the stand of President Fitzpatrick and his associates unique, to our knowledge, is the fact that they have shown that they mean what they say by doing something about it.<sup>662</sup>

In the pages of the ISFL Weekly, Reuben echoed his support:

What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander...the Chicago action should be emulated in every other division of the organized labor movement of the United States wherever rascals have “muscle in.”<sup>663</sup>

## OVERREACH

### *Durkin Out, Murphy In*

In the wake of a disappointing legislative session, Reuben decided he should get away for a while. That summer he and his wife Jeanne took a much-needed vacation. Embarking on a journey that would become an annual tradition, the couple packed up their car for a three-week journey. First they traveled to Birmingham, Alabama by way of Evansville, Indiana to view the statue of Vulcan erected in tribute to union steelworkers. Next, the couple made their way to Florida, visiting Tallahassee, St. Petersburg, and the famous Cypress Gardens botanical gardens. Strolling amidst the peaceful palms, Reub could momentarily forget the chaos at home.

And then the moment was gone. Soon after returning, Reub turned his attention to the problem of competing conventions—the ISFL convention in Danville and the growing headache that was the new CIO convention in Springfield, scheduled immediately following. While the ISFL convention ran smoothly and successfully, its message was muted by the bombastic antics that followed at the Illinois capitol.

In his keynote address, Edmundson declared war on the ISFL, promising “No quarter will be given and none asked...With this new council, the CIO will build a wall around the state of Illinois and call the domain its own.”<sup>664</sup> He also called for the ouster of Illinois Department of Labor Director Marin Durkin. The IDOL leader had earned Edmundson's undying hatred the past spring, when he ruled a group of CIO miners ineligible for unemployment compensation for the time they'd spent on strike.<sup>665</sup> Edmundson had cried for Durkin's head ever since. Reub quickly and strongly swung to Durkin's defense. In a signed public plea, Reuben made the case for Durkin's retention, arguing:

Under the leadership of Director Martin P. Durkin, the State Department of Labor is constantly growing and is functioning in a very satisfactory way... The policy of the American Federation of Labor has always been to elect our friends and defeat our enemies, regardless of party...It is also labor's policy to support the appointee who is in office if he is rendering good service- and the State Director of Labor is doing just that. Because the Illinois State Federation believes in rewarding faithful service we are supporting Martin P. Durkin.<sup>666</sup>

Still, the odds were stacked heavily against Durkin. Not only had he lost the support of the CIO, but by September of that year he was only one of two remaining appointees from the previous Democratic Governor's administration. There were rumors he was going to be tapped for a national post. Green was also eager to replace the AFL-affiliated Durkin with a candidate who would be viewed as "neutral" in the AFL-CIO fight. Finally, on September 29th, Durkin resigned his post, with Green announcing Francis Murphy, the president of the Deep Water Way Coal & Dock Company of Chicago, as his replacement.

The news sent Reuben through the roof. Not only was his man out, but he was to be replaced by a man with no history in labor a selection which to Soderstrom was in direct violation of Governor Green's pledge to select a director "qualified to handle the problems of labor, one in whom the wage earners of the state have implicit confidence."<sup>667</sup> Murphy was no such man. "The Illinois State Department of Labor has virtually been handed over to a coal merchant!" Reuben roared. "Governor Green has deliberately turned his back on the entire working population of the state to name a political employer to take charge of the labor interests in Illinois."<sup>668</sup> Olander was likewise inflamed, crying that the Governor had "sold us down the river!" He vowed to fight the nomination tooth and nail, proclaiming "The day has long since passed when any substantial number of Illinois workers will tamely submit to the snarling command to 'bend yo' knee and bow yo' head,' whether it comes from the politicians or anybody else!"<sup>669</sup>

Together Reuben and Olander began a campaign to have Murphy removed. Week after week, they slammed Murphy and Green in the press, hammering them with headlines like "Governor Green Flouts Illinois Workers," "Indefensible," and "The Broken Pledge."<sup>670</sup> They sought and secured a condemnation of the Governor's action from AFL President Green, who called the appointment "indefensible even from a political point of view...a rare departure from the policy pursued by practically all governors in all states in appointing Commissioners of Labor or the heads of State Labor Departments."<sup>671</sup> They taunted the Director to "show his card" of union membership, repeatedly making the case that Murphy's lack of union experience disqualified him as a candidate for IDOL Director.

Reuben repeated this refrain to the *Freeport Journal-Standard*:

It's a great mistake...This is something no other governor has done- appointing an employer to direct Illinois labor. We have a lawyer for attorney general and a former farmer for Director of Agriculture, but Governor Green now picks a man who does not carry a union card to head labor.<sup>672</sup>

Unfortunately, their argument was intellectually sound but politically disastrous. While Reub and Victor were busy attacking the freshman Governor, the CIO's Edmundson took the opportunity to ingratiate himself to the new administration by publicly supporting the choice. As he told the press:

The governor should be congratulated on the appointment. Mr. Murphy is eminently qualified for the position and will be fair to all elements coming within the jurisdiction of his department, including the A.F. of L., the C.I.O., the employers and the state inspection service.<sup>673</sup>

Other ISFL unions also quietly moved to support Murphy. In their shared (and mutually affirming) anger,

Soderstrom and Olander hadn't stopped to gauge the sentiment of those they represented. Although not a union member, Murphy seemed a genuinely amiable fellow, and few unions wanted to be on the wrong side of the man who controlled millions of dollars in unemployment compensation. The new IDOL Director also proved politically savvy, retroactively awarding both the CIO's United Mine Workers and the AFL-affiliated Progressive Mine Workers unemployment compensation for the past spring's strike to the tune of \$1,000,000.<sup>674</sup> Soderstrom and Olander soon became isolated in their opposition. Less than a month after Murphy's appointment, Governor Green was openly dismissive of their protests, telling the press the two were "about the only objectors" and noted that a number of AFL union leaders had commended the appointment.<sup>675</sup> By November, labor opinion writers like SP Miller, editor of *The Labor Record, Inc.*, also began to endorse Murphy.<sup>676</sup>

Then came the damning blow. As the *Edwardsville Intelligencer* proclaimed on its front page on December 6:

Revolt flared within the ranks of the Illinois State Federation of Labor (AFL) today with the Progressive Mine Workers of America on record as endorsing appointment of State Labor Director Francis B. Murphy. Victor Olander, Secretary of the state group, had previously urged Murphy's dismissal...The Progressive union's action lines it up with the United Mine Workers of America (CIO) which through its president, Ray Edmundson, Springfield, had approved the appointment.<sup>677</sup>

The alignment of the ISFL's Progressive Miners with the CIO's United Mine Workers not only effectively killed Reuben's and Victor's campaign against Murphy; it very publicly undermined Reuben's authority and tested the limits of his leadership. Reuben, feeling personally betrayed, directed every ounce of his considerable fury at PMWA President Keck. In a letter to AFL President Green, Soderstrom denounced Keck, claiming:

President Keck seems to have a tacit policy designed to discredit himself and his associate officers of the Progressive Miners union. This appears to be done to create dissatisfaction, suspicion and rebellion among the membership of the A.F. of L. coal miners he is supposed to be giving guidance and leadership to.<sup>678</sup>

To Soderstrom, Keck's actions were just the first step towards a larger goal of realignment with the CIO, to whom Edmundson had earlier offered the presidency of the Illinois UMWA if the Progressive Miners were to rejoin.<sup>679</sup> He continued:

I have no way of definitely proving all of my suspicions but I am beginning to reluctantly believe President Keck is completely influenced and dominated by Ray Edmundson ...I am convinced that President Keck is a counterfeit and I felt that I had no right to withhold my views and opinions about him any longer. I am convinced that his actions are not due to dumbness and stupidity but are designed somehow to bring discredit upon the Progressive Miners' leadership in the constant scheming going on in Illinois to deliver this membership back to John L. Lewis.<sup>680</sup>

Ultimately, Keck didn't shift the PMWA's allegiance, but the vehemence of Reub's response shows how deeply wounded he was by the actions of Keck, Miller, and others, both politically and personally. For him, the decision to support or protest the Governor's appointment was a matter not just of opinion; it was a question of morality, of right or wrong, of honesty.<sup>681</sup>

The loss did not leave him disillusioned or jaded, however. Just the opposite; the Murphy battle convinced Reuben that what union leaders needed was a greater strength of character and courage of conviction. As he had time and again, Soderstrom would not conform his acts or expectations to the supposed reality of Illinois politics; he would instead attempt to transform the political landscape to his meet his ideals. However, the

historian feels the undeniable struggles Reuben faced during this time, including a state legislature not friendly to labor, intense and bitter competition from the rival CIO, and the roiling anxieties of international conflict.

### *Race, Color, or Creed*

Of all the issues requiring courage and conviction, perhaps none posed a greater challenge to organized labor than that of racial equality. The history of race and labor in the United States was often contradictory and always complicated. For reasons both principled and practical, unions should have been naturally allied with groups seeking racial equality. As the famed Arthur Goldberg, at the time a lawyer for the CFL, later wrote in his chronicle of labor history:

It may seem surprising that racial discrimination...has ever been an issue in unions. Racial discrimination is morally wrong and unions are formed to achieve moral and ethical goals, and, of course, racial discrimination has no rational justification. Finally, as a practical matter the effectiveness of a union depends on its organizing all of the workers in its field, not just those of a particular color or a particular racial descent. If, for example, Negro workers remain unorganized and work for low wages, the wages of all white workers in the same industry inevitably will be adversely affected.<sup>682</sup>

Sure enough, some of the most important advocates for racial parity were also labor leaders. A. Philip Randolph, the pioneering civil rights leader and founder of the radical *Messenger* monthly, was also the organizer and president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first predominantly black labor union. The AFL was likewise officially opposed to discrimination for reasons of race, creed, or color.

Despite this official stance, however, the AFL remained haunted by the plague of racism. Many unions within the Federation refused to accept workers of color, and still more union men and women sadly perpetuated such prejudices. While the AFL directly organized Negro workers, there was no requirement that member unions accept black members. According to the AFL Executive Council, the Federation's policy of "self-restraint" meant the AFL "cannot interfere with the autonomy of National and International unions. The American Federation of Labor cannot say who are eligible or who are not eligible to membership in National and International unions."<sup>683</sup> AFL President Green was himself personally supportive of Randolph, publicly in favor of his aims and privately intervening where he felt he could. Still, Green stopped short of compulsory action, believing it beyond his authority.<sup>684</sup>

This position was hardly satisfactory to union workers of color, who denounced the Negro unions as both unjustified and powerless. In Randolph's words, the "Federal form of organization that the American Federation of Labor provides for the Negro workers is virtually no organization at all."<sup>685</sup> Unable to find relief within the structures of the AFL, black union activists increasingly turned to political activism. As the National Defense Program continued to expand, discrimination within the armed services and the companies that served them became a chief target. In 1941, Randolph organized the March on Washington Movement, which sought to bring over 100,000 protesters to the nation's capital. In response to the proposed march, President Roosevelt issued executive order 8802, which barred racial discrimination in the defense industry. This news was especially welcome in Illinois, where black citizens had hit a "job ceiling." By some estimates, discrimination against men and women of color had cost the black community over 10,000 skilled jobs in Chicago alone. Black workers were routinely turned away from WPA jobs, told by managers they would not "tolerate a Negro working with whites on this job."<sup>686</sup>

It was in this environment that Charles Jenkins, a Negro Representative from Cook County, began introducing a series of bills to prohibit discrimination on the base of "race, color, or creed." His most famous



of these, House Bill 37, popularly known as the Jenkins-Warfield Act, specifically prohibited race discrimination in hiring by war defense contractors.<sup>687</sup> Although it initially stalled, in the wake of FDR's executive order Jenkin's bill easily passed, becoming the nation's first general fair employment practices statute, and is generally considered a landmark labor bill for the state and the nation.<sup>688</sup>

Reuben initially supported Jenkin's bill, hailing it as a "square deal for Negroes," but his support became muted as the year progressed. He was, after all, in favor of racial equality within unions, writing both publicly and privately about the reality of discrimination and the need for equality in labor. A letter sent to fellow laborers that very year is just one such example:

There can be no doubt that there are many unfair discriminations against capable and willing Negroes, based on nothing but race...The Negro is one of us who has his rightful place in the life of the Nation, just like other citizens, with the same rights, the same duties, and with may more difficulties to overcome. He is entitled to the sympathetic aid of his fellow citizens.<sup>689</sup>

The most credible explanation for Reuben's reticence lies in an examination of the particular bills that drew the ISFL's opposition, as well as a larger possible difference of opinion between Soderstrom and Olander. In 1941 Jenkins and his fellow Negro legislators unveiled a series of discrimination bans targeting a variety of institutions, from businesses to schools to hospitals.<sup>690</sup> HB 269 sought to legally forbid discrimination by labor organizations. For some time, Reuben struggled with whether or not to support the bill. After being handed an advance copy by Jenkins, Reuben wrote to Secretary Olander, describing his thoughts and concerns. The letter shows a leader who, like AFL President Green, was struggling to reconcile the need to fight discrimination with the principle of voluntary association:

While there is no color bar in the American Federation of Labor...[discrimination] does exist in some unions affiliated with the A.F. of L. Frankly, I do not know how to wipe it out completely because the A.F. of L. has no right to invade its affiliated organizations with (the) regulations necessary to accomplish it. Unions are voluntary institutions. They have a right to a right to legislate for themselves relative to who shall be admitted or who shall be excluded from membership. To destroy this right by legislative action would mean the destruction of this voluntary principle...Against this, however, the American Federation of Labor has always believed in raising the level of living for all people regardless of race, creed or color or previous condition of servitude.<sup>691</sup>

For much of the letter Reuben seems at a genuine crossroads, earnestly trying to discern the right course of action. When Jenkins had put forth the idea of this bill two years ago, Olander had advised opposition because the penalty for discrimination was disqualification of a union as a bargaining agent. Victor worried this language "might easily be used by interests hostile to labor to further their own ends."<sup>692</sup> This time, however, that language had been removed, and the state of New York had reportedly passed an identical bill in the interim. Could now be the moment to support Jenkins's bill? In a letter to Vic, Reuben appeared to signal it might be; at the least he felt the bill deserved careful consideration:

The main thing that you successfully objected to in House Bill No. 373 two years ago has been eliminated from House Bill No. 269, introduced today. If Representative Jenkins is right and the State of New York has enacted this bill it places those who feel justified in opposing it at a much greater disadvantage than they were two years ago. Since this is a very delicate question I thought it best to mail you the attached copy of the bill so you could do some thinking in odd moments about what our position should be.<sup>693</sup>

Victor, however, remained steadfastly opposed. Like Reuben, he believed in racial equality, at least in the abstract. However, when it came to HB 269, Olander was convinced that it would backfire. As he wrote to

Reuben:

I think it is unenforceable, of practically no value, and with little affect other than to hamper the efforts of those who, like you and I, are making continual efforts to obtain greater opportunities for Negro workers. The promotion of measures like the Jenkins bill tends to arouse the very prejudice against which the bill's allegedly directed.<sup>694</sup>

It is not unfair to read in this a larger difference between Reuben and Olander with respect to race. While nothing in Olander's writing suggests a racial bias against people of color, unlike Reuben there is also nothing to suggest he believes in a pervasive structural racism, or that, if there is one, that it is a problem worthy of serious legal redress. As a scholar, Olander devoted a considerable amount of his intellectual effort towards a reinterpretation of the thirteenth amendment, one which effectively posited that it should be viewed not as a protection for freed (black) slaves but for (white) citizen workers, an analysis that, while important for labor, also had problematic racial implications.

In the end, Reuben heeded the advice of his trusted councilor, and the ISFL came out in opposition to the bill. It is, however, worthwhile to note that the ISFL's articles arguing against HB 269 are largely direct quotations from Olander, rather than from Reub or even unattributed editorial statements.<sup>695</sup> While the obstruction of this bill had little direct effect on labor and race relations, the fight against HB 269 did pull the ISFL's precious attention and effort away from the fight for equality in the workplace. Still, even in Soderstrom's opposition to HB 269 we can see repeated affirmations of broader efforts to eliminate racial discrimination. Citing union efforts to end discriminatory hiring practices, Reuben wrote, "It is not an easy problem...Patient and persistent effort is what is needed, on the basis of persuasion and education."<sup>696</sup> Letters like these reflect on a struggle that mirrored the one occurring within the popular consciousness, a wrestling with the reality of racism and the need to take more aggressive measures to combat it. It was a conflict which would come into stark relief in the years to come.

## THE LABOR PATRIOT

Despite some missteps and a brutal legislative session, Reuben finished the year strong. Unemployment was the lowest it had been in years, ISFL enrollment was at a record high, and despite some bruises Reub had won new protections for working men and women while beating back attempts to use the threat of war to curtail established rights. Perhaps even more importantly, Soderstrom had, through his arguments and exhortations, developed a coherent philosophy of the "labor patriot." This vision of the labor patriot was of a man who, though nameless, was both the foundation and guardian of American liberty, fusing faith, love of country, and union loyalty in a way that made them seemingly indistinguishable.

No writing or speech better illustrates this ideal than Reuben's 1941 Labor Day message. Reuben begins his celebratory address in a deeply patriotic tone, intimately connecting unionism with love of country:

All holidays are important. We need them to commemorate religious, patriotic, economic, and historical events...Labor Day is distinctively American, and is observed only in the United States and its territorial possessions...Labor Day is a day which marks unity through unionism. It is a day of intense patriotism. To organized workers, unionism and patriotism spell Americanism. It is the day on which these sentiments are on parade. Working people gather at celebrations to inspire each other, to review the accomplishments of the past year, to strengthen their patriotism, to renew their faith in trade unionism, to pledge anew their loyalty to our country and to American democracy. Old Glory is unfurled to the breeze by the calloused hands of toilers and 'God Bless America' songs are sung everywhere sincerely and wholeheartedly.<sup>697</sup>

Reub then deftly turns from God's blessings to man's sins, faulting them - especially greed - for the twin evils of industry and war:

The human family has been granted by Divinity an abundance of everything to make life good and kindly, generous and beautiful. Man has been given power even over the abundance of nature, but instead of making Christ-like use of these gifts, man has been brought to the brink of ruin by his failure to obey the rules of the Almighty and the laws of Nature which thoughtful people recognize are related—probably one and the same thing.

And success or well-being in life is as easy as that, or, to put the thought in reverse, as hard as all that. The most difficult struggle of all is to attain control over one's self. The employers of labor, too, are in the same boat. They seem to find it easier to sidestep the mental and physical effort necessary to establish control over selfishness and greed. This is the evil of our industrial system. It is the evil of our distribution problem.

And if this is true in Illinois, it is true nationally and throughout the world. The whole world is suffering the awful pangs of remorse, punishment and war because of its failure to establish control over greed. And if there is no control over selfishness among leaders—civic leaders, political leaders, industrial leaders—there will be none in the world, not even the organized labor world.<sup>698</sup>

As the year began to wind to a close and America settled down for the holiday season, all eyes were glued to the events unfolding in Europe. With German Panzers on the outskirts of Moscow, Rommel tearing through Libya, and U-boats terrorizing the oceans, families sat down and listened to the nightly news broadcasts anxiously awaiting the latest on the Nazi advance.

Then, in the early hours of December 7, 1941, all of America was caught by surprise when six Japanese carriers launched a wave of over 180 bombers and fighters slightly 200 miles north of the Hawaiian Island of Oahu. By the time the US navy recognized the approaching swarm for what it was, it was too late. The Japanese strike force ravaged the ships anchored in Pearl Harbor, damaging or destroying eight battleships, three cruisers, three destroyers, and nearly 200 US aircraft.

News of the attack spread quickly. One can easily imagine Reuben, spending a relaxing Sunday in his Streator home nestled next to his RCA Victor radio and lost in the sounds of Sammy Kaye's "Sunday Serenade" when the news broke over the wire. "From the NBC newsroom in New York...President Roosevelt said in a statement today that the Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii from the air. I'll repeat that: President Roosevelt says that the Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii, from the air..."<sup>699</sup>

As the news sank in, shock first turned to horror before giving way to a mix of anger and resolve. Reuben steeled himself, mentally preparing for what would come next. The moment had arrived: labor was at war.

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# DAN CARMELL, LABOR'S LAWYER

In the 1940s Dan Carmell came to the fore as general counsel for the Chicago and State Federations of Labor, arguing many important cases in and outside of court on their behalf. His relationship with the Federation and with Reub, however, stretched back much further.

It all began eight years earlier during the lady garment workers strike in Decatur, Illinois. Carmell had assisted the ISFL, representing the Federation in court and helping them lift the injunction against the striking workers. It was a major victory both for Soderstrom and the ILGW. Reuben didn't want to stop there, however. The entire incident had convinced him that there was far more at stake. Reub had long held the conviction that picketing was a form of free speech, and he wanted to press the issue in court. After a fitful weekend in Streator, Soderstrom took the train to Chicago and made his case to Olander:

If a man has no other way of showing how he feels about a given situation, he has as much right to put a sign on his back and walk up and down the streets as the largest newspaper has to circulate in that same territory. I says, "For heaven's sake, Vic, do you have to have \$200,000 to buy a newspaper in order to exercise your right to free speech?" and he says, "Repeat that again." It caught his imagination. He said, "I think you've got something there. Let's send for Dan Carmell to find out."<sup>700</sup>

They did just that, and together the three men decided to make a play. Carmell told Vic and Reub they'd have to find a case to bring the issue before the court. "And it has to be a good case," he emphasized. "If you start out with a poor case you'll get poor law from the court."

"Well," Reuben said, "There's this case, a man by the name Swing, I think, and you can take that case and steal it away from these people, they're not much interested in it anyhow. Take a look at the case."

Dan did, and before long he took over in the Swing case- a suit in which union protesters of Swing's Beauty Shop, not themselves directly employed by the business, had been barred from picketing to pressure the shop to unionize its workers. Although it took years, the case eventually made it all the way to the United States Supreme Court, where the Justices definitively ruled that:

A state cannot exclude workingmen for peacefully exercising the right of free communication by drawing the circle of economic competition between employers and workers so small as to contain only an employer and those directly employed by him.<sup>701</sup>

It was a groundbreaking decision, one that reversed the lower court's ruling and made legal history. As Reuben wrote in the ISFL weekly:

The Illinois State Federation of Labor has won a major victory for the American trade union movement through the Supreme Court...The issue was one of free speech, including free press, as relating to the organization activities of trade unions, their representatives, pickets, and members.<sup>702</sup>

It was only the first of several victories for Carmell on labor's behalf. Over the next several years he acted as general counsel for the ISFL, representing them on a range of issues from defending free speech to protecting war veterans' jobs. Impressively, he did all this work pro bono publico; it wasn't until 1949 that the Federation was able to pay him for his service. He was a favorite speaker at ISFL conventions and Labor Day

parades. Most importantly, his work for the ISFL earned him a reputation as the worker's best friend in the Illinois courthouse.

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# CARL SODERSTROM MARRIES VIRGINIA MERRINER

June 12, 1941 was a special date for Reuben; arguably the most important day in his life, at least until that point. Finally, after years filled with dissention, war, and death, Reuben had something to celebrate—the wedding of his son Carl to his long-time love, Virginia Merriner. Like most weddings of the time it was a small gathering, held at the home of Virginia’s uncle Earl in nearby St. Louis on a Thursday afternoon. Though intimate, it was nevertheless an elegant affair; local newspaper accounts described the scene:

Rev. Schmidtke, pastor of the First Methodist church in Webster Groves, Mo., officiated at the marriage, which was solemnized before the fireplace. The mantle was banked with shining huckleberry leaves and palms, while bouquets of white daises, gladioli, carnations and larkspur were effectively arranged before the fireplace, at either side of which were lighted tapers in cathedral candelabra. Bouquets of roses were used throughout the Stucker home. Just the immediate families of the young people, both of whom are well known in this city, witnessed the pretty service at which Miss Rose Jeanne Soderstrom, sister of the groom, and James McCaskrin, of Rock Island, a former classmate of the bridegroom, were the only attendants.

The pretty brunette bride, who was given in marriage by her father, was a picture of loveliness in her gown of white Chantilly lace over taffeta...Lace and lilies of the valley formed the tiara which held in place her finger-tip veil of illusion, and her bouquet was of white roses, lilies, and blue delphinium...

Following the ceremony a dinner was served by Mrs. Stucker, the table being attractively decorated with favors of miniature brides, bridegrooms and bridesmaids. Soft music was played throughout the service and the dinner by Erma Welch, violinist, and Louise Zopf, cellist.

Though simple by modern standards, to Reuben it seemed an elaborate display, at least when compared to his own wedding. He had married Jeanne in his own living room, with only a minister and his sister Olga as a witness. No procession, no decorations, and certainly no dinner with live music! After Reuben’s nuptials, he returned to work the following day. Carl, in contrast, took an extended honeymoon. That night the new Mr. and Mrs. Soderstrom left for a trip through the northwestern United States.

It was a happy day, both for the newlywed couple and for Reuben. There would be far too few of them in the days to come.<sup>703</sup>

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# RUBEN'S CORRESPONDENCE

A considerable portion of Reuben's time as President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor was dedicated to private correspondence. Every day he visited the Springfield office, Reub began by reading the letters he received, no matter the writer's position or title. This was no mean task; as Soderstrom himself later described:

We have a vast number of pieces of correspondence that come into the President's office. Sometimes they'll run as high as 85 pieces of correspondence in the day. So I devote my mornings pretty much to taking care of the correspondence. No letter remains in my office more than one day if I can help it, so that these people who take time out to write to me have an opportunity to have a reply.<sup>704</sup>

Of course, most of the letters were of a political or professional nature—dealing with matters of strikes, negotiation, and legislation. Not infrequently, however, Reuben would receive requests for assistance from his fellow brothers in labor. Like Reuben, these selfless men rarely asked for favors for themselves. Instead, most were pleas on behalf of friends or family members. This 1941 letter from labor brother Ted Weller is a perfect example of the types of requests that often came to Reuben's attention.<sup>705</sup> Ted, who evidently knew Soderstrom personally, was asking for help on behalf of his brother:

My Dear Reub;

Here is just another constituent asking for a favor. I am writing you in behalf of my brother, Andrew Weller, a traffic officer in the city of Chicago, stationed at Ogden and Madison.

He is desirous of getting transferred from the traffic division to something more to his liking, and seems to be having a hard time of it, operating on his own with practically no assistance. I rather think his immediate superiors are reluctant to help him because he does his job perhaps a little too well (He has a perfect record). This often happens in like cases, I understand.

Now, Reub, I dislike to ask your intercession, but it seems imperative. Andy is a good boy and will reflect credit upon on himself and his backers, I am sure, if given a chance. If, through your labor or political influence, you could get him transferred to the Detective Bureau, downtown, preferably, or to any other division, you would have the gratitude of the whole Walsh clan, who are already your debtors.

With kindest wishes, I am,

Yours Sincerely,

Ted Weller<sup>706</sup>

While Ted's letter was very tongue-in-cheek, not all the letters were so light-hearted. When Robert Mueller, a union official from Chicago, wrote Reuben regarding his nephew Luke, the circumstance was much more serious. Arrested with his friends for a minor incident, Luke was sentenced to jail due to a Chicago Municipal Warrant whose existence was previously unknown. In his appeal to Reub, Robert explains:

In November, 1939, I informed Judge Michaels that I would be a sponsor for the boy and would do everything in my Power to see the lad rehabilitated in the proper channels of society. I also agreed to take the boy in my

home, but since then due to business reverses of my own son, I now have his family, a wife and two children with us. Therefore, Luke's sister and brother-in-law...have agreed to make a home for the boy and his father...[there is also] a job for Lee as soon as the Pontiac Officials release him.

If the Parole Board insist on holding the boy until the warrants in Chicago are lifted, it seems to me that a few stubborn police officers could keep a lad in jail for life and for any crime short of murder even though it may be his first offence...

Well Reub, I know you will do whatever you can relative to this situation and therefore thank you most heartily.<sup>707</sup>

Perhaps the most somber exchange Reub received that year, however, began with a brief telegram from a fellow laborer in New York just days after the New Year which read:

Please be advised I have just received a telegram from the Illinois Security Hospital Menard Illinois that my son committed suicide today. Will you please handle the situation for me there as I am ill and unable to leave the house? I am notifying authorities that I have contacted you. Will you please wire me by Western Union immediately if you will assist?

George Radcliff<sup>708</sup>

Reuben did what he could to help the unknown brother care for his son's body and sent his condolences. Then, six weeks later, he received an unexpected response:

Mr. R. Soderstrom;  
Pres. Ill, State Fed. Labor.

Dear Sir and Brother;

Now that I am feeling somewhat better physically, I am writing you to express my sincere thanks for your kind consideration of problems.

My Son has passed away, I'll never be in a position to see him again, I was of the opinion that some time or other he would become well and things would turn out O.K.

Him and I up until the time he was confined were very near and Dear to each other, I wish to say that notwithstanding all appearances to the contrary, he was a regular fellow. Would have reached his 31st Birthday on July 4th 1941.

Of a family of 4 boys and one girl I have only 2 left. And their Mother Died in N.Y. city 1929.

Well Bro Soderstrom I have just passed my 62, birthday, and I will not have too many years ahead of me. I have for the past 44 years worked and sacrificed plenty, for the uplift of the toiler, and I have no regrets on that score. I did my part and never yet violated the oath I took here 44 years ago; I've seen them all...I know all the tricks etc. and as long as I am aware of the fact that there is one more like myself that is willing to go all the way, I hardly believe you will find me at all Lagging. Again thanking you, and trusting that some time or other I may have the pleasure of meeting you. Also hearing from you, and with best wishes and kindest Personal Regards,



I hope to remain, Sincerely and Fraternaly Yours,

George Radcliff<sup>709</sup>

The letter is heart-wrenching, as much for its simplicity as the story it tells. Here, Brother Radcliff is not asking or looking for something. He is merely a man nearing the end of his life, burying yet another son and reaching out to Reub—a stranger—to grieve; to share his pain with someone whom he believes, he hopes, will understand.

Reuben was evidently touched. We know from his journal that Reub would sometimes take certain letters back with him to his room at the Leland hotel, working into the evening hours to craft the right response. It is not hard to imagine that Reuben's letter to this brother in mourning was one of these, carefully crafted in the late hours after long contemplation:

Dear Sir and Brother:

I made the state department of public welfare feel that the Illinois State Federation of Labor was interested in your son's welfare and my office continued that interest in him when the announcement came to our attention relative to his death. When the final curtain falls there isn't much that one in my position can do in addition to what was done except to express sympathy to those who remain.

I have never met you personally, but I do know you are a brave soldier in the work of advancing labor's great cause and I want you to know I do sympathize with you in the loss of your son.

Trusting that the future will be brighter and will bring to you all of the good things that can come, I am,

Yours fraternally

Reuben Soderstrom

President<sup>710</sup>

It is easy to focus on the great works and major deeds that Reuben Soderstrom, a labor leader of national consequence, accomplished for the hard-working people of his State and Nation. But as these letters show us, it was also acts like these—helping a worthy brother get the job he deserved, standing up for a young man so he could have second chance, caring for the dead and helping their loved ones to grieve, even when they were strangers—that were at the heart of what made him a beloved figure to those he served. These small, tender kindnesses defined Reuben's legacy just as profoundly as any grand legislative or presidential act.

Photostrip of Reuben Sodersrom, 1937



Reuben and CFL President John Fitzpatrick, 1931



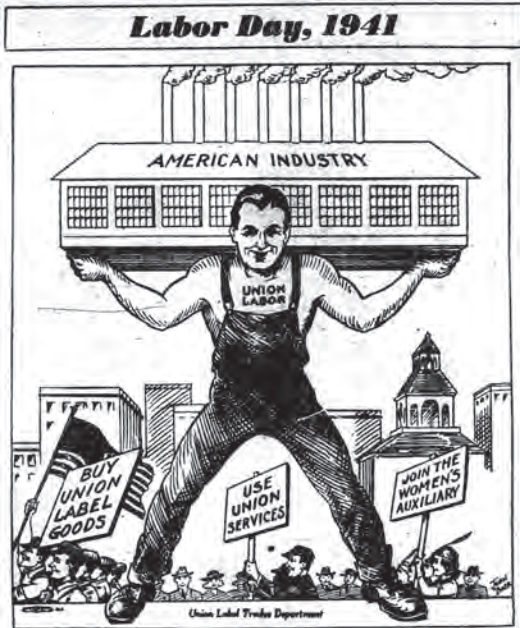
Reuben with grandson Carl Jr., 1944



Reuben Soderstrom, 1942



Reuben's son Carl with his fiancé Virginia and sister Rose Jeanne, 1940

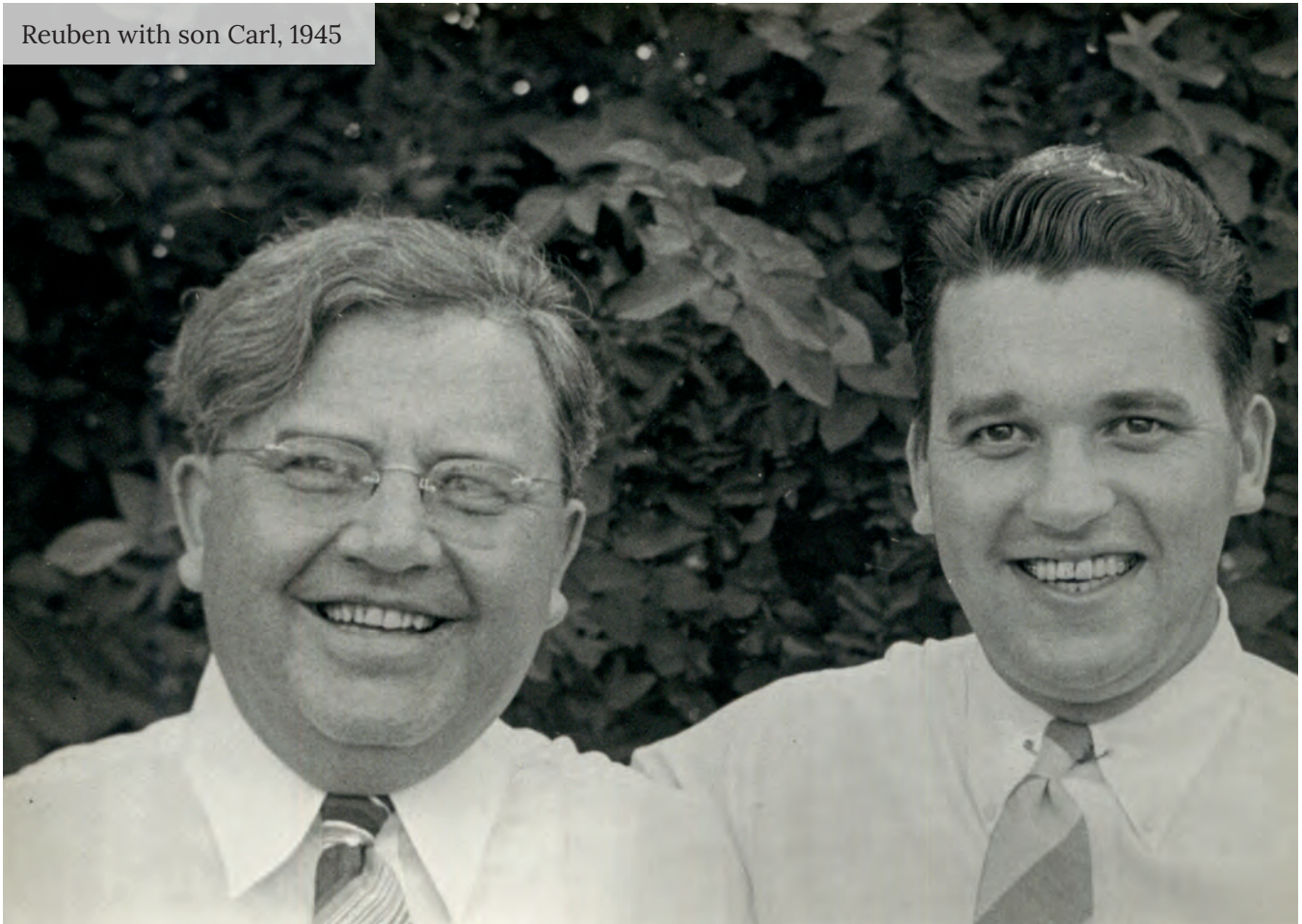


Editorial Cartoon from the *Labor Temple News*, 1941



Still from a film strip of Reuben Soderstrom at the Illinois Labor Convention, 1942

Reuben with son Carl, 1945





Reuben Soderstrom, 1944

# ERA VI

## 1942-1949

### WORLD WAR II AND RECOVERY

#### IN THIS ERA

Reuben prepares organized labor for war. In Illinois, he helps oversee civil defense, health and safety, and industrial development. Nationally, he is appointed to the War Production Board, War Manpower Commission, Advisory Committee for Industrial Safety, and the Federal War Savings Committee. While honoring the wartime moratorium on strikes, he simultaneously fights manufacturers exploiting patriotic sentiment to abuse workers. He also attacks wartime racketeers falsely posing as labor officials for personal gain. As victory nears, Soderstrom plans for labor's post-war role.

In Illinois, Reuben navigates a rocky political landscape. He weathers an inconstant governor mired in scandal, the growing clout of the Illinois CIO, and the death of his closest advisor and friend, ISFL Secretary-Treasurer Victor Olander. Still, Soderstrom spares Illinois labor much of the post-war chaos that strikes the rest of the nation. He helps keep the peace between labor and business after the war, and successfully fends off attempts to pass anti-labor "right to work" legislation in Illinois. In 1946, helps create the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations at the University of Illinois.

In 1942, Reuben became a grandfather for the first time with the birth of Carl Jr. He is soon followed by siblings Ginny, Bob, Jane and Bill.

In 1947, Congress passes the Taft-Hartley Act, devastating unions. The AFL creates a political action committee under Soderstrom ally Matthew Woll to fight back. Meanwhile, the rival CIO begins to fracture. Founder John L. Lewis, removed from leadership, swerves in and out of the AFL. Reuben's influence within the national AFL continues to grow. He serves as a personal envoy for AFL President Green, and is dispatched to represent the AFL and resolve labor disputes in St. Louis, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles.

"What are the United States? Not a mere collection of sovereign states, each controlling its own destiny; not a federation united merely for the convenience of defense, or for economic reasons. It is the people who are sovereign; the United States of America are the American people. Working together, without regard to class, creed, or color, we have coordinated people of different backgrounds and faiths, without sacrificing the good in their pasts, by welding them together in a common vision of a world of freedom. It is this cohesion, this ability to assimilate the good and discard the bad, which has made America the richest and most envied country in this world."

*-Reuben Soderstrom, ISFL presidential address, 1944*

# CHAPTER 31

## 1942

### REUBEN RALLIES HIS “ARMY OF WORKERS”

*“Nowhere in America is the labor movement of any state more patriotic and loyal than in the labor movement of Illinois. Now that the nation is at war labor has proven its patriotism by voluntarily giving up its right to strike for the duration of the war. Organized labor will meet the issue in such a fashion, and with determination, to preserve to itself and to those who are to follow us, that priceless gift of liberty and pursuit of happiness, the right of free speech, the right of freedom of religion, in short, and in the words of the immortal Lincoln, ‘That this government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish.’”*

-Reuben Soderstrom  
1942 ISFL Convention

#### LABOR, INDUSTRY, AND GOVERNMENT UNITE

The devastating attack on American soil in the closing weeks of 1941 terrified the country. Reuben captured the feelings and fears of the nation in the days following the bombing, describing the mood in detail in a 1942 address he gave later that year before the Illinois State Federation of Labor delegation:

December 7, 1941, will always be a significant date in American history. It will be remembered as the Sunday of Awakening and will stand out as the occasion upon which unity and solidarity was achieved in the international crisis... America emerged from her world of dreams to face her enemies...

You and I sat at the radio that fateful afternoon... we were aware something else was happening during these historic hours when America woke up. Something we couldn't see, something we couldn't hear, something we could only feel, and yet it was as real as the sound coming over the airwaves, as the December evening dusk fell over the trees around our homes, and across the street. It was America coming together forgetting her differences, joining hands wholeheartedly for the conflict.

Differences faded into thin air as the realization of what America meant became real; that miraculous, all-powerful force known as public opinion, changed and crystallized between the noon-meal and the night and while we had no word of confirmation about it, we knew it. The next day on the surface, the face of our world appeared about the same. I recall the front porch with the folded newspaper; the neighbor's house with the friendly smoke from the chimney; the main street with people going to work as usual; but something fundamental had changed. Americans, in this thing together, knew on that morning that we were, better or for worse, come what may, in it wholeheartedly and without reservation, realizing as we never did before that we were what we had always proclaimed—one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all!<sup>71</sup>

This coming together was not vague or airy; it was determined and of consequence. Groups that had long been at each other's throats—including the AFL, CIO and employers—were now united against a common

enemy. In the wake of Japan's attack and Germany's declaration of war, President Roosevelt called together representatives of labor and industry to "reach unanimous agreement to prevent the interruption of production." Out of that conference came a three-point-plan promising:

1. No strikes or lockouts in defense industries
2. The creation of a War Labor Board, established by the President, to settle all unresolved disputes.
3. All grievances would be submitted to the Board.<sup>712</sup>

The new National War Labor Board was both inclusive and powerful. Formed by President Roosevelt through Executive Order, it was comprised of appointees representing labor, industry, and the general public. It was given the authority to determine any dispute that could not be solved by normal procedures. Once the board assumed responsibility, its decision was final; there would be no alternative.

For Labor, this was a big leap of faith. Although the men and women of the AFL had already pledged not to strike where defense interests were concerned, handing over so much authority to the President and his appointees required no small measure of trust. The board also split union representation evenly between the AFL and CIO, who were still distrustful of one another. Despite this, many, like AFL President Green, needed little prompting. As he proclaimed in a radio address delivered days before the Plan was announced:

The American Federation of Labor...will cheerfully make every sacrifice the Government calls upon them to make. American labor and American industry are now marching hand in hand with the Government to speed victory by assuring an all-out, uninterrupted defense production. All sides have agreed that there shall be no strikes or lockouts for the duration of the war and that such disputes as may arise will be settled by peaceful means without stopping the wheels of production.<sup>713</sup>

Still, many friends of labor worried that surrendering their greatest weapon--the strike--and the suspension of collective bargaining to the President's men would lead to an erosion of the rights they had spent decades fighting for. They were essentially placing their fortunes "in the lap of the commission."<sup>714</sup> To these friends (and similar voices in industry), Reuben made an impassioned plea for trust. In his published essay "Unity and War," Soderstrom publicly argued that for labor to succeed--for America to succeed--labor must be unified not just within but without, standing alongside industry and government. The Nation must work to provide a seamless front to the enemy; any in labor or industry who sought their own advantage at the expense of that unity did so at their own peril. Reuben stated:

A policy of divided effort means disaster and failure for all of us...Division means retrogression, means going backward. Unity means progress, hope, aspirations, better conditions. The most essential lesson for wage earners to learn, the most essential lesson for citizens to learn, at this time, is that of unity. Unity of purpose; unity of thought; unity of action; unity of effort; unity of hearts. An organization or a nation is like a family. Our interests are all bound up together, and while there may be divisions of opinion, such divisions of opinion should not allow us to forget that one is necessary to the success of all, and that an injury to one affects us all and is of concern to all. What we should make the first business in life is unity for each other and for all—a mutuality of assistance beneficial and helpful at all times to all; and I repeat that our most important obligation at this time is to pull together, not for a day, nor a week, nor a year, but for the entire duration of the war. And may I remind you again that this nation is at war. Anyone who does not take that seriously is just stupid.<sup>715</sup>

## SODERSTROM BUTTRESSES STATE'S WAR EFFORTS

### *Leads Labor in State, Local Efforts*



While Reuben made the case for unified action to the nation, he worked at home to make it a reality. In the weeks following the Japanese attack, Soderstrom called an emergency meeting of the ISFL Executive Board. Together, they officially resolved:

The Executive Board of the Illinois State federation of Labor Hereby calls upon the officers and members of the organized labor movement, and all other workers in Illinois, to strive to do their utmost to increase national defense production throughout the state to the highest possible degree; to cooperate with and aid all other citizens in the maintenance of a high degree of morale throughout Illinois in relation to all matters affecting the national interest; to avoid strikes and jurisdictional disputes or other activities likely to interfere with defense production; and in all of their attitudes during the war emergency, to give first thought to the needs of the great republic of which they are free and equal citizens, thus giving unmistakable proof to all the world that the freest people are the strongest people.<sup>716</sup>

Just three days later, the “clans of Illinois labor” gathered in Chicago in response to a call from the Illinois Committee of Labor, a group formed by the US Coordinator of Civilian Defense and comprised of AFL, CIO, and Railway brotherhood representatives. Nearly 1,200 trade union officers representing every division of labor from Chicago and the surrounding area packed the halls of the Chicago City Council chamber. Again, with one voice (and in language nearly identical to Reub’s Executive Board resolution) they affirmed to do all they could to increase defense production.<sup>717</sup> The message was loud and clear: Illinois labor was united behind the President and the nation. “Superior equipment means final victory and we are 100 per cent behind the president—behind him, in back of him, in front of him and all-around him,” Reuben boasted to a reporter in the wake of the event. “And with the equipment, we will beat the enemy!”<sup>718</sup>

Reuben was soon called upon to serve on a host of state committees to help with the war effort, both directly and indirectly. In addition to his post on the Illinois State Defense Council and the Illinois Development Council, Soderstrom also acted as a member of the Illinois Statewide Public Health Committee and the University of Illinois Advisory Committee.<sup>719</sup>

In Reuben’s hometown of Streator, the Japanese strike touched a deep chord. Two of the Harbor’s dead, Harold Christopher and Leo Jaegle, were local sons. As the first wartime draft registration opened in Streator that February 16, the air of somber determination was palpable, leading one local reporter to remark “while there was the usual banter on the part of many registrants, a grimness was evident, as in many instances father and sons marched together to add their names to the roster.”<sup>720</sup> By May of that year, over 814 men from Streator and nearby towns were in service abroad, while at home locals rationed, donated, and largely did without. In August Streator joined other cities in employing planned blackouts to reduce energy consumption. Common items like sugar and cigarettes became scarce, while others like silk stockings disappeared entirely.

Streator also became a center for wartime production. The local industries, including the Anthony Company, ran three shifts seven days a week. To Reub’s satisfaction, payrolls doubled as Streator workers sweated to produce “everything from trench shovels to trailers for delivering bombs,” exceeding Army-Navy production quotas.<sup>721</sup> Streator labor wasn’t limited to city limits; that spring many locals also began work at the Seneca shipyards on the Navy’s Landing Ship, Tank boats (LSTs). One of those men would be Reuben’s son, Carl.

### ***Finances the Fight***

Of course, one of the greatest struggles the nation faced was how to pay for all the increased production, and in this field Soderstrom led both the state and the nation. During the last World War Reub was a minuteman, selling war bonds to help cover the costs of the fight. He’d developed a talent and reputation for

the practice, and as the US ramped up its war production it was only natural that he would push for a revival of the practice. Reuben had been hard at work in support of Defense Savings Bonds even before Pearl Harbor, authoring a resolution at the 1941 AFL convention in support of the Defense Savings Program - an action which earned him the personal thanks of Assistant secretary of the Treasury James Houghteling.<sup>722</sup> Before long Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr. appointed Reub to the Defense Savings Committee.

With the war now in full swing, Reub made every effort to help provide for the national defense. In interviews with the local press, the ISFL President emphasized that “We’ll have to out-finance and outfight the enemy and that means we will have to get busy on defense bonds and stamps drive.”<sup>723</sup> The day before FDR announced the creation of his War Labor Board, Reuben was in Springfield organizing a massive Unity Parade. Speaking before an assembled crowd of over 20,000 alongside Mayor Kapp and Illinois CIO chief Ray Edmundson, Reub opened the city’s \$500,000 defense bond drive.<sup>724</sup> He followed this with an impressive string of speeches and events throughout the state, including a “Minute Man Drive” that May. He advised his readers:

In the three-day period, May 11, 12, and 13, the greatest all-out effort on record in the history of Illinois will get under way...No worker will be overlooked. Systematically, block by block, in the cities and towns, and mile by mile in rural areas, a vast army of ‘Minute Men and Women’ will see that every income receiver is pledged to Bond and Stamp purchases on a regular and continuing basis...Welcome the ‘Minute Man’ when he knocks at your door.<sup>725</sup>

As the year progressed, Reub spent so many miles on the road in his prized Buick Century on behalf of labor and country that he wore through the rubber on his tires. He petitioned the rationing board for a new set, explaining that in the last few months he’d put over 41,500 miles of wear on his car in his to campaign to sell one billion dollars worth of bonds to union members.<sup>726</sup> Norman B. Collins, State Administrator for the War Savings Program, promptly replied to the request, writing Soderstrom, “I am sure that if anyone is entitled to receive new tires you are.”<sup>727</sup> Collins also sent a letter to the rationing board in Streator asking they comply, reminding them that “Mr. Soderstrom is State Chairman of our Labor Division and as such he is a valuable member of the War savings Staff.”<sup>728</sup> Reub got his tires.

### *The President’s Personal Representative*

Soderstrom’s responsibilities expanded well beyond the state, however. In Washington, Reuben served his country as a member of the US Industrial Safety Commission (War Department). He was also the Illinois representative for the U.S. Defense Savings Staff as well as the U.S. War Finance Committee (Treasury Department).<sup>729</sup>

Perhaps Soderstrom’s greatest national role in 1942, however, was that of personal representative for American Federation of Labor President William Green. It began in the summer of 1941, when Green asked Reuben to speak on his behalf at the Iowa State Federation of Labor Convention.<sup>730</sup> The following year, Green greatly expanded Reuben’s role, asking the ISFL president to act as his personal representative in an explosive labor dispute in the latter’s old stomping ground of Saint Louis, Mo. A conflict had arisen between the powerful local Operating Engineers and the other unions of the city’s Central Body. The stakes were high; failure to resolve the fight could leave the constituent unions vulnerable to racketeers, industrialist attacks, or CIO takeover. Soderstrom, however, proved the right man for the job, able to negotiate an end to the tense standoff. As the appreciative Green wrote upon Reuben’s return:

I knew when I asked you to take up this St. Louis central body controversy that I was calling upon you to deal with a very complicated and most difficult situation. It was for that reason especially that I felt you were the one

man who could do the job. Your report makes it clear that my judgment was well founded and that you performed your task in a highly commendable way.<sup>731</sup>

A few months later Green dispatched Soderstrom again, this time to Minneapolis for a national meeting of the Coordinating Committee. A joint committee representing the AFL, CIO, and the Railroad Brotherhood, the Coordinating Committee was responsible for formulating labor's political front. Again Reuben earned Green's respect and admiration, both for his work and his "impressive address."<sup>732</sup> Four months after that, Green called upon Soderstrom again, this time to act as an arbitrator in a national labor dispute between the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America and the Retail Clerks International Protective Association. Once again, Reub was able to bring the affair to a peaceful resolution. "You did a fine piece of work," Green wrote him, "When through patience and the exercise of discretion and sound judgment you brought the representatives of the two organizations together into a common accord."<sup>733</sup>

One can imagine Reuben Soderstrom--sitting in a tense conference room with two hostile parties—exercising formidable powers of listening, cajoling and compromise to bring resolution to longstanding, bitter standoffs. His energy as a type of arbitrator in these situations must have been expansive when needed, authoritarian when challenged, and overall successful because he got the job done when no one else could. By the close of 1942, our 54-year-old protagonist had proven himself not only to be a skilled orator and fundraiser, but an adept negotiator, able to enter seemingly intractable disputes and help the parties somehow find accommodation. It was a talent he would call upon repeatedly in the years to come.

## CASUALTIES OF WAR

### *Reuben Asserts Rights of Women Workers, Expands Education*

As America entered the war, speed of production became of paramount importance. Alongside the War Labor Board, Roosevelt created the National Manpower Commission and the War Production Board, tasked with, among other things, transitioning peacetime industries to a war-ready footing. It was no easy task; officials estimated that the roughly 5,000,000 workers currently employed in war industries would need to be joined by another 6,700,000 before the year's end, just as most young men of working age were heading off to war.<sup>734</sup> Faced with such great need and dire shortage, many industries began turning to women to fill the gap. At the start of 1942, fewer than 500,000 women were at work in war industries. The U.S. Department of Labor, in contrast, believed that more than 6,000,000 women could be recruited for the cause.<sup>735</sup>

While excited at the prospect of women gaining greater opportunity through work, Reuben and others in labor cautioned against allowing an erosion of working women's rights, particularly equal pay and the recently won eight-hour day. "Trade unions need to plan at once for protection of women in wages, hours, and working conditions," Reuben wrote that spring.<sup>736</sup> In a call to arms, Soderstrom prevailed upon all unions to be vigilant in the fight for equal rights and equal pay:

Union standards and union protection will be essential for women war workers. The rate of pay for the job should be maintained, whether held by a man or a woman...Unions must consider how they can provide for women war workers, to assure fairness and adequate protection, and to prevent undermining established labor standards.<sup>737</sup>

In addition to women, many industries looked to another major source of labor—the recently unemployed. As traditional industries moved to war production, they had to lay off large portions of their old workforce. That January the government estimated 12,000,000 peacetime workers would join the 4,000,000 already unemployed, with 70% of the layoffs coming from auto and auto equipment companies.<sup>738</sup> This created a

“revolving door” for workers, who were being let go from their jobs in record numbers at this hour of critical need.

To solve this crisis, Reuben and the ISFL called for a massive build-up of education and apprenticeship programs. Public high schools throughout Illinois and the nation inaugurated special training courses.<sup>739</sup> The related National Youth Administration trained over 3,000 Illinois men and women between the ages of 17 and 24 each month for work in industry.<sup>740</sup>

Reuben also believed in educating workers about their rights as well as in their skills. He promoted programs like the CFL Labor School, where over a 10-week period students could take courses including “Labor Relations and Labor Law,” “Parliamentary Law and Public Speaking,” and “Better English and Labor Journalism.”<sup>741</sup> Other events were held throughout the year to help inform and educate workers. One of the biggest that year, the Moline Labor Institute, was a week-long symposium that brought in several illustrious speakers from the U.S., U.K., and China, as well as several Germans in exile.<sup>742</sup> Soderstrom also made a regular practice of publishing educational articles in the *ISFL Weekly Newsletter*, teaching workers the history of labor and informing them of their rights under the law.

### ***Labor Sacrifices, Dies for War Effort***

With the full support of organized labor behind it, wartime production began to soar. Airplane production increased fourfold in under two years, while the number of naval ships produced rocketed from 5 in the beginning of 1941 to 55 a year later. The number of shipyards grew by 30% and overall production by 20%.<sup>743</sup> Across the nation, labor rose to the challenges of wartime production. Seattle shipyards turned out ships up to 6 weeks ahead of schedule, while San Francisco built ships up to 100 days in advance of expectations.<sup>744</sup> Illinois production was particularly spectacular, producing ships like the Landing Ship Tanks (LSTs) and all other manner of supplies. In the words of Col. Donald Armstrong, Deputy District Chief of the U.S. Army Chicago Ordinance District, to the industrial management and labor of the Chicago Metropolitan Area:

You have shown me...what a patriotic group the Chicago industry is. We have had from you outstanding cooperation...If you examine the labor record, you will find that no other district in the United States has anywhere near as good a record in the matter of strikes as the Chicago Ordinance District. I have never seen in my years of service a more loyal group of civilian employees, men and women, who cooperate 100% that that shall be true.<sup>745</sup>

This expanded production came at a cost, however, particularly for working men and women. To keep the shipyards open 24/7, union men in the Metal Trades Department and the Building Trades agreed to give up double time for the 6th day of continuous work, cutting their wages significantly. At the same time, inflation pushed the cost of living for the working class to record highs. All this led to a more than 18% reduction in real wages for laboring men and women.<sup>746</sup>

As steep as they were, reduced wages and extra loads were the least of the burdens workers suffered. In the rush to produce, workplace death rates jumped across the country. In July of 1942, National Safety Council figures showed six times as many people were killed in workplace accidents as had been killed in combat warfare.<sup>747</sup> No less than 26,000 men between the ages of 20 and 45 alone were killed on the job in work-related accidents—the equivalent of nearly two army divisions.<sup>748</sup> Illinois was hit especially hard; Reub’s state saw a work-related death increase of over 30%, the second-highest increase in the nation.<sup>749</sup> Writer Michael Evans gave an excruciatingly graphic depiction of the injuries one working woman suffered in the August 1942 issue of the *Coroner*:

In two seconds it happened. There was Stella's grisly scream of horror as the steel fingers of the stamping machine snagged the ragged cuff of her sleeve and hurled her arm forward under its descending jaws. Then her head was pitched against the metal uprights and the scream vanished like a squall from the radio when you flip the switch.

Stella was knocked unconscious and there was no sound but the clamp, clamp, clamp of the machine. You could not hear the rubbery snap as steel brackets ripped the big muscles in her shoulder—nor the hiss of hot blood spouting vacantly from the torn vesicles like water jetting from a kinked garden hose....<sup>750</sup>

The maiming of “Stella” and those like her horrified Reuben. Even before the war, Soderstrom had fought hard for increased safety. Now, with workplace deaths and injuries exploding, Reub worked harder than ever to bring this tragedy to public attention. In his essay “Figures of Concern to All,” Reub highlighted this “hidden tragedy”:

The American war losses since Pearl Harbor are 4,801 dead, 3,128 wounded, and 36,124 missing- a total of 44,143. The National Safety Council announces for the same period, 30,000 dead and 2,500,000 injured as the results of industrial accidents to American Civilian workers. The total American accident toll since Pearl Harbor, including automobile accidents, totals 60,000 killed and 5,500,000 injured....

Labor has no desire to minimize the grim losses sustained in the carnage of war. These men are heroes and died for our country. We respect and revere them. Over sixty-five percent of the soldiers in the army, navy and air corps came from homes of wage-earners. They belong to us. But the worker does not like the inexcusable attitude of silence associated with the dozen times greater list of deaths and injuries from accident in civilian life—many of them preventable.

Every common sense safety-precaution in the household, highway and at work should be religiously practiced and observed, so that losses at home will be reduced to a point below that of those who were called upon to fight and die on the field of battle.<sup>751</sup>

### *Reuben Defends Freedom, Attacks Overwork*

Soderstrom soon discovered that one of the best ways to prevent workplace injury and death was to end the insidious practice of overwork. In the face of the labor shortage, popular opinion latched on to the notion that employees should be worked 10 hours a day, seven days a week. Interestingly, most employers opposed this idea, as the Fair Labor Standards act would force them to pay time and a half for this work. Politicians and profitable news personalities, however, saw self-serving gain in prescribing overwork as a magical cure-all to the national need. Throughout 1942 they pushed for laws compelling labor and removing such protections as the Women's Eight Hour Law and the Six Day Week Law.

Soderstrom punched back at this roll-back of rights from the first, calling it not only bad for workers but destructive for production:

Overwork, even though consented to by the worker, dulls both mind and body, and therefore must inevitably retard production. Overtime pay is no remedy, except to the extent that the cost serves to restrict overtime work. Any person capable of logical reasoning, and familiar with the mental and physical reactions of human beings, must admit, as a self-evident proposition, that the high point of production cannot be reached and maintained by overwork of men and women...<sup>752</sup>

Effective war production, Reuben maintained, depended on effective workers, and an overworked laborer was anything but:

Accuracy, speed, continuity. These are the essentials of high war production. Knowledge, skill and alertness on the part of workers are indispensable. To obtain the best results in production, knowledge must be increased, skill improved, and alertness maintained. There is no other way. This means short work periods for men and women, utilizing plants and machines over larger periods through shifts of workers...<sup>753</sup>

The attempt to compel laborers to work past the breaking point wasn't simply ineffective; it was morally wrong. Reuben and Victor contended robbing workers of their right to their own labor—of their right of choice—undermined the very principles America was going to war to protect. “Americanism,” in Olander’s definition, was at its core a “declaration against human bondage,” and that declaration as fully realized in the 13th Amendment meant that no citizen could be forced to labor, whether in the fields of the South or the factories of the North.<sup>754</sup>

This freedom was not just a right, however—it was also a responsibility. This new World War was not simply a fight amongst nations or armies; to Reuben it was a fight of ideas, waged between ideologies of freedom and control, of labor forced and freely given. It was, in his words, a “challenge to free men.” As he eloquently wrote in the *ISFL Weekly*:

The people of America are facing their supreme test. They are the freest people of all the world. The United States of America surpasses all other nations in the personal freedom of the individual citizen. The American workers are protected against the evil of compulsory labor by a written Constitution, which cannot be altered by Congress. In labor service they have the right of choice, for no man can command their labor in civilian activities.

Having the right of choice, they must continue voluntarily to make the right choice—that which can best serve the national need. Hitler, the Mikado and Mussolini sneer at this, and insist that in war production their captive workers will produce more and better war material, under the force of compulsion, than can be produced by the voluntary efforts of the free men and women of America.

The foreign war trio is wrong, of course. Americans feel quite sure about that. But there’s only one possible method of proof to the world in this emergency, and that is in the amount and quality of war production.

Free men are under a test against slaves. The free men must now prove themselves. As they do so, the slaves will look on in wonder, then in hope and finally in rebellion against their masters.

This will freedom spread over the earth. That is why the United States of America must win without sacrificing the status of its common people as the freest men and women in all the world.<sup>755</sup>

### *Takes to the Air in New Press Offensive*

The battle Reuben described wasn't one only waged abroad. The struggle also raged at home, and one of the biggest battlefields was the court of public opinion. Recent events, particularly the aggressive tactics of John L. Lewis and the CIO, had fed a backlash against unions. As historian Joseph Rayback notes, “The war began in the midst of a strong public reaction against labor. Friends of labor feared that this sentiment might result in the enactment of repressive legislation.”<sup>756</sup> Metropolitan newspapers, guided by their conservative editorship, used any and every opportunity they could to advance the narrative that organized labor was a “fifth column,” bearing responsibility for any delay in production.

Such talk infuriated Reuben. Unafraid to give as good as he got, Reuben pulled no punches in his critique of the newspapers and reporters whom he viewed as in industry's pocket; columnists like Westbrook Pegler, who wrote in favor of the conscription of labor. With scorching anger and thinly veiled contempt, Reuben mused in his own signed column that:

Uncle Sam ought to utilize non-essential newspaper columnists in war production work...These yelping folks are parasites who produce nothing of war-time value, while they live off the rest of us who are productive Americans, conscientiously and honestly working for American victory. All that these useless publishers and other non-essential union-baiting people have done in this Second World War, up to date, is to criticize those who have made the greatest contributions and sacrifices...

According to the putrid and cheap mouthings of these Fascist-minded overlords, organized labor is a needed but still unwelcome influence in the industrial brotherhood of war production people...Let's take these non-producers, these anti-union cheering squads who have been yelping so loudly to 'utilize all women and children first,' and give them a chance to set labor an example, to dirty their hands and break a few industrial records. They sure have been full of 'patriotic' production comments and seem to know exactly how to break records when not in harness themselves, and the whole labor world would smilingly enjoy giving these physically lazy louts their chance to perform war work.<sup>757</sup>

Reuben knew that if he was to protect workers' rights, he had to reverse the narrative. While he had long criticized what he viewed as biased print journalism, by 1942 a new breed of journalistic personality had come to the fore: the radio commentator. With rhetoric as coarse as any columnist and displaying even less restraint, many of these on-air personalities turned labor into a national scapegoat to build their reputations and ratings. As tenacious as ever, Soderstrom started the year out strong, openly taunting conservative radio personalities vilifying labor:

Radio commentators—A new business for profit!—have become very eloquent lately in urging the workers of America to work hard and unceasingly in the production of arms and munitions and supplies needed in the present war emergency. The commentators are right, but decidedly lopsided!

What about the employers? They own the plants. They direct operations. They give the orders. They reap the profits. Not a single one of them will consent to operate at a loss. All, without exception, must—and they insist—have a minimum sufficient to meet the cost of operation, including a very comfortable and even luxurious living for themselves and their families...

Yet the plea of radio orator is almost exclusively to the workers, never to the employers. What's the matter? Are the commentators currying favor with one class of citizens against others for a profit? That's an ugly suggestion, of course! But what's the answer? The obvious fact is that the radio gentlemen seem to become enthusiastic on only one side of the issue. The situation warrants the query, 'Are pocketbooks speaking, rather than brain? Or are they just ignorant of the practical affairs of life?' Perhaps among them some may be found who will attempt an answer.<sup>758</sup>

His critics roundly tweaked, Soderstrom took the offensive. Never a stranger to reporters or interviews, Reuben now expanded his airtime exposure, making multiple appearances on Chicago radio station WCFL, the "Voice of Labor." During "Americanism Week" (a precursor to the modern Presidents Day), Reuben gave a stirring address linking American values, unity, and labor in the midst of existential conflict:

On one occasion during the war between the states—1861 to 1865—from his room in the White House,

President Lincoln looked out of the window at the flickering camp fires of the enemy, entrenched across the river, near Washington D.C. So close had defeat come to the capital of the nation in the days of our Civil War. Then he rose to face his rebellious cabinet, to stand firm against those who desired compromise or surrender. He resolved to fight to the end for a united nation. And unity is needed again today...

As a labor official I naturally believe in unity. Organized labor believes in democracy and democratic processes. The very word "union" means unity. And on this occasion our working people are glad to join with business men, professional men, political leaders, farmers, patriotic organizations and citizens generally in developing unity for American victory against the Hitlerized forces who have declared war on these United States!<sup>759</sup>

Reuben didn't limit himself to labor airwaves. He also took his message mainstream, participating in round tables on the CBS Chicago affiliate WBBM.<sup>760</sup> As the year progressed and his appearances continued to mount, Reuben became the literal "voice of labor" in Illinois, taking the fight against anti-union propaganda into the living rooms of Illinois.

## SODERSTROM BLOCKS GOV FROM GUTTING LAW IN NAME OF WAR

### *Murphy Shows his Colors*

Reuben took on a variety of opponents and special interests in 1942. Of all of these, however, none earned his ire more than Illinois Governor Dwight Green and his Secretary of Labor, Francis Murphy. President Soderstrom and his secretary, Victor Olander, had loudly denounced the Governor's decision to appoint Murphy, a former coal industry executive, to a position that he had publicly promised to someone "whom the wage earners of the state have implicit confidence to administer the laws of the state affecting every wage earner,"<sup>761</sup> a statement Reub and nearly all labor voters took to mean a union man. Despite months of protest following his appointment on Reub and Vic's part, deal-cutting and political advantage lead many other labor voices, most notably Illinois CIO chief Ray Edmundson, to give Murphy (and Governor Green) their endorsement. By the start of 1942, Soderstrom and Olander appeared outflanked and defeated.

Still they refused to let go. During the entire month of January the duo ran article after article, week after week, in the pages of the ISFL Weekly condemning Governor Green, Murphy's selection, and Edmundson's support. Murphy was a wolf in sheep's clothing, they warned; it was only a matter of time before this pro-industrialist entrusted with the duty to protect labor would sell workers down the river.

Illinois didn't have to wait long. In the weeks following Pearl Harbor, Murphy announced that he intended to permit suspensions of the Women's Eight Hour Law and the Six Day Week Law. In Olander's words, "Apparently he (Murphy) has set up some sort of 'come see me' arrangement where employers may obtain his permission to work women and girls, as well as men, longer than the law allows."<sup>762</sup> The move angered not only Vic and Reub, but labor officials and women's groups across the state.

Soderstrom was incredulous (if unsurprised) by the labor director's anti-labor actions. What possessed Murphy to make him believe he could single-handedly overturn state law? In answer, Reuben received a cryptic invitation from Governor Green to a meeting at the Executive Mansion. The telegram, sent to 35 labor representatives in all, provided no agenda or stated purpose for the meeting--just a date and location. However, Victor Olander, despite his status as one of the highest ranking labor officials in the state, was curiously left off the guest list. The message was clear; Olander was out, and Reuben was to come alone.

At the meeting, Governor Green told those assembled that Murphy and his administration was acting at the behest of the Roosevelt administration in issuing the "relaxations" of state labor laws. Washington, he said,



had asked for these exemptions to stop state (and possibly federal) legislatures from emasculating the labor laws themselves. He appealed to the patriotism of those assembled, asking for their support (or at least silence) in the name of the President.<sup>763</sup>

### *The Governor's Deception*

Reuben left the meeting feeling suspicious. Support of Murphy's and Green's "relaxations"—violations, in truth—of state law seemed fundamentally wrong; still, if the President believed it was necessary, should he disagree? Could it really prevent lasting damage to those laws if he looked the other way, just for a bit?

Reub got his answer on a tip from Miss Agnes Nestor, the famous social reformer and ISFL ally. The day after the gathering, she received from a confidential source a copy of an internal memo from George Barrett, Governor Green's Attorney General, to Murphy on the legality of these relaxations.<sup>764</sup> While finding them legal, Barrett's reasoning essentially invalidated the laws in matters of interstate commerce, gutting these and all state protections—not just temporarily, but from that point forward.<sup>765</sup> Despite the fact that this document had been issued on December 15, 1941—well before the Governor's meeting—he had hidden its existence from the group, knowing the impact it would have.

That was only the first deception to come to light. After the meeting Reuben wrote to US Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins, whom he had worked with repeatedly in various Washington visits and committee appointments, to see if Roosevelt did indeed ask for these labor protection rollbacks. The Secretary's answer was a resounding "NO!" In an official letter to the ISFL, Perkins stated she "did not for a moment wish to indicate approval of the practice of granting variations from the labor law when no power to grant such variations was given the administrative officer."<sup>766</sup>

Governor Green, meanwhile, quickly moved to make his controversial director's decision appear settled. He billed the "mansion meeting" as an endorsement of the policy in the press, claiming the labor community supported the labor law suspensions. He also attempted to use the Attorney General's memo to his advantage, claiming it validated Murphy's (and his) authority to violate state law.

Reuben immediately called upon the ISFL's General Counsel, Dan Carmell, to fight back. Carmell challenged the Attorney General's ruling, furnishing a variety of rulings from other states convincing noted constitutional lawyer Walter F. Dodd to issue an opinion on labor's behalf. Soderstrom and Olander, meanwhile, kept the heat on Murphy in the press, highlighting not only the questionable legality of the Governor's policy but the ethical troubles the Administration's actions raised.<sup>767</sup> Faced with mounting public pressure, the Governor's lawyer appealed to the Solicitor of Labor at the U.S. Department of Labor, who upheld worker protections and held Murphy's actions invalid. Barrett then reversed his opinion, defeating Murphy and Governor Green's maneuver.<sup>768</sup>

### *Soderstrom on Gov: "Two Time Double Cross"*

It was a huge victory for Reuben and Olander. Finally, after months of setbacks, lies and slander, they had succeeded in stopping Murphy. In the wake of Barrett's decision, Green sent an envoy, a pro-Green union official, to the ISFL's Chicago office with an offer of truce. As Reuben later recounted:

(Green offered) a proposal that the present state director of labor be moved out and a union man be appointed in his place. This, he said, was to take place if we would agree to discontinue comment about this controversy in the Weekly Newsletter. We accepted the proposition in good faith. The next day this same trade union official called Secretary Olander over the telephone and stated that the Governor was delighted with our

acceptance and that the Governor would carry out his end of it if we would carry out ours.<sup>769</sup>

Reuben carried out his end of the bargain. For months the *ISFL Weekly Newsletter* remained silent on the issue of Murphy and his attempted rollbacks as Soderstrom eagerly awaited news of Murphy's resignation. He continued to hold his tongue as the weeks turned into months. The heat of summer came and passed without word of Murphy's removal. By late September Reuben began to realize he'd been played; the momentum and popular anger over Murphy's appointment had dissipated, but Murphy himself wasn't going anywhere.

Reuben was overwhelmed with anger. Never in all his years as a legislator or labor official had he been so blatantly lied to. Dunne, Lowden, Small, Emmerson, Horner, Stelle- Democrat or Republican, pro-labor or against, he'd worked with them all, and despite their individual shortcomings, at least he knew that when they shook hands in private, he could trust their word.

By the time of the ISFL convention, an open breach had developed between President Soderstrom and Governor Green. In his opening remarks, Reub charged Green had "double crossed" labor through his appointments and policies, revealing the "little secret" of the Governor's private promise and betrayal. Slamming him for Murphy as well as other "two-timing" actions, Reub called on members to protest what he described as the "playboy antics of the playboy governor," saying:

Apparently Governor Green has fooled us twice. It is the two time double cross...He promised to take the provisions of the federal wage and hour act and extend them to cover intra-state industries, but instead he actually tried to take away from labor two laws we already have. Through improper administration in the labor department he tried to nullify, relax and destroy the women's eight hour day law and the one day rest in seven law, just to satisfy a few greedy employers. He failed to appoint a man of labor at the head of our state labor department...He has done none of the things he promised to do...In other words, Governor Green has double crossed labor and there is nothing for labor to do but return the compliment.<sup>770</sup>

Green was aghast. He denied promising to quietly sack Murphy, and refuted the assertion that he'd broken his campaign pledge. In an open letter to Soderstrom, Green protested:

Your remarks, delivered either in the heat of passion or under the stress of political bias, contain so many inaccuracies that in fairness to labor in this state and in justice to me and my associates in the state administration I deem it necessary to point out a number of facts which you have apparently forgotten...I know, of course, that you preferred my keeping in office the former democratic director of labor, but I am sure it is possible for a man to have great sympathies for the cause of labor in the administration of the laws of the state and yet not be a member of organized labor. Mr. Murphy has demonstrated that he is such a man.<sup>771</sup>

Soderstrom promptly returned fire, charging the Governor with "ruling by fooling" and reaffirming that all the members of the ISFL would remain in protest until Murphy was removed.<sup>772</sup> The bad blood between Reuben and the Governor continued to sour as the 1942 elections approached. Although the Governor himself was not up for election, many in his party were, and Reuben worked hard and openly for their defeat. It was a risky gamble - one that he lost. Illinois, like the nation, moved toward the Republican Party in 1942. While the swing was not as dramatic (Illinois Republicans gained no Senate and five House seats, while the party gained eight Senate and forty-five House seats nationally), it did mean that Republicans controlled both the General Assembly and the Governorship, putting labor legislatively on the defensive.<sup>773</sup>

Significantly, the fight marked an abiding rift between the Illinois State Federation of Labor and the Governor's office - a rift that would only become more problematic as the 1943 legislature began.

### *Shows Grimmer, Grittier Edge: “Cudgels in Defense of Faith”*

While the Governor’s actions clearly angered Reuben, he could not afford to linger. Soderstrom was busy, and his national reputation in the labor world, already on the rise, grew even further after the publication of his article “The Worker’s Two Friends.” As he had previously done in local print and radio appearances, Reuben used this full-page editorial to push back against the narrative that labor cared only for its own interests at the expense of the nation. He extolled labor’s virtues and sacrifices for the country during time of war, finding fault only in workers’ failure to speak loudly about their accomplishments and the costs they endured:

Organized labor has been too quiet since open warfare started with the Axis nations. It ought to talk more about the fine and continuous contribution it is making to the nation in the workshop, in the air, on the land and on the sea. Invite these critics to check the official list of soldiers, sailors, marines and coast guardsmen killed since the beginning of the war, December 7, 1941. What percentage of these casualties came from the professional world? What percentage came from the business world? The percentage of those who have made the supreme sacrifice, from families that work for a livelihood, is greater than all the other groups combined.

Easily over fifty percent of those who died at Pearl Harbor came from homes of wage-earners... While the labor movement respects every man who wears the uniform of the United States, it is clearly provable that the smug elements which criticize the most, and contribute the least, are cheating those who are making the largest and most costly contribution out of the credit which is rightfully theirs...Let’s talk about our skill in the navy yards, in the munition plants, in the aviation factories. Let the whole world know about the large number of carpenters, painters, plumbers, machinists, electricians, common laborers, teamsters, and the millions of miscellaneous steel workers, mill workers, miners, lumber jacks, and transportation people who are giving their time, money, and male youngsters to this evolutionary war. Modesty among American citizens is a virtue which should be observed only so long as there is no disadvantage in its practice. Let’s brag a little, too, about the war nurses who grew up in the homes of wage-earners.<sup>774</sup>

Labor workers were now, as ever, under attack. But while in the past workers could only count on one another, they now had a second friend, Reuben declared, in Roosevelt:

The Federal Government is definitely on the side of labor and humanity and, in return for that friendship, labor and humanity is very definitely on the side of the federal government. All of which is a very natural result of mutual friendship. We always like those who like us. That’s natural. The Roosevelt administration is for labor and labor is for the Roosevelt administration. That, too is natural!<sup>775</sup>

But for Soderstrom, it wasn’t enough for organized labor to support Roosevelt. His clashes with Green, Murphy, and the new crop of craven Republican politicians who couldn’t keep their word had convinced Reub that workers had to defeat what he called “reactionary candidates” all across the board, at every level. He pointedly asked for all labor, even those members like himself who traditionally identified as Republican, to vote Democratic in the coming election:

Under such possibilities and circumstances, no one with good sense will deny that a landslide—a democratic landslide—is in the making, and since the President of the United States is about the only real friend the worker has, aside from his fellow worker, this seems to be a good time to forget our political party affiliations and give support at the polls to congressional candidates who are going to uphold America’s great commander-in-chief, President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

It’s time for members of labor unions to take up cudgels in defense of their own faith. Reactionaries are not worth fighting for and certainly not worth voting for...Let’s take our cue from those who are maligning us.

Let's use their tactics. Oppose them rough shod. This is a period when men are taught to expect no mercy and to give none. An eye for an eye policy applied to them by labor only half as energetically as they have applied this policy to us would swell democratic majorities into the greatest democratic landslide the country has ever witnessed.<sup>776</sup>

This was a different Reuben. Certainly, Soderstrom had always been pugnacious, as well as a strong supporter of Roosevelt. But over the course of 1942 his politics had become more partisan and his tone became more determined. His tireless work on behalf of labor and the country, his fights with an increasingly negative and duplicitous press, and above all his complete break with the Governor had created a man fully prepared to dirty his hands, fight fire with fire, and unabashedly work against the political party that he now saw as hopelessly in the hands of anti-union interests.

Reuben's words touched a national nerve, spreading throughout the country like wildfire. Labor papers across the country reprinted his "Two Friends" article, and even the Roosevelt Administration took notice of its impact. It was a message he carried on through to the ISFL convention, addressing the assembly from underneath a huge portrait of President Roosevelt in the Peoria ballroom.<sup>777</sup> Speaking to the wearied crowd, Reuben recounted the recent events of the war, from victories at Midway and Guadalcanal in the Pacific to allied losses at the hands of Rommel's feared Afrika Korps. Linking the fate of the Allies to the fortunes of labor, Soderstrom reaffirmed labor's loyalty and resolve:

Nowhere in America is the labor movement of any state more patriotic and loyal than in the labor movement of Illinois. Now that the nation is at war labor has proven its patriotism by voluntarily giving up its right to strike for the duration of the war. Organized labor will meet the issue in such a fashion, and with determination, to preserve to itself and to those who are to follow us, that priceless gift of liberty and pursuit of happiness, the right of free speech, the right of freedom of religion, in short, and in the words of the immortal Lincoln, "That this government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish."<sup>778</sup>

## REUBEN BECOMES A GRANDFATHER

While Reuben's public life was fraught with drama, his private life in 1942 was much more joyful. The previous year, the 54-year-old had welcomed the young and beautiful Virginia Merriner into his family when she married his son, Carl. Now, less than a year and a half later, he had the privilege of introducing yet another: his first grandson, Carl Jr. Born on Armistice Day, November 11, 1942, the healthy, seven-pound, two-ounce baby was a wondrous boon not only to Carl and Virginia but the whole Soderstrom clan. As the local paper noted, "Mr. and Mrs. A.W. Merriner and Mr. and Mrs. R.G. Soderstrom of this city are grandparents for the first time and can't seem to talk about anything these days but their new grandson!"<sup>779</sup>

"Little Carl" was a perfectly timed blessing for the labor leader. After a year filled with so much death, deception, and doubt, it seemed fitting to end it with the birth of an innocent, the epitome of all the nation was fighting for. Reuben's new status as a grandfather reinvigorated him, reminding him of the affirming optimism that naturally coursed through his veins, the source of his strength. It was a well he would draw from repeatedly in the dark years to come.

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# RACKETEERS

Conservative editorialists and Lewis's antics weren't the only forces undermining labor's image in the press. A number of petty thieves and thugs profited during the war years by posing as union officials. In the opening months of the war, Reuben confronted a pair of racketeers running a con on Illinois doctors. Soderstrom detailed in his warning to members:

Two racketeers claiming to represent the "Federation of Labor" have been calling on physicians and collecting money on false pretenses. Their game is to announce that they are recruiting labor for a railroad or some other concern, that all the laborers are to be subjected to physical examinations at five dollars each, and if the physician approached will donate a given amount to the "Federation," \$15.00 in the case of a Wenona doctor, the laborers would be sent to him for examination.<sup>780</sup>

Just a few months later, Reub returned to the presses to spread word about another racketeer, R. A. Neumann, who was posing as a representative of the Federation and collecting money on its behalf. As the ISFL made clear:

The use of the name "State Federation of Labor" by an unauthorized organization or person is an unlawful infringement upon the Illinois State Federation of Labor. The collection of funds through such unlawful infringement is criminal fraud and should be reported to the state's attorney and the police in any locality where the racketeer attempts to operate.<sup>781</sup>

Such warnings soon became boilerplate, as almost every month a different thief used the name of the ISFL in a new confidence scheme.

Possibly the most curious case Reuben faced that year, however, was that of George "Slim" Ziller, a 538-pound politician and labor racketeer. In the spring of 1942, Soderstrom started to receive complaints from members of the Hod Carriers and Common Laborers Union. According to these reports, Ziller was "flashing a gold badge and posing as a representative of the AFL."<sup>782</sup> Reub immediately published a warning to all members in its weekly newsletter about the not-so-gentle giant posing as a labor official:

WARNING! Information has reached the Illinois State Federation of Labor to the effect that a racketeer, operating under the name of "Ziller," and displaying a gold badge inscribed "Representative, State Federation of Labor," is posing as a representative of the Illinois State Federation of Labor. "Ziller" is not a representative of either the Illinois State Federation of Labor or the American Federation of Labor.<sup>783</sup>

Ziller ignored the charge that he had posed as an ISFL rep, instead claiming "Reuben Soderstrom and the Illinois Federation of Labor don't like me because I had something to do with swinging the 16,000 Caterpillar workers to the CIO. When you take about \$30,000 a month from a fellow he isn't going to like you very much."<sup>784</sup> But the CIO disavowed Ziller too, and with good reason. His work as a "union contractor" seemed to have more in common with a mobster don than an honest labor official. As one of Ziller's colleagues (who wished to remain anonymous) described to reporters:

I referred a number of men to him for jobs and they got them. At that time he had headquartered in a Joliet hotel. There were always three or four big and tough guys there. A man would come in for a job. Slim would say, "Lay 25 bananas on the table." When the man put down the money Slim would give him a slip of paper.

“That’ll get you at the head of the line. Get out and get to work,” Slim would say. He had an “in” with the unions and with the company man who did the hiring. I’ve heard him call the latter and tell him, “Listen, Funnyface (that’s what he called him), here’s my list of men to go to work.” Sometimes “Funnyface” would object to a man but Slim would say, “Put him on anyway. And say, put Joe what’s his name from Bellflower in the mud.” That meant that “what’s his name” was behind in his payments. He’d have to drive his truck across mud fields instead of on pavement. Get stuck with 10 tons and they’d send a “cat” out, hook on to your front end and go on back to town with your front wheels.<sup>785</sup>

Ziller hadn’t only posed as an AFL rep; he also carried a police officer’s star and drove a big black Cadillac equipped with a red policeman’s spotlight, ripping through his hometown of Weston at over 70 miles per hour. That spring he got himself elected Democratic precinct committeeman in sleepy Yates township by wrangling 11 votes in a write-in campaign (his opponent received 5 votes), allowing him to claim he was a Democratic Party operative.<sup>786</sup> Despite all his antics and deceptions, Ziller was able to escape legal prosecution until he moved in on defense contracts, conspiring to rig job placements at the Wilmington and Kankakee ordinance plants.<sup>787</sup> Attorney General George Barrett spent years prosecuting Ziller for conspiracy as a scandalized press breathlessly wrote reams about the cartoonishly thuggish “labor agent.”

Reub did all he could to expose frauds like Ziller, working with local police and the state’s attorney to expose these fakers. In the wake of the Ziller affair Reuben wrote an essay entitled “Smash Racketeering” to speak to the issue directly. He began with an unqualified call for the removal of “the rascals” wherever and whenever they were uncovered:

The racketeer, hoodlum and gangster, who plays his nefarious trade among innocent wage-earners, is a definite menace to union labor and the sooner he is exposed and publicly kicked all the way out of the trade union movement the better it will be for the entire membership. Organized labor must be increasingly watchful and vigilant so that hoodlums who skin the public, or who victimize wage-earners, and who are connected with gangster or political rackets, do not get a foothold in any of our union organizations. The policy adopted in many former conventions of the Illinois State Federation of Labor to drive these rascals out, to swear out warrants, arrest them, and bring them to justice, to have nothing whatsoever to do with them, have borne fruit during the years...Smash their rackets by exposing them to the pure sunlight of honest publicity and call in the state’s attorney, the sheriff and the police to help keep them out permanently.<sup>788</sup>

Reuben understood the danger that these rogue elements posed to both the reputation of the Federation and to working men and women:

Labor unions are honest and necessary institutions and their reputations have been besmirched too often by criminal-minded racketeers who professed, and sometimes did have, contacts and standing within the labor movement...No matter what they do it results in harm to the movement because their smelt reputations arouse resentment and suspicion...

The labor movement is rightfully more concerned about the elimination of rackets and gangsters than any other group because union working people have more at stake than others. Hoodlums, gangsters and racketeers can do labor more harm than they can to employers, business men and politicians. The menace is greater—first because labor’s good name is a precious thing and must be kept clean and second, because more decency and perfection is expected from labor than any other group. Working people have had the least opportunity in life, they are admittedly limited in education, have been treated less generously than any other section of society within the nation itself—yet of them the whole business world, including newspapers, expect perfection.<sup>789</sup>

This double standard infuriated Soderstrom. Why, he asked, did the world expect the men and women of

labor to be “five times as good and honest as others?” To him, the case of Ziller and his ilk was a prime example of such hypocrisy:

Even when it comes to the matter of condemning rackets in general, apparently only labor is expected to condemn its wrong-doing associates. When the utilities were infested with a billion dollar financial racket, pyramiding financial get-ups through the medium of holding companies, not a word was ever said...When banks failed by the thousands and the government had to step in and declare a “bank holiday,” and untold millions of poor and needy people lost their savings there wasn’t a banker association in this country which passed a single resolution condemning faulty banking or condemning a single financier who was responsible for these shocking failures. Only labor is expected to publicly condemn its own associates when they come within the classification of racketeers, hoodlums and gangsters.<sup>790</sup>

Still, Soderstrom said, labor would be better. It would rise to the challenge and act the way it ought, even if others failed to do so. To the criminals who took advantage of those seeking honest pay for honest work—particularly during this time of war—Reub had a simple warning:

Labor is against the Racketeer. Labor is against the Hoodlum. Labor is against the Gangster...Let them beware, because treason laws can be invoked against them when they make a racket out of jobs, or sale of jobs, or in production industries.<sup>791</sup>

# CHAPTER 32

## 1943

### WORKERS SACRIFICE TO FUEL MASSIVE WAR MACHINE

*“I say to you the mission of organized labor is to abolish poverty, to make war impossible, to bring to each and every citizen a realization of his or her relationship with their fellows, to usher in an age of human brotherhood.”*

-Reuben Soderstrom  
1943 ISFL Convention

#### LABORING FAMILIES GIVE ALL FOR VICTORY

Like every American in 1943, Reuben devoured the daily headlines. In the months following the 1942 ISFL convention, the Axis Powers had suffered a string of crushing defeats. US and British troops opened up a second front in Northern Africa with Operation Torch, putting American boots on the ground and capturing Morocco and Algeria from the Vichy French in a matter of days. In Eastern Europe, Russian troops broke through the Siege of Stalingrad, forcing the surrender of Germany’s Sixth Army. Every day seemed to bring encouraging news from the front lines to the home front.

Despite this good news, most Americans remained in a state of near-constant worry and readiness. In Illinois, posters and radio waves repeatedly painted the picture of an army in desperate need of weapons and material. Workers were rallied with phrases like “We’re building arms for victory!” and “You knock ‘em out—we’ll knock ‘em down!”<sup>792</sup> Households were likewise cheered to “salvage scrap to blast the Jap” and admonished that “when you ride alone you ride with Hitler!”<sup>793</sup> Materials and common goods remained scarce. Gas rationing hit the Illinois Valley that February, while restrictions on common materials ground the production of everyday goods to a halt. Clock making at the local Westcloc plant, for example, was temporarily suspended due to a shortage of brass, while the army’s leather needs meant a ban on the production of evening slippers and leather shoes.<sup>794</sup> Foods like meat and sugar became luxuries.

Of all the things Illinois workers sent to the front, by far the most precious was their own flesh and blood. The number of souls sent to war in 1943 continued to mount, as did the number of casualties. As historian R.G. Bluemer writes:

Patriotic ceremonies filled with pride the hearts of parents and spouses of those in the armed forces, but at the same time, families lived in apprehension of the sight of Western Union messengers coming to the door...Examples of personal hardships and tragedies were especially hard to accept, not only for the individual family, but for everyone in the smaller towns. Another name was typically added to the memorial honor roll of those who had sacrificed their lives, and life went on.<sup>795</sup>

Streator was no exception to this tragic rule. The city’s first casualty in action, Thomas Dunn, died that year in the North African campaign.<sup>796</sup>



As the year progressed, Reuben's weekly waits at the Streator train station grew packed with soldiers passing through on troop trains taking the Santa Fe line to Chicago. A gregarious soul with a noted habit of striking up train-side conversations, Soderstrom likely heard many stories from the soldiers as they stopped to buy coffee and sandwiches from the depot's Streator Canteen.<sup>797</sup>

Most of the boys he met were the children of working men and women, far too many of whom would be mourned by parents who, like Reub so many years earlier, could scarcely afford their child's burial. Still more would return alive but scarred inside and out, like his brother Paul who served his country the last time the world went to war. All this led Reuben to repeatedly turn the national attention to the sacrifice working families made for the war, not just in sweat and dollars but in blood and loss:

Sixty-five percent of those who are now wearing the uniform—in the army, the navy and the air-corps—come from the home of wage earners. Sixty-five percent of our patriotic women serving the Nation in the WACS, the SPARS, WAVES, MARINES, and trained nurse divisions, come from the homes of wage-earners. Sixty-five percent of those who made the supreme sacrifice at Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941, came from the homes of wage earners. All of which means that at least sixty-five percent of the sacrifices made in the Second World War have been made by wage earners.<sup>798</sup>

The war required “soul-stirring sacrifices” from labor, but they were willingly made. The men and women of labor, Soderstrom said, were patriots of the highest order, standing side by side with those in the fight. As he told the assembled delegates at the ISFL convention later that year:

The wage-earners of Illinois, and America, today can be properly designated as the Brotherhood of War Production Workers, just as our soldier sons, and brothers, and relatives, in the armed forces of our country, can be properly designated as the Brotherhood of American Warriors. In my imagination I can see the brotherhood of War Production Workers and the Brotherhood of American Warriors standing silently at attention at sunset, jointly saluting the Stars and Stripes, the flag of the freest and happiest and most enlightened people under the sun.

Today this great convention salutes the soldiers... These working men and women who wear the uniform... are fighting for liberty, equality and the continuation of American freedom for all of us. They are fighting so it will always be possible for wage-earners to gather in conventions of this character and say to the world, both publicly and privately, collectively and individually, proudly and defiantly, I am an American worker, I am an American trade unionist.<sup>799</sup>

## SODERSTROM STANDS FOR AMERICAN PRINCIPLES, RIGHTS

### *Roosevelt Freezes Wages, Jobs*

While organized labor in Illinois endorsed the US war effort and the Roosevelt administration's efforts abroad, it was far from supportive of all the President's policies at home. In fact, the ISFL spent most of 1943 protesting several of FDR's key decisions. It started with the President's Executive Order 9250, which froze wages and salaries. Issued on October 3, 1942, the Order stated:

No increase in wage rates, granted as a result of voluntary agreement, collective bargaining, conciliation, arbitration, or otherwise, and no decrease in wage rates, shall be authorized unless...the National War Labor Board has approved such increase or decreases. The National War Labor Board shall not approve any increase in the wage rates prevailing on September 15, 1942, unless such increase is necessary to correct maladjustments

or inequities, to eliminate sub-standards of living, to correct gross inequities, or to aid in the effective prosecution of the war.<sup>800</sup>

The wage freeze couldn't have come at a worse time. Despite efforts to control inflation, heavy price increases had pushed the cost of living to record highs. As the *Chicago Tribune* noted that year:

A chart on the financial page...and the statistics upon which it is based give little comfort to those who had hoped that price increases had been arrested. Since the war began average wholesale prices in the United States have gone up 35 per cent, wholesale food prices more than 50 per cent, and the cost of living nearly 20 per cent...These figures suggest that the Roosevelt administration has not been very much more successful in preventing prices from soaring in war time than the Wilson administration was.<sup>801</sup>

The Roosevelt administration's response was to "hold the line," refusing to permit any rise in wages while simultaneously cracking down on rent and price control violations. As the President subsequently wrote:

To hold the line we cannot tolerate further increases in prices affecting the cost of living or further increases in general wage or salary rates except where clearly necessary to correct substandard living conditions. The only way to hold the line is to stop trying to find justifications for not holding it here or not holding it there. No one straw may break a camel's back, but there is always a last straw. We cannot afford to take further chances in relaxing the line. We already have taken too many.<sup>802</sup>

While this action stemmed the tide—cost of living over the next 21 months rose only 1 percent—most labor leaders were incensed.<sup>803</sup> The ISFL and Reuben had a particularly difficult time squaring an order which so clearly undermined labor with its broad endorsement of the President's policies. They first counseled members to reserve judgment while the order was reviewed, then tried to emphasize certain technicalities that left the door open for individual increases.<sup>804</sup> Ultimately, however, it was impossible to deny the fact that Roosevelt had effectively outlawed raises for the duration of the war. Despite its opposition to the policy, the ISFL remained relatively quiet on the issue.

The silence would not last long. On April 8th, 1943, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9328, the Wage and Price order, a broad extension of his "hold the line" policy. While it did indeed reaffirm existing wage and price freezes, the most controversial part of the order was the authorization of job freezes, forbidding workers from quitting or changing jobs if they were in "essential" industries:

The Order also makes clear the authority of the Chairman of the War Manpower Commission to forbid the employment by an employer of any new employee except in accordance with regulations of the Chairman, the purpose being to prevent such employment at a higher wage or salary than that received by the employee in his last employment unless the change of employment will aid in the prosecution of the war.<sup>805</sup>

As difficult as the wage controls were for Soderstrom's ISFL to accept, this new order created a firestorm. ISFL Secretary Victor Olander in particular found it to be a gross violation of the Constitution, specifically the 13th Amendment's protections against forced labor. In a series of columns for months on end, Olander railed against what he described as "serfdom obnoxious to Americanism."<sup>806</sup> He viewed these restrictions as even more oppressive than the previous attempts by industry to blacklist union laborers during the open shop struggles of the 1920's, writing in an address to employers:

A scheme is now being promoted to hold the worker to your service against his will. He has known what it means to be locked out until you are willing to permit him to come in. Now it is proposed that he shall be locked in until it pleases you to let him out! That's what is called 'freezing' of the worker to his job in your

plant.

What's worse- to be locked out or to be locked in? Take a look at prison walls of any sort and you'll feel the answer. It makes little difference to the individual worker whether he is tied to your service by labor conscription through law, or by administrative edicts applied without legal authority...The "freeze" will chill the ardor of workers.<sup>807</sup>

Although Olander addressed his condemnation to employers, many industrialists also questioned the policy. Already no friends of Roosevelt and contemptuous of the related price controls, many prominent industrialists were happy to attack another part of FDR's plan. As C.E. Wilson, President of the General Motors Corporation, told the press:

Freezing of men to their present jobs or drafting them for work in another factory is easy to talk about, but it's quite another thing to put into operation...It's alright to talk about making men go where they don't want to go and do work that they don't care about, but the big problem is: How are you going to get a man to do a fair day's work when you get him there?<sup>808</sup>

In the months leading up to and following the President's executive order, Illinois labor aggressively pushed back against job freezes in multiple ways. Olander eventually wrote and published an alternative Stabilization Plan that relied on social and organizational pressure instead of legal coercion.<sup>809</sup> The Chicago Federation of Labor, meanwhile, lodged official and public protests with the Roosevelt administration.<sup>810</sup> In the end, however, these actions had little effect; the "hold the line" price, wage, and job freezes would remain in place.

While Olander was outspoken in his condemnation of Roosevelt's executive actions, Reuben was comparatively quiet on the issue. Unlike Victor, he did not publish a single signed article in opposition. When articles critical of job freezes did occur in the pages of the *ISFL Weekly*, they shifted attention away from the President and onto the War Manpower Commission, the body chiefly responsible for implementing the President's mandate.

While Reuben almost certainly shared Olander's unease, his trust and support of the President was most likely responsible for his relative silence. This was one of the primary differences between the ISFL Secretary and President. Olander prided himself on an unyielding commitment to principle, regardless of what opponents or bedfellows that commitment might create. Soderstrom, in contrast, tended to put his faith in expediency and in people; if he thought a man or woman was of a worthy character and had their "heart" in labor, he was much more likely to give them leeway on a given issue. Conversely, pro-union actions taken by a person Reuben distrusted seldom received a warm welcome. Such maneuvers were considered at best with suspicion and at worst as preludes to deception.

### ***Reuben Fights to Expand Voting Rights***

Soderstrom's personal approach to policy could be seen in his earlier battles with Governor Green. In Reub's estimation, the Governor's chief sin wasn't that he appointed Murphy or backed the "relaxation" of labor laws; it was that he'd broken his campaign promise to labor voters to elect a union-friendly Labor Secretary. Even worse, he violated and even denied making a second promise to the ISFL to remove Murphy if the labor organization ended its public campaign against the Secretary of Labor (presumably so Green could quietly retire Murphy without the public appearance of bowing to union pressure).

It should come as little surprise, then, that Reub campaigned hard against the Governor and his Republican allies. For the first time in his tenure as ISFL President, Soderstrom made a partisan appeal in a statewide race,

calling on labor voters of all affiliations to vote Democratic in the coming election. It did not go well; the Governor's party kept control of Springfield, as Republicans strengthened their numbers in Washington. While war fatigue and mid-term voting dynamics could explain some of the Democratic loss, Reuben saw a different, more perverse and pervasive force at play: voter discrimination. In his signed column "Why Elections Go Wrong," Reuben for the first time called for election law reform:

Standing alone the wage-earner is weak, united with his fellow workers he is strong; but unless wage-earners have a better opportunity to march to the polls together four abreast, so to speak, with every toiler of voting age, man and woman, in the parade, the results on election day will continue to seriously miscarry.

Working people, last Election Day, even those employed in defense production plants, did not show up at their precinct voting places because it was too inconvenient or too embarrassing to get there...Of course politicians find it hard 'to get out the vote.' Only leisure classes of citizens, and those who do not need to consult anybody for permission to be away from their place of business...have become the electorate or voting public in Illinois. Something ought to be done about that!<sup>811</sup>

And Reuben knew exactly what he wanted done—longer poll hours and "souls to the polls" Sunday voting. Only then, he said, could working men and women be able to exercise their constitutional right without fear of losing their jobs. He worked with Representative Lloyd Harris to introduce a series of voting rights bills to amend the General Election Law.<sup>812</sup> Unfortunately, House Republicans (who feared extending the vote to labor) tabled all voting reform laws, including those that made it easier for servicemen fighting abroad to vote in state elections.<sup>813</sup> Reub didn't give up, however. He led the ISFL to push for early voter registration, writing:

It is quite obvious that one of the most important duties of a free citizen is to exercise his right of franchise in public elections. The first step is to register as a voter. The Executive Board of the Illinois State Federation of Labor is therefore calling upon all workers in Illinois, and especially upon the members of affiliated unions, to exercise their rights of citizenship by registering to qualify as voters in all public elections.<sup>814</sup>

By October of that year, Soderstrom began a full-fledged voting rights and voter registration campaign, actively working with the Secretary of State and the Election Commissioners of Cook County to identify and register working voters.<sup>815</sup> A believer in the power of democracy, Reub resolved to spread its influence and thereby increase labor's voice in the legislature.

## 1943 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

### *Governor Undermines Worker Protections*

Unfortunately, however, Reuben had to enter the 1943 legislative session not with the General Assembly he wanted, and that legislature had painted a target squarely on labor's back. As usual, Soderstrom built a full-bodied legislative program, complete with old-age pension extensions, civil service amendments, and a fifty percent farmer's tax, but he had virtually no chance of enacting any of it. There was no doubt—Reub was playing defense, holding the labor line against an expected onslaught of anti-labor legislation.

It didn't take long for the wave to hit. Soon Representative William Thon introduced legislation to suspend the Six-Day Week Law and the Women's Eight Hour Law, removing the protections Director of Labor Murphy had been "relaxing" by fiat before he was thwarted by Reub and the ISFL. While Thon's stated aim was to prevent "handicapping many industries and business concerns in this state in their efforts to supply war needs and civilian requirements," Soderstrom and others suspected the suspensions were merely the first step

in a larger effort to permanently repeal the protections.<sup>816</sup>

Reub did not take the threat lying down. As the *Freeport Journal-Standard* reported, “Organized labor, having made little if any progress to date on enactment of labor laws in the present session, is ready for a full strength fight to keep from losing any labor legislation passed by previous assemblies.”<sup>817</sup> As he had done two years before, Reub gathered his troops at the Leland Hotel, strategically placing them for committee hearings and honing their rhetoric for the coming battle.

But while Soderstrom was preparing for a fight, his opponents were getting ready to take a dive. Less than two weeks after Thon introduced his bills, Director Murphy came out against them as too extreme. He instead threw his support behind a bill introduced by Rep. McDonald that proposed creating a board that could issue “relaxations” of the law on an individual basis.<sup>818</sup> It was a brilliant tactical move; by starting the conversation so far on the anti-labor political right, Republican politicians (including Gov. Green and Murphy) were able to appear moderate while getting exactly what they wanted in the first place.

Murphy and the Governor received further help from Representative Greene, an influential politician who headed the House Industrial Affairs sub-committee. Greene was a close ally of the Governor and no friend to labor. Greene was someone constantly identified in the press as a “negro legislator,” and his support was commonly viewed as an endorsement by the black community; his voting record, however, more closely aligned with his personal financial interests than community ties. In the last legislative session, he led the attack on Soderstrom’s Wage Hour Bill.<sup>819</sup> Now as subcommittee chair, Greene added a series of amendments to the McDonald bills to further undercut workers’ legal protections. As the *ISFL Weekly* explained:

The Greene amendments, in the main, are designed to give the Director of Labor authority to permit employers to disregard the Women’s Eight Hour Law and the Six Day Week Act for unlimited periods, with the peculiar provision that such permits, once granted, cannot be revoked or modified ‘except for reasonable cause’...Neither the original bills as presented by Director of Labor Murphy, nor the amendments as offered by the Greene subcommittee, contain any provision for overtime pay...The Murphy bills are bad. The Greene amendments are worse.<sup>820</sup>

The *ISFL Weekly* bemoaned what it described as Greene’s betrayal of his own constituents:

It is notorious that there are a great number of unemployed among the Negroes of Chicago...Representative Greene, while complaining against discrimination on the one hand, is now in effect urging that, instead of employing additional workers, such industries should be allowed to overwork women already engaged, whatever their color or race might be.<sup>821</sup>

Still, the greatest double-cross came not from Greene, but from the CIO. Two years earlier, Ray Edmundson and his Illinois CIO made the political decision to support Murphy despite his complete lack of union credentials in a bid to shut out the ISFL and curry favor with the Governor. The plan had largely worked. Now, with a piece of blatantly anti-labor legislation up for consideration, Green once again turned to the CIO. To ensure the McDonald bills’ passage, the Governor and his allies withheld key documents from not only the ISFL but also the Railway Brotherhoods and labor-friendly representatives while giving them to CIO chiefs.<sup>822</sup> The CIO, meanwhile, gave testimony in support of the bills, providing the necessary cover to pass the legislation.<sup>823</sup> Despite a hard fight led by the ISFL, Reuben’s efforts were ultimately ignored and the McDonald Relaxation Bills became law, effectively (if temporarily) suspending labor wage and hour protections at employer request.<sup>824</sup>

### ***Soderstrom Wins Equal Pay for Equal Work***

Not all news from Springfield was bad, however. While some protections for women were weakened, their right to equal pay finally became the law of the land. For years, Soderstrom and the ISFL had declared that women deserved equal compensation, working hand in hand with famous activists like Agnes Nestor to affect change. Finally, in 1943 Reuben helped Illinois join the ranks progressive states with the courage to codify that right.

The need for such protection was glaringly apparent. According to the Office of War Information approximately 15,000,000 women were gainfully employed, four million of them in war work.<sup>825</sup> Yet these women were heavily discriminated against. According to the Illinois Department of Labor, working women brought home average weekly earnings of \$21.57, little more than half of the \$41.01 their male counterparts made. In non-manufacturing industries that gap was even higher, with women earning roughly 40% of what men in those fields earned.<sup>826</sup>

Disparities like these spurred organized labor and women's groups to call for a "Square Deal" for female workers. At the start of the 1943 legislative session, Rep. Lottie Holman O'Neill, whom Reub had worked with to pass the Women's Eight Hour Law, introduced the Equal Pay for Equal Work Bill. The legislation, sponsored by the ISFL and the Women's Trade Union League, was beautiful in its simplicity—it provided that "the wages of women shall not be less than the wages paid men when the work performed is substantially the same."<sup>827</sup> O'Neill, a brave fighter and unionist whom Olander described as "the greatest figure among women legislators in America," had no easy road ahead of her, as she had to convince the increasingly conservative House Committee on Industrial Affairs to approve one of the most progressive pieces of legislation in the nation.<sup>828</sup> Despite this, O'Neill and her compatriots didn't hesitate, grounding their arguments on firm labor principles. As Illinois Women's Trade Union League president Mary White testified before the committee:

The principle of 'equal pay for equal work' is morally and economically sound...You are all aware that much is being said in the public press to the effect that women are equal to men and sometimes superior to them in productive capacity. Women are, of course, pleased by the flattering references to our great value in industry and commerce as compared with our brothers who have left or are leaving for the battle fronts....Notwithstanding all the praise we are receiving, the wages paid to the average woman worker is little more than half of the amount received by the average man worker.<sup>829</sup>

This bill wasn't just about protecting the rights of women, Miss White reminded the commission. It was also about protecting the rights of the boys serving their nation in war:

We feel that we owe double duty to our brothers. Our first duty is to give willing service in war production industry and all other employment into which we are being called because of the war emergence. Our second duty it to safeguard the wage standards of our brothers during their absences so that when they return victorious from the battle fields they will not be forced into a long struggle at home to restore the wage and working conditions which are being lowered by the exploitation of their sisters while the men are away.<sup>830</sup>

Despite these and other expert arguments, the Illinois Manufacturers' Association was able to bottle the bill up in the House subcommittee for weeks while its companion bill was challenged in the Senate.<sup>831</sup> There, despite a party platform pledge to pass an equal pay act, a majority of Republican senators aligned firmly against the bill. They presented and passed an amendment that left it effectively unenforceable—so weak, in fact, that most Democrats appeared ready to oppose it as well.

Reuben was in a bind. He wanted, desperately, for this bill to pass. As he had previously warned legislators:

That condition of inequality, utterly unfair to the women of the state, is the condition sought to be remedied by the Equal Pay for Equal Work Bill...The issue will not die. Either the women of Illinois will get a square deal from the Illinois legislature on this question, or the failure on the part of legislators to treat them fairly will be heralded throughout the state until every woman in Illinois will know what happened- and who was responsible.<sup>832</sup>

He acknowledged the bill had lost much of its teeth, but he knew even a watered-down act was better than inaction. At the very least, he wanted to be able to affirm that “the principle of equal pay for equal work, as affecting women in relation to men, was upheld by the Illinois legislature.”<sup>833</sup> In this hour of need, Soderstrom turned to an old friend—Senator “Johnny” Lee, a man Reuben had described as “strong, with a steadfastness that never wavered, unflinching in his courage, intelligent and diplomatic in his dealings with others, always patient and courteous, yet never hesitating to peak with utter frankness.”<sup>834</sup> At Soderstrom’s personal request, the Democratic Senator made an impassioned appeal from the Senate floor. As one newspaper accounts reported:

At a critical moment, Senator Lee took the floor on behalf of the measure and urged his Democratic colleagues to vote for it, notwithstanding its emasculated form, in order that the bill might thus be sent to the House with the hope of possible amendment there. The defeat of the bill seemed almost certain until Senator Lee made his plea...Addressing the Republican side, Senator Lee said, “Labor will take your few crumbs and hope for a change of heart by the administration later. We can only hope that the House will do something to strengthen the bill.”<sup>835</sup>

The Women’s Equal Pay for Equal Work Act became the law of the land in Illinois, further affirming the state’s status as a leader in labor legislation. Despite immense odds and significant losses, Reuben left the halls of Springfield in 1943 confident that he had prevented the worst abuses and even advanced the line in working women’s rights.

## REUBEN RESPONDS TO NATIONAL CRISES

### *Wartime Strikes and the War Labor Disputes Act*

Although labor faced serious and often bitter challenges during the course of the Second World War, neither Soderstrom nor the ISFL ever wavered in their commitment to victory through national unity and patriotic sacrifice. As Reuben so eloquently announced in his 1943 Labor Day address:

Because the labor movement believes in absolute loyalty to our country-fixed and unchanging- Labor Day in this year of our Lord, 1943, becomes something more than an occasion on which to estimate gains won, or losses suffered, by wage earners during the past twelve months...On this Labor Day we are involved in a Second World War, called upon to fight the forces of evil which again seek to prevent our peaceful advancement to a larger freedom and a better life...

The labor movement is supporting America and America is supporting the movement of labor. Wage-earners everywhere are loyally standing by our great Commander-in-Chief, the President of the United States, against Mussolini of Italy, against Adolf Hitler of Germany, against Hirohito of Japan. A victorious peace will reward the United Nations in this Second World War because the common people believe in unity, and because they have adopted and put into practice the age-old slogan of the United States, “United We Stand, and Divided We Fall...This year, more than any other like period in the history of the Nation, the spirit of Labor Day becomes identical with the spirit of America.”<sup>836</sup>

Not all labor leaders shared this view, however. John L. Lewis, former founder and chief of the CIO and current President of the United Mine Workers, had grown increasingly bitter and intransigent during the years leading up to the war. His outspoken opposition to FDR in the 1940 election had backfired, failing to convince even a substantial minority of CIO members and causing him to resign from the organization's leadership in disgrace. Phillip Murray, his successor and former ally, was bitterly opposed to Lewis, whom he considered "hell bent on creating national confusion and national disunity."<sup>837</sup> It was Murray who worked to ensure Lewis was not nominated to the President's Combined Labor War Board.<sup>838</sup> By October of 1942, the relationship had so thoroughly fallen apart that Lewis withdrew his United Miners from the very organization he'd helped build.

Though dejected and frozen out, Lewis still commanded arguably the most important union, one with the power to either fuel the nation or bring it to its knees. Coal miners provided the energy needed to keep the factories churning, and they did so at great cost. As historian Melvyn Dubofsky writes:

The longer hours and increased mechanization imposed by the wartime demand for coal made mining—already one of the most dangerous jobs in America—even more dangerous....(Lewis) understood as did neither Roosevelt, (NWLB Chair) William Davis, nor most Americans, that for miners the battle for production on the home front produced its own body count.<sup>839</sup>

By 1943 these miners, like many wage earners, were ready for rebellion. Unlike presidents Green, Murray, and Soderstrom, however, Lewis decided to fan the flame. In April of 1943 he began to demand a \$2.00 wage increase, which the operators refused. When the War Labor Board tried to intervene, Lewis refused to recognize their authority. While not directly ordering a strike, Lewis declared that none of the miners would "trespass" on the employers' property unless a new contract was reached. In response, coal miners across the nation went on strike, declaring "we won't go back without a contract unless Lewis says so."<sup>840</sup> It wasn't until FDR seized the mines from the operators and offered direct negotiation between Lewis and Secretary of the Interior Ickes that Lewis agreed to release his miners for work. For the next six months, newspapers reported the controversy with a mix of entertainment and fear-mongering as work was stopped three more times before a satisfactory agreement was reached.

The strike was disastrous for labor. Whatever Lewis's reasons, the most lasting and impactful effect of his actions was to sour the nation on labor and union policies. In the wake of the coal crisis, labor's every motivation was questioned and every misstep magnified. According to historian Rayback:

During 1943 public disapproval of labor policies increased. A fear that labor had secured a power which would enable it to choke off the nation's entire war effort appeared in many quarters. The nation's metropolitan newspapers, which had long been anti-labor, and most of the rural press, which took its tone from its urban contemporaries, lost no opportunity to exploit this feeling. They gave wide publicity to every strike, no matter how trivial...The coal conflict climaxed this presentation. Lewis was portrayed as Hitler's ally, and it was easy to transform this charge of unpatriotic behavior from Lewis to the entire U.M.W. and to labor itself.<sup>841</sup>

All of the union-bashing hysteria Lewis stoked culminated in what has been described as one of the most odious pieces of anti-labor legislation ever passed by the United States Congress: The War Labor Disputes Act. Introduced by Howard Smith of Virginia and Tom Connally of Texas, the bill prohibited strikes or stoppage of production in mines, mills, manufacturing plants, and all facilities which produced materials to prosecute the war. It also included blatantly anti-union provisions unrelated to strikes, such as the outlawing of political donations from organized labor. When Roosevelt vetoed the bill, labeling it unnecessary and counterproductive, Congress overrode the President. The veto marked a new low point for both organized



labor and the administration.

### *Reub Bears Message of Hope*

In Lewis, anti-labor forces had an easy devil—someone with fiery rhetoric seemingly aimed squarely at America in its greatest hour of need. Labor needed a corresponding force—someone who could counter Lewis’s condemnation with hope, beat back his separation of the needs of labor from those of the nation with a message marrying the two. Soderstrom’s speeches and appearances from this period clearly demonstrate an understanding of this need as well as an ability to fill it. Much of Reub’s hottest rhetoric—previously his signature—was downplayed, particularly during the second half of 1943. Instead, it was replaced with a hopeful, transformative message. If Lewis presented to the nation a labor movement living in the present moment, strong enough to fear and fierce enough to bite, Soderstrom gave his audience a labor looking to the future, worthy of believing in and ready for fundamental change. In his address to the convention that year, Reuben spoke of how all Americans—wage earners and employers alike—could move past the old fights to expand the country’s commitment to democracy and prosperity in the wake of war:

The cause of organized labor far transcends the winning of the war. We must win the peace too. We must re-arrange our society, in which we do not feel well of, because of the contrast of poverty. Rather we must concern ourselves with the total abolition of poverty, and a realization that the nation can only be rich by sharing with our fellow-citizens all of the joys that a full life can give.

In other words—a political democracy is not enough. We must strive to establish an economic democracy, in which every citizen can enjoy equal economic rights, as well as equal political rights... The principles of political equality, which lie at the very basis of our democratic system, will lose its value unless translated economically into the life of the average citizen. A healthy democracy implies an adequate economic standing for all of its members, and since conditions no longer exist in which it might be hoped this can be attained through the interplay of blind economic forces, self preservation dictates that the national and international policy must be directed deliberately towards that end.

Economic security in this sense for the individual implies more than the old slogan, ‘the right to work,’ or ‘work or relief;’ it implies more even than the prevention of unemployment...It aims at enabling him to secure for himself and his family all that is necessary to enable him in youth, and in his working years, and in old age, to enjoy peace and dignity in the life of the community and make such contributions as his gifts and capacities may render possible.

I say to you the mission of organized labor is to abolish poverty, to make war impossible, to bring to each and every citizen a realization of his or her relationship with their fellows, to usher in an age of human brotherhood. This, and nothing less than this, is the mission of organized labor.<sup>842</sup>

This was message decades ahead of its time, at once fundamental and radical, appealing to the most basic of American ideals while urging the nation to charge forward unafraid. Reuben was calling for nothing less than the complete re-imagining of society, eliminating poverty by establishing a set of economic rights just as fundamental and protected as traditional political rights- and all this in the midst of the greatest war the world had ever seen! In a lesser orator’s hands, such a message may have been viewed as a subversive call for revolution. But Soderstrom, skilled and articulate, was able to fill his audience not with anger but with hope. Hope that this time, we could win the peace, not just the war. Hope that this time we would have the strength and moral courage to abolish poverty. Hope that this was not just one more conflict, but the end of an age, and the beginning of something new.

At a time when the press was so eager to make Lewis's scowl the face of labor, Soderstrom's irrepressible smile and infectious optimism served as a powerful and needed counterpoint, especially in the critical manufacturing heartland of Illinois. In the years to come, Reuben would have the chance to put his vision into practice, working to remake postwar Illinois into an industrial democracy. But first, he had to focus on finishing the task at hand: keeping labor together through the crucible of war.

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# REUBEN G. SODERSTROM'S PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS AT THE 1943 ILLINOIS STATE FEDERATION OF LABOR ANNUAL CONVENTION

That which the world calls the movement of Labor is not new. It is not a new invention. It runs through history—centuries and centuries back. The labor movement is the struggle of the masses of our people for a better day. It might be summed up in one word: “hunger.” Hunger in the very beginning for the commonest food. Hunger, as time went on, for better food; hunger for clothes, and for shelter; for better clothes and better shelter; hunger for home; hunger for love; hunger for justice; hunger for freedom; hunger for the enjoyment and development of the highest and best surroundings for life and labor.

At one time this labor movement was a rough struggle. A struggle of the masses is of necessity a rough struggle. But in the development of the human family, conditions have arisen in which mass struggle occurred—the struggle for the Magna Carta; the struggle for the independence of the American colonies; the Declaration of Independence; the fact of independence; our Civil War, in which human slavery was abolished and the union of our Republic maintained; the war with Spain for the independence of Cuba; the first World War of 1917-1918; and the second World War of today (greatest of them all, not in what it has given to the world but in matters of numbers and sacrifice)—all of them rough struggles! But man forgets the roughness of the struggle in the ideality which he hopes to attain, and so with this labor movement of the past and of today. Whatever roughness there may be attached to it, the future will forget, and forgive, in this ideal to establish better relations and better conditions for the great mass of people of our country and of our time.

## INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY

The day has gone by when employers of labor can assume for themselves the old position of absolutism and of autocracy. Industry and commerce must become far more democratic. Industry and commerce must establish more trade unionism, more democracy in industry, just as political democracy has been established in the political life and governmental life of our state and of our nation. The onward march of labor has forced society to make these concessions.

Modern society demands the comprehensive and intensive organization of the means of production, distribution, and exchange to meet world needs. Ever since the advent of the factory system, ever since the advent of the industrial revolution, the only thing that has been constant is the rapid changes in the mode of production and conditions of life. This war has, and is, creating a more revolutionary situation than ever before. The United Nations are engaged in a life and death struggle to preserve our common heritage and our common destiny. Throughout all of the ages men have slaved that we might be free, they have fought that we might have peace, they have studied that we might know and they have handed down these wonderful heritages so that we, in our turn, could hand them on to future generations.

We are engaged in this war now battling to overthrow the forces of evil which seek to prevent our peaceful advancement to a larger freedom and a better life. Within the framework of our democratic system of society, organized labor has won the right to organize; has won the right to fight for the rights of the common people

by seeking to improve working conditions, by securing a higher remuneration for services rendered so that our living standards can be raised and improved. These legal and economic rights, which we have won, are fundamental and have become an integral part of our economic order. In Germany, and other Fascist countries, these rights and advantages have been destroyed. The Gestapo, the firing squad, and the concentration camp, is the fate of any of those who would venture an opinion contrary to the will of the dictators.

Organized labor is fully conscious of what would happen to our country if the forces of evil prevail. Consequently, the winning of the war is of first importance.

## **WAR MUST BE WON**

I say we are conscious of our duties and of our responsibilities. In order to win this war we must have an intelligent democratic planning or mobilization, of all of our nation's resources in order to make common cause of the great task of achieving a speedy victory. But the cause of organized labor far transcends the winning of the war. We must win the peace, too. We must rearrange our society, which we do not feel well of, because of the contrast with poverty. Rather, we must concern ourselves with the total abolition of poverty, and a realization that the nation can only be rich by sharing with our fellow-citizens all of the joys that a full life can give.

In other words—a political democracy is not enough. We must strive to establish an economic democracy, in which every citizen can enjoy equal economic rights as well as equal political rights. In striving to accomplish this great task, organized labor must take an ever-increasing part in the councils of the nation. The principle of political equality, which lies at the very basis of our democratic system, will lose its value and efficiency unless translated economically into the life of the average citizen. A healthy democracy implies an adequate economic standing for all of its members and since conditions no longer exist in which it might be hoped this can be attained through the interplay of blind economic forces, self-preservation dictates that the national and international policy must be directed deliberately towards that end.

Economic security in this sense for the individual implies more than the old slogan "the right to work," or "work or relief;" it implies more even than the prevention of unemployment by such economic measures and policies which might produce that result, thus eliminating insecurity from the life of the average citizen. It aims, in addition, at enabling him to secure for himself and his family, all that is necessary to enable him in youth, and in his working years, and in old age, to enjoy peace and dignity in the life of the community and make such contributions as his gifts and capacities may render possible. I say to you that the mission of organized labor is to abolish poverty, to make war impossible, to bring to each and every citizen a realization of his or her relationship with their fellows, to usher in an age of human brotherhood. This, and nothing less than this, is the mission of organized labor.

## **IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVE**

The purpose of organized labor at this momentous hour is to establish under the banner of liberty, under the leadership of the President of the United States in this North American continent, the greatest nation on earth. As organized workers, we do want self-government. Under the leadership of the President of the United States we want to establish equality of opportunity by developing more trade unionism, more democracy in industry, and at the close of this Second World War, we want to restore to the common people of the United States, as quickly as possible, the highest standard of living on earth.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt represents labor's hopes and aspirations. President Franklin D. Roosevelt has

become a living symbol of labor's faith in governmental strength, and governmental friendship, and governmental guidance. He recently defied the enemies of labor and humanity by vetoing the very dangerous Smith-Connally anti-strike bill, a bill promoted by enemies of labor, promoted by those who are making war upon labor, making war upon labor in the United States. While this Presidential veto became a lost cause, because the anti-strike bill was passed over the President's veto, yet the act of vetoing this bill demonstrated to the whole world he was a true American, a true friend of American labor!

Organized labor is supporting President Roosevelt, because President Roosevelt is protecting and supporting organized labor.

I know that I voice the sentiment of the wage-earners of Illinois. I know I voice the sentiment of all the delegates in this great convention, when I say to you, and you, and you, and you, and all of us here, that the Chief Executive of the United States is the greatest President that the common people of America have ever known!

Word should go out of this great convention that we are going to stand by him against Fascism of Italy, against Hirohito of Japan, against Adolph Hitler of Germany, and also against all of his political enemies who are waging war upon the wage-earners of America!<sup>1843</sup>

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# REUBEN SOLVES LOS ANGELES STRIFE

As Soderstrom's national reputation grew, he was increasingly called upon by the American Federation of Labor to help settle problems across the country. President Green had already called upon Reuben repeatedly to act on his behalf in several intra-labor conflicts. In 1943, Reub received yet another urgent request from AFL President William Green to arbitrate a labor dispute in the entertainment capital of the world – Los Angeles.

Unfortunately, the state of organized labor in the city had deteriorated to a deplorable state. Half of the city's unions had pulled their affiliation from the city's Central Labor Council (CLC), leaving the local unions in a state of anarchy. When the President of the local Joint Council of Teamsters, who had bolted from the CLC, appealed to the national organization for help, Green turned to Reuben. He charged Soderstrom to sort out the situation, get to the truth, and recommend what the national organization should do.

Soderstrom accepted the call. While it was a long trip, it was almost certainly a thrilling one for Reub, who'd long been a movie buff. Barely a week went by without Reuben taking in at least one show; the journal entries he left behind are filled with descriptions of the movies of the day and the stories that captivated him. Now he was being asked to travel to the homeland of American film in the name of labor.

Unfortunately, the City of Angels in 1943 was anything but heavenly. War and racial tensions were on the verge of tearing Los Angeles apart. Antagonism between the white, Hispanic, and African-American communities was at an all-time high. Less than two months after Reub's arrival, the violent "zoot suit riots" would rock the city, leaving spilled blood and bodies in their wake. The city's Asian community had been devastated by the forced relocation of Japanese Americans from their quiet homes to camps in the west. L.A.'s famous smog also hit the city for the first time that year, stinging eyes and instilling fear that the Japanese had launched a chemical attack.<sup>844</sup>

This was the Los Angeles Reuben met as he got off the train at the famed Union Station on Sunday, April 4th, 1943. Pushing through the crowd in the dizzyingly bright, warm weather, Reub grabbed a cab to the Rosslyn Hotel to settle in and meet his partner, Secretary George Lawson from the Minnesota State Federation of Labor. The problems began almost immediately, with the head of the Joint Executive Board of Culinary Workers coming to personally complain to Reuben that the hotel was unfair to labor. Instead of remaining at the Rosslyn, he offered to put the pair up at the elegant Mayfair Hotel at no expense.<sup>845</sup> Reuben was suspicious; the Rosslyn was not on any of labor's unfair lists, and he worried this was more than just a simple gesture of goodwill. "I was, of course, very hesitant about accepting courtesies and expensive hotel rooms from people whom I was instructed to investigate," Reuben later wrote, "and did not leave the Rosslyn until I had made sure that the Hotel and Restaurant Employees representatives were not trying to bribe me or my associate."<sup>846</sup> Already, Soderstrom's journey was off to an interesting start.

Once situated at the Mayfair Hotel, Soderstrom and Lawson began to plan out the week. They decided to meet with the CLC and Executive Board members first at the Los Angeles Labor Temple that Monday, followed by meetings with the dissenting unions at Teamsters Joint Council Building the following day. On Wednesday, they would invite both parties to the hotel to answer any unresolved questions. Reuben ordered no stenographic report "in order to get all of the facts straight and to give everybody interested the widest possible leeway without restraint."<sup>847</sup>

What was at the heart of the chaos? As Reuben later revealed:

The hearings disclosed an amazing story of years of feuding and trouble between opponents and proponents of the leadership of Brother J.W. Buzzell, Secretary of the Los Angeles Central Labor Council. The clashing between the council, under Secretary Buzzell's leadership, and Teamsters unions of Los Angeles, is long-standing, and verbal testimony disclosed, that it developed partially out of Buzzell's dislike for some of the tactics and aggressiveness of unionizing, and political campaigns, led by resentful but militant unions of teamsters, musicians, painters and motion picture studio wage-earners.<sup>848</sup>

Buzzell was definitely a colorful personality. He had led the Los Angeles Federation through some of its darkest times, fighting against local Manufacturers Associations that didn't shy away from vicious, bare-knuckled tactics. "I remember when we had to hold our meetings in secret and at a different place every night because of the fighting tactics used against us," Buzzell recounted.<sup>849</sup> He also didn't hesitate to turn his energies against labor officials and unions whom he considered disloyal. During the height of the AFL-CIO fight, Buzzell fought off and forced out anyone whom he suspected of having CIO sympathies.<sup>850</sup>

Reuben knew Buzzell, if only casually, and his report refrains from using the harshest language about the Secretary.<sup>851</sup> He made sure to highlight his dedication and "unbroken loyalty" to the AFL. Still, Reuben said, Buzzell had been "overzealous" in his attacks against those he disagreed with, often labeling them as communists to discredit them. After 18 years of service, he had led city's organized labor into a "sensitive, bitter struggle for union leadership supremacy."<sup>852</sup>

While Soderstrom had his doubts about the soundness of Buzzell's leadership, he had darker suspicions about the Council's President, Harry Sherman. Sherman was a former investigator in the District Attorney's office and a "subversive activity investigator" for MGM Studios. It appeared he'd held these posts while president, giving him an ability to possibly spy on his opponents. Reuben reported "considerable suspicion, insinuation, and innuendo about President Sherman's questionable sleuthing." Reub couldn't prove that the President's under-cover detective work had produced material to blackmail complainants, though he certainly had his suspicions. He did, however, note that the CLC's books had not been audited by a properly certified accountant in years.<sup>853</sup>

Despite his misgivings about the President and Secretary, Reuben did not advise immediately removing Sherman or Buzzell. Soderstrom held democracy sacrosanct, and he did not believe a democratically elected leader should be removed by fiat. Instead, he said, fair and proper elections by all LA unions were the best answer. While he recommended the President and Secretary not be removed outright, he did advocate temporarily suspending their authority, allowing the troublesome duo to "graciously submit to supervision." International unions could then instruct their local organizations to re-affiliate, and all members would let the next election decide Buzzell's and Sherman's ultimate fate.

Unfortunately for Sherman, the evidence Reuben uncovered proved too damning to allow him to remain in his post, in any capacity. In the wake of Soderstrom's investigation President Green immediately demanded Sherman's resignation.<sup>854</sup> However, Green did follow Reuben's suggestion with regard to Buzzell. The plan proved successful; he resigned later that October after being voted out by a 2 to 1 margin, a result the AFL leadership fully credited to Reuben's hard work.<sup>855</sup> Reuben was characteristically modest, saying simply that he was "mighty well pleased with what is now happening. What is taking place now should result in a unified labor movement in that great western metropolis."<sup>856</sup> The episode also gives us a clear view into Reuben's thinking—particularly his attention to detail and commitment to democratic solutions. These traits would prove increasingly important to the ISFL President in the years to come.

# CHAPTER 33

## 1944

### LABOR POWERS THE MARCH TO VICTORY

*“What the future of America holds depends upon what you and I and all our fellow-citizens together do... We can make America the Utopia of which men have dreamed throughout the ages, a land of peace and prosperity with justice and brotherhood for all. We can do this because we, the citizens, are the United States, we, you and I, are America.”*

-Reuben Soderstrom  
1944 ISFL Convention

#### REUBEN REACHES OUT TO VETERANS

Reuben strode to the podium, brimming with excitement and swagger. The Chicago hall, packed tight with veterans of various ages, wages, and battles, mirrored his enthusiasm. These were heady days for America. The Allies had turned the tide of the war; from the invasion of Italy to the end of the Leningrad siege to the bombing of the German homeland, the Axis powers were everywhere on the retreat. In the months to come, the US and her Allies would capture Odessa, Crimea and Rome—a string of successes culminating in Operation Overlord, the June 6 invasion of German-occupied Western Europe popularly known as D-Day. Soon Allied troops from the West and Russian troops from the East would begin their march to Berlin while the U.S. crippled Japanese forces on land, air, and sea.

None of those assembled came to hear of current successes or future campaigns, however. They had braved that windy, rainy March evening to hear Reuben G. Soderstrom, President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, make the case for unionism. It was no easy task. True, union hands built the weapons that empowered American soldiers and crafted the armor that kept them safe. Organized labor was directly responsible for 85% of total production of war material.<sup>857</sup> In the words of Rear Admiral FG Hussey Jr., “The men and women of American labor, through their magnificent efforts, made possible the miracle of production that enabled our armed forces to smash the Axis onrush and prepare the coming offensives.”<sup>858</sup> Union households sent more than simply their sweat to the front. Relentless bond drive efforts (tirelessly led in Illinois by Reuben himself) had raised a substantial number of “fighting dollars” to fund the war. A disproportionate number of soldiers—a full 65%—also hailed from union households.<sup>859</sup>

Despite these sacrifices, some veterans had a neutral or even negative opinion of unions. Like many on the home front, they had been fed a steady line of stories about union cronyism and corruption, of selfish opportunists using the war to line their own pockets. In the wake of John L. Lewis’s mining strikes of 1943, “a fear that labor had secured a power which would enable it to choke off the nation’s entire war effort appeared in many quarters,” according to historian Joseph Rayback. “Lewis was portrayed as Hitler’s ally, and it was easy to transform this charge of unpatriotic behavior from Lewis to the entire UMW and to Labor itself.”<sup>860</sup>



Although wartime strikes outside of mining were nearly non-existent—productivity lost from strikes during this time amounted to less than one-seventh of one percent of total working time—the popular press had succeeded in pushing the idea of a home front threatened by labor’s “fifth column” out to soldiers serving abroad.<sup>861</sup> As one soldier from Reub’s own hometown of Streator put it in a letter home:

Say, what’s the matter with all the people back there? Going on strikes and raising hell. All they are doing is prolonging the war. I read in the papers of coal strikes and strikes of all other sorts. Maybe they would like to be here in my shoes...I’ll trade them and give them five years of my life to boot. They are acting like a bunch of kids. Do they know there’s a war on?<sup>862</sup>

This was the situation Soderstrom faced as he prepared to speak to the March meeting of the American Legion. His mission that night was not only to defend labor’s record, but to change hearts and minds. The men in that room, along with the millions of others currently in uniform, would shape the nation after war’s end, and Reuben had to convince them of labor’s place in that world. Labor and veterans had much in common, as Commander Bryant noted in his introduction of the ISFL President to the crowd:

It appears to me that it is either an ignorant or a prejudiced fellow who has not been able to understand that regardless of its faults or its shortcomings, of its good or bad leadership, that the labor union movement has been a part and a parcel of that great movement stretching throughout history where men have fought for human rights...No one can deny the rightful position of organized labor in this great march for human freedom.

We, in the American Legion, have everything in common with that march...All through our career we have stood for the spirit of Americanism, and surely the very essence of that spirit, from the Declaration of Independence to today, is the importance of human rights, the dignity of the human being, the sacrifice of the lowly; and so we, legionnaires, whose organization is dedicated to the principles of justice, freedom, and democracy welcome as our guest today the leader of another organization which has fought for human rights, and it is our great privilege to present to you the Honorable Reuben Soderstrom, a warrior for liberty.<sup>863</sup>

As Reuben took to the stage and addressed the crowd, he appealed to their common sense and shared experience, particularly the importance of payday:

This audience looks like an audience of grownup people. You are not children...and can probably stand some plain speaking. Everybody loves the holiday season—everybody loves Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, St. Patrick’s Day and New Year’s Day, but the day that really fills everybody’s silent soul with joy and laughter in the labor world is that day called payday—that good old American pay-day!...It gives the head of the household the exquisite satisfaction of feeling important because it was his work or his skill that produced the money in the pay envelope. Whether it is a thick envelope or a thin one depends largely upon his membership, or non-membership, in a trade union. All over the world the labor movement is growing stronger and becoming more and more a factor in the lives of men...It is the organized worker who takes the lead in every move for the betterment of the sons and daughters of toil.<sup>864</sup>

Organized workers weren’t just fighting for more money, Reub was quick to point out. They were fighting for a fundamental freedom—one that President Roosevelt himself had outlined as one of the “four freedoms” of mankind:

The things advocated by labor are fundamental things, such as more food, more clothing, more shelter, more homes, and steady employment. Steady employment is, of course, the most important because all of the other fundamentals are dependent upon the income of steady employment. Well, there are some thinking people

beginning to give some heed to the things advocated by labor. Some sixteen months ago, in the Atlantic Charter, so-called, Winston Churchill, the Premier of England, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, the President of the United States, outlined four points which have become our war objectives, and which will automatically become our postwar program. These four points are Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Religion, Freedom from Want, and Freedom from Fear. While common people everywhere are very much interested in all four of these points, wage-earners are particularly interested in Freedom from Want.<sup>865</sup>

Having connected the aims of labor to the aims of the World War itself—the very principles and beliefs that his listeners had risked so much to secure - Soderstrom now asked his audience to look beyond the current conflict. He wanted to talk about the fight to come, namely, the struggle to ensure freedom in the peace to follow. He put forth an unflinchingly progressive vision of the problems and solutions he foresaw:

When this war is over there is going to be an opportunity for everybody - including wage earners - to earn an abundance of food, clothing, and homes. This can be accomplished, of course, if the problem of unemployment is actually solved. We still have thousands of people idle in spite of the war, and this problem of unemployment can be solved in one of two ways—either by reducing the hours so that more people might be employed or by developing governmental projects which will employ all of those who are not now engaged in private industry. Both solutions have labor’s recommendation, both solutions have labor’s blessing - in fact, both solutions for the unemployment problem originated with labor...

Labor wants economic freedom for all. Labor does not mean by that the old-fashioned idea of the right to establish a grocery store on the street corner. Labor talking about unemployment compensation, old age benefits, about real public education including university and professional training, and all of the other things that are needed to give to the citizen economic security in this complex civilization, this complex world of ours. Labor does not believe we have obtained complete economic security in the past—labor is fighting for our right to obtain it.<sup>866</sup>

A new world is coming, Reub roared to the assembled, and they had the chance to shape it together:

What the future of America holds depends on what you and I, and all of our fellow citizens together, do. We can follow the course mapped out for us by the signers of the Constitution, working out by peaceful means the way to a better world and to a more equitable distribution of the bounties of a free country. We can make America the Utopia of which men have dreamed throughout the ages, a land of peace and prosperity, of justice and brotherhood for all. We can do this because we, the citizens, are the United States. We, you and I, are America!<sup>867</sup>

## WINNING THE PEACE

### *Reuben Joins the AFL Post-War Planning Committee*

Soderstrom’s focus on the future of labor after wartime was not new. His early calls for action had earned him a prestigious seat on the American Federation of Labor’s Post War Planning Committee (PWPC), a 10-member council President Green had charged with creating a “plan for labor representation in the peace conferences which will follow victory” including “specific proposals which the labor representatives should seek to have incorporated in the peace treaty.”<sup>868</sup> It was a heavy duty; “There is no more important responsibility,” President Green wrote to Reuben in his request for the ISFL president’s service. “We must look forward to labor representation in the postwar administration as well as among those who shall formulate the terms and conditions of peace. This is an important duty and will require hard work to be ready when needed.”<sup>869</sup>

Reuben did not shy away from the task. "I shall be glad to serve," he wrote President Green. "Please know that I am conscious of the responsibility attached to this very important assignment...In accepting this grave responsibility I am appreciative of the honor and distinction naturally associated with such service to the labor movement of this character."<sup>870</sup> He was especially excited to join such a diverse and impressive group, including progressive luminaries such as African-American Milton Webster of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and storied female labor leader and social reformer Agnes Nestor, Reub's longstanding personal friend. Together the PWPC wrote the blueprint for what was to be American labor's role in the post-war world; a starring role, in their estimation. After Hitler's decimation of international labor, American unionism was to become the model for labor organizations abroad. The restoration of organized labor and democratic rule in these crucial years would, in Soderstrom's opinion, be both necessary and symbiotic; in the words of fellow labor theorist Jay Lovestone, "Labour cannot go forward without democracy, and democracy cannot advance and must perish without labour's conscious, insistent and energetic participation and support."<sup>871</sup> Democracy and unionism went hand in hand, and to ensure a flourishing of both, the committee called for the creation of a corps of professional labor attaches appointed on the basis of their experience in the labor movement.<sup>872</sup> This labor corps would spread American unionism throughout the world; as Reuben described to the delegates in his 1944 ISFL Convention Address:

Labor is fighting for a human, progressive American way of life. Labor is fighting so that our river of democracy will roll on and wash away in its waters all inequalities, all intolerance, all discrimination, and all wrongs so that some day, as labor believes, our river of democracy shall reach the sea and mingle with similar rivers of other nations, so that our country, which labor loves so dearly, and all other countries will be bathed always in the waters of human decency, in the waters of human brotherhood, in the waters, I trust, eventually of perpetual peace.<sup>873</sup>

While labor's role abroad was important to Reuben and his peers, even more consequential was the effect of the war's end on the home front. The end of the last Great War had brought with it economic calamity. Veterans were dumped into the workforce, sparking mass unemployment, while the abrupt end of price controls brought about massive inflation. This time, labor wanted to make sure the nation didn't suffer the mistakes of the past. The committee demanded labor representation not only at the peace conferences but "on all Government boards and agencies dealing with postwar problems" and called on state and local labor affiliates to "obtain representation on local governmental agencies created to deal with postwar re-employment and public works."<sup>874</sup> They wanted an active government overseen by a "kind of Reconversion czar," but called for civilians, not military officials, to supervise the transition.<sup>875</sup> In its final report, the committee called for the formation of an Office of War Economic Mobilization and Reconstruction with a Review Board. They sought an immediate end to wartime wage and manpower restrictions and the start of a peacetime employment service. They also wanted the government to provide unemployment benefits for demobilized soldiers, demobilization payments for returning soldiers to continue interrupted education and training, and medical and rehabilitative care for the injured.<sup>876</sup>

More important still, the committee believed, was the need to find and preserve veterans' jobs. Although draft law technically protected a soldier's job, similar legislation had failed to stem the tide of unemployment after the First World War. To ensure soldiers' job security, there needed to be more than legal cover. Veterans needed an advocate, and a strong, united institution of unionism could be uniquely positioned to provide such protection. As Reuben explained:

Veterans will need the protection of unions when this Second World War is over. There are many ways in which employers can evade the job rights ex-servicemen have under the Selective Service Act. Veterans who were holding temporary positions, for example, are not entitled by law to re-installment. Soldiers returning to

civilian life are, of course, entitled to their former position, or positions of like seniority, status, and pay. Experience after the First World War has proven this was effectively carried out, however, only where there were union agreements containing seniority provisions, with the power of the union to enforce them. Union agreements go much further than existing laws...Veterans of the First World War can testify the workers' only real security is his or her union and the contract which the union negotiates with fair union-minded employers.<sup>877</sup>

America could not afford to forget her veterans as she had done in the past, and the unions, which had more of their own in the fight than any other civilian organization, would help to ensure that wouldn't happen. "Over one million, five hundred thousand members of the American Federation of labor are serving in the armed forces of the United States," Reuben said. "When this Second World War ends victoriously for the Allied nations, the labor movement has its hopes and aspirations for a permanent peace."<sup>878</sup>

### *Equality Regardless of Gender, Color*

Of all the issues that confronted the committee, Soderstrom took a special interest in women in industry. Committee minutes noted that "Mr. Soderstrom...thought that the problem of taking proper care of women in industry was most important not only during the post-war period but now."<sup>879</sup> He was especially concerned about the present readiness of states to "relax" laws protecting female workers. Twenty states and the District of Columbia at least temporarily suspended their laws governing hours of women's employment for the war emergency in 1942 and 1943, according to the US Department of Labor.<sup>880</sup> Reuben worried that these rollbacks, declared necessary for the sake of the war, would sneak their way into permanency at the war's end. Labor had to be vigilant to protect against such a tragedy; as he reported in the pages of the journal of the Illinois State Federation of Labor:

Action has been taken on approximately 30,000 applications from 12,000 firms for exemptions from various labor laws in 34 States since the beginning of the war period...The firms, not all of them war contractors, applied for permission to work in excess of the maximum hours laws, to employ women at night or for longer hours, or to employ minors beyond the limitations of existing legislation...Long hours and other wartime working conditions must give way to peacetime standards as soon as war production demands permit it...[in order] to stabilize post-war industry and employment.<sup>881</sup>

Of course, any discussion about working conditions for women in a post-war America begged the obvious question: what would happen to all of the women currently employed when all the soldiers returned home to resume their jobs? According to research conducted by the periodical *Advertising Age*, plant managers and company heads found their female employees to be "invaluable," and had even "created positions for themselves never before filled by men."<sup>882</sup> These managers estimated that a full fifth of those women currently employed would retain their jobs in the wake of the war, and while they did not predict this would interfere with the rehiring of soldiers, it did open up a new series of questions, tensions, and concerns.

Throughout 1943 and 1944 Reuben worked closely with female labor advocates, particularly his fellow committee member Agnes Nestor, to address these challenges. Nestor and Soderstrom arranged to have women advocates from organizations such as the American Arbitration Association speak at ISFL conventions.<sup>883</sup> Reuben likewise met with the delegation to the Illinois and Wisconsin Women's Trade Union Leagues to deepen ties and gain a fuller understanding of their needs and concerns.<sup>884</sup> Through their work in and beyond the AFL postwar committee, Soderstrom and Nestor worked to ensure that the working women of America would have a protected place in peacetime.

As women teamed with organized labor to preserve and expand their rights in the workplace, citizens of color

finally began to see signs of hope that the peace might bring with it a real chance to exercise their franchise. In 1944 the Senate Judiciary found that “Most poll taxes were written to prevent Negroes and poor whites from voting,” and recommended passage of a bill passed by the House to outlaw poll taxes for federal offices.<sup>885</sup> Race still proved problematic for the American Federation of Labor. Leaders like AFL President Green and ISFL President Soderstrom supported equality and opposed exclusion on the grounds of race. At the 1943 AFL convention, Reuben and the other delegates officially declared:

The founders of the American Federation of Labor since its inception were opposed to any prejudices, traditions, social or religious demarcations which could be applied to interfere with or prevent thoroughgoing organization of all wage earners. They made one of the cornerstones of the great trade union structure they were determined to erect, the principle that the right to work, or membership in a trade union should not be limited or restricted in any manner because of creed, color or race. National origin, race or color must in no manner or form restrict any American from a free opportunity to prepare himself to become a skilled mechanic, a craftsman, and take his place as such in any employment requiring the skills which he has acquired. The doors of our trade union movement must be open.<sup>886</sup>

Reuben and Green believed they lacked the authority to compel their affiliates to ban discrimination. The transformation offered by the war’s end, however, held promise. In his hallmark address before the Chicago Association of Commerce, Professor Sumner H. Slichter theorized that labor’s growing charge and influence in society would inevitably result in a change in labor itself. “Few persons, even within the ranks of labor, would deny that organizations as large and powerful as trade unions are affected with a public interest,” he said. “Consequently, they are bound sooner or later to be regulated in certain respects. Unions are likely to be forbidden to exclude persons because of race, color, or creed. Several states have already done this.”<sup>887</sup>

Whether compelled by law or not, labor took a growing interest in ensuring the rights of men and women of all colors and creeds. This became increasingly important as some states, particularly those in the South, began to use anti-labor laws to arrest, convict, and imprison black laborers. In his 1944 Labor Day Address, Victor Olander highlighted the case of Emanuel Pollack, a “Negro laborer from Florida,” who was fined \$100 and jailed for 60 days for quitting his job, which Florida law defined as violation of contract. To Victor, this case should concern not just those of color but all working men and women:

There can be no free trade unions without free workers...No man can be held to the service of another. The right to quit is inviolable. That simple right is the most important of all human rights because it marks the essential difference between the free man and the slave. Let no man dismiss this subject on the belief that it relates solely to some maneuvering against Negroes in Southern States...The enemies of human liberty have tried in devious ways to counteract the effect of the Thirteenth Amendment by resorting to such subterfuge as the Florida law.<sup>888</sup>

## POLITICAL AND LEGISLATIVE BATTLES

### *Reub Resists the “Labor Draft”*

Victor Olander highlighted the case of Emanuel Pollack not just to provide an example of racial discrimination. To him it was yet another instance in a growing, disturbing trend of governments using the law to compel labor. “At the moment, there is much concern over the growing disposition to regulate and restrict labor organizations by law,” he continued. “Trade union officials are aroused on this point. The greater danger, by far, however, is the restriction of the rights of the individual. Not enough is being said about free labor. Under the pressure of war problems, there is a brooding silence on that question.”<sup>889</sup>

In the wake of John L. Lewis's mining strikes, President Roosevelt in 1944 called for a National Service Law—essentially a conscription service for workers. Opponents of organized labor immediately seized on the idea and espoused the theory that if a man can be drafted to fight for his country, why can't a man be drafted to build the bullets? Of course, such calls wholly ignored the idea of any subscription or sacrifice on industry's part. As AFL Vice President Woll noted, "For labor conscription to be analogous, the Federal government would have to nationalize the war industry, in order that the conscripted worker might produce under the direct command of his government, with no profits from his labor accruing to private industry."<sup>890</sup> If industry was so keen on a "labor draft," then where was their call for an "industry draft?"

None of labor's arguments slowed anti-union forces, however. In the U.S. Congress, Senator Warren R. Austin of Vermont introduced a bill to implement the labor draft, legislation Reuben and the ISFL described as "the most direct defiance of specific sections of the Constitution ever submitted to any Congress since the birth of the nation."<sup>891</sup> The bill subjected workers to indentured service while placing no requirements on industrialists who reaped a whirlwind of profits from wartime production. "Proponents of Austin-Wadsworth would permit industry to operate during the war much as it did during the peace, but regiment labor in order to combat the major dislocations which would inevitably develop," explains famed historian Paul Koistinen. "The proposal was not only glaringly biased, it was hopelessly absurd. Efficient economic mobilization must begin with controlling the means of production, not just one input of production."<sup>892</sup>

The Statewide Council of the Congress of Industrial Organizations joined with the ISFL to decry the pending legislation. In the end, a variety of factors led to the defeat of such attempts to conscript labor, including the case of Mr. Pollack that Olander had detailed in his Labor Day message. The black laborer imprisoned for attempting to quit his job appealed his sentence all the way to the Supreme Court., and on April 10, 1944 the Justices ruled such compulsion unconstitutional. Labor had won yet another important victory in the march to justice.

### *Catches "Election Fever"*

Over the last several years, Reuben had given everything he had to the labor movement and the war effort. In addition to his normal duties as ISFL president, he also served on multiple state and national committees, oversaw labor's defense bond fundraising efforts in Illinois, crossed the nation representing Illinois labor and acted as AFL President Green's personal envoy at a host of labor events and disputes. He pushed himself so hard on labor's behalf that by the spring of 1944 he had nearly, and literally, worked himself to death. As the ISFL (most likely his friend and partner Victor Olander) reported, "President Soderstrom had undertaken a trip to the A.F. of L. Conference in New York City on April 11, notwithstanding the fact, very apparent at the time, that he had overworked himself. The result was that, upon his return, he was obliged to remain at home, and, finally to go into St. Mary's hospital at Streator."<sup>893</sup>

When the 56 year-old Reuben finally emerged fully recovered and recharged, however, it was to some unexpectedly welcome news. Francis Murphy, the Illinois Secretary of Labor that had plagued Reuben and the ISFL for the last three years, tendered his resignation, effective July 31st, 1944. He was replaced by Robert Gordon, a painter by trade who had served as an officer of the Painters' Union and the Urbana Central Body. Reuben lauded the change, writing:

On August 1, 1944, therefore, the Illinois Department of Labor will again be headed by a qualified Illinois trade unionist of long service in the Illinois labor movement...The Illinois Department of Labor was established in 1917, as a result of persistent efforts of the Illinois State Federation of Labor. In the years that followed, every director of Labor was appointed from the ranks of labor until October 1, 1941, when Governor Green appointed Mr. Murphy, who was entirely without trade union experience or membership...For a period of

three years, the protests of the Federation went unheeded. The election campaigns are now in full swing.<sup>894</sup>

The message was clear: vote out labor's enemies. It would be no easy task; while Illinois had voted for Roosevelt in the past, an anti-Democratic backlash had begun to boil in the Midwest. Roosevelt's recent wage and job freezes had angered many in labor, including Reuben's close friend and colleague Victor Olander. Rumors of the President's ailing health further depressed his campaign. Illinois freshman Democratic Senator, Scott Lucas, was also no safe bet, winning his last election by a razor-thin 51%. And while Green was vulnerable, he had strong political machinery behind him—assets which his opponent Thomas Courtney lacked.

Despite the odds, Reuben felt personally obligated and invested in these struggles. He viewed the President as the best friend labor ever had in high office, declaring "I am proud of him [FDR] as a co-worker in humanity's cause, I am proud of him as a friend, I am proud of him as the greatest president that the wage-earners of America have ever known."<sup>895</sup> He was also personally indebted to Sen. Lucas, who had helped Reub's brother Paul receive the disability benefits to which he was entitled as a veteran of the first Great War. "He has never requested me, or any other influential person to give him a helping hand before," Reuben wrote to Lucas in 1939. "In fact, he has been rather backward about pressing his claim. Compared with similar cases of disability his pension is obviously too small."<sup>896</sup> The Senator also helped Paul get a job as a guard at the Seneca shipyards.<sup>897</sup> While this help on Paul's behalf didn't entail any special treatment or untoward favors, they did demonstrate to Reub that the Senator was a person of character and a man of his word—traits the labor leader took very seriously.

Reuben's main weapon of choice in the 1944 election was voter registration. Week after week, Reub issued reminders in the ISFL weekly newspaper to register to vote, reminding union members that "It is not only the right but the duty of every citizen to vote...Failure to register deprives one of the most precious heritage of a free people—the right to vote."<sup>898</sup> As he had begun to do in essays and articles the year before, Soderstrom began to publicly and loudly call for voting reform. As he told the delegates of the 1944 ISFL Convention in his keynote address:

In many of the industrial sections of Illinois, less than ten percent of our people found time to go to the polls to vote in the primary...We need more time to go the polls on Election Day. It ought to be made convenient for all citizens to vote; not just only professional people and bankers and employers, but it ought to include wage-earners. The polls could be opened at eleven o'clock in the morning and kept open until ten o'clock at night. I think it would be more sensible really to close the polls during working hours and keep them open in the evening after men and women are through with their day's work, than to expect working people to perform the duty of voting and the duty of working at a time when such duties so clearly conflict and interfere with each other.<sup>899</sup>

By and large, Reuben's efforts met with success. While most of the Midwest—including Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Iowa—went for FDR's opponent, Thomas Dewey, Illinois voted for FDR by 51.52%, helping him win re-election. Senator Lucas fared better than he had in his previous election, winning by 52%. Unfortunately for Reuben, however, Green held on to his Governorship by the thinnest of margins—50.75% to 49.93%.<sup>900</sup> Reuben would continue his troubled relationship with Green for another four years.

### *Worth Fighting for*

Still, throughout all the struggles of 1944, whether against Nazis abroad or politicians at home, Reuben never failed to frame his battles in the greater moral arc of the universe. It was important for him not just to win but to let everyone know exactly what he and his fellow labor leaders were fighting for. The year 1944 was the

first that Americans could finally dare to hope for war's end, to envision the light at the end of the tunnel. But when her citizens emerged, what kind of people would they be? How would they understand themselves and their nation, especially after the experiences and losses they had suffered? Reuben had one, simple answer—they would be a people united. In a callback to the message he had delivered to the legionnaires earlier that spring, Soderstrom called upon the men and women of labor to see themselves not just as citizens but as the engine, the very heart and soul of the nation. As he closed his address, he proclaimed:

What are the United States? Not a mere collection of sovereign states, each controlling its own destiny, not a federation united merely for the convenience of defense, or for economic reasons. It is the people who are sovereign. The people of each state give to the state government such powers as they desire and they keep the rest. The people of all the states give to the national government such powers as they please and they retain the rest...

The United States of America are the American people. Neither rich nor poor, neither employer nor employees, neither blacks nor whites, neither Protestants, Catholics nor Jews, but Americans all, united under one banner, which calls for an equal opportunity and an equal justice for all. Working together as one people without regard to class, creed or color, we have coordinated various elements here, people with different backgrounds, people with different faiths, into one common whole, without sacrificing the good in their pasts, by welding them together in a common vision of a world of freedom. It is this cohesion, this ability to assimilate the good and discard the bad, which has made America the richest and most envied country in this world... No country is greater than its people. It is its people. The idea is being accepted that we, the citizens, are the United States. "We the people" are America!<sup>901</sup>



## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# LABOR DURING WORLD WAR II

*“The Toilers of the land can properly be designated as the Brotherhood of War Production Workers, just as our soldier sons and brothers and other relatives in the armed forces can be designated the Brotherhood of American Workers.”*

-Reuben Soderstrom, 1943

## LABOR AT WAR

The Second World War was a time of great hardship for many Americans. In the years following the attack on Pearl Harbor, US families poured their all into the fight, a sacrifice measured in sweat, scraps and sons. No segment of the population shouldered a greater share of these burdens than the American working class. Wartime inflation increased the cost of daily goods at the very moment that wage freezes made it nearly impossible for laboring families to make ends meet. Despite this, working households donated every cent they could spare (and many they couldn't) to the cause, buying war bonds through popular drives and payroll deductions.<sup>902</sup> Many laid “victory gardens,” growing fruits and vegetables to keep prices in check and preserve food supplies to the troops.<sup>903</sup>

Laboring families also sent a disproportionate number of their own to the war front. As Reuben himself noted, “sixty five percent of those who are now wearing the uniform—in the army, the navy and the air-corps—come from the home of wage earners.”<sup>904</sup> Many working households hung their Illinois-issued Silver Star, a sign proclaiming “Our Home Has Contributed” a family member to the armed services, with equal measures of pride and fear. Too many of those homes would never see their sons and fathers again; even more would spend lifetimes helping and caring for members maimed in the fight.

While the casualties suffered abroad were immense, they were exceeded by the number of lives lost at home building the engines of war. In the first year alone, over 42,600 war workers were killed in industrial accidents, compared to 37,941 U.S. battle casualties during the same period.<sup>905</sup> In the words of Dr. Victor Heiser, medical consultant to the Committee on Healthful Working Conditions of the National Association of Manufacturers in 1942:

If to this you add the number of injured, the record is this: 11,000 workers in war industries killed or injured on and off the job every day since Pearl Harbor...If present estimates are correct, 121,000,000 man days- or 968,000,000 man hours- will be lost to vital war work this year alone because of absence from the job for all causes.<sup>906</sup>

Large numbers of working dead and wounded were not new to labor; union officials, including Reuben, had fought long and hard for safe working conditions precisely because they were acutely aware of the dangerous conditions callous employers had placed them in. The war did, however, offer a renewed and popular spotlight on this important issue. When the National Safety Council issued its first wartime report, revealing over 102,500 accidental American deaths and more than 9,000,000 injuries, Soderstrom publicly remarked:

Usually only statisticians and those who have a flare for statistics pay serious attention to figures but the above outstanding casualty list was so appalling it received a good deal of attention in the public press. One reason

why the annual toll of accidental killings attracted more than usual attention this year was because they were frequently compared with American war losses and were found to be much greater, every two years, than the combined number of American Soldiers who have made the supreme sacrifice on all battlefields since 1776.<sup>907</sup>

As bad as the steady stream of workplace accidents and death was, the deaths of workers at wartime increased that rate to a torrent. The story of labor at war has been little told, but it is a tale of immense effort, accomplishment and loss. It is a narrative filled with tragic accidents and brave acts, negligence and heroism. Above all, it is a story that deserves to be told. As Reuben remarked:

Labor has no desire to minimize the grim losses sustained in the carnage of war. These men are heroes and died for our country. We respect and revere them...They belong to us. But the worker does not like the inexcusable attitude of silence associated with the dozen times greater list of deaths and injuries from accident in civilian life—many of them preventable.<sup>908</sup>

## TRANSITION TO WARTIME PRODUCTION

The reason for the extreme numbers of working dead and injured was the rapid transition to wartime production. When the war began in December of 1941, the United States was unprepared. Despite early calls to arm the British, only two plants in the US produced ammunition in 1940, and no American plants produced large quantities of small arms or anti-aircraft weapons.<sup>909</sup> The country had to build an army essentially from scratch. To meet the need, President Franklin D. Roosevelt submitted a budget to Congress on January 7, 1942, that earmarked \$52 of its \$59 billion for the construction of 60,000 planes, 45,000 tanks, 200,000 anti-aircraft guns and other war materials. In a few short months, more than 5,000,000 Americans were working in defense, a number that was expected to increase by 500% within the next two years.<sup>910</sup>

That build-up in wartime production required a rapid, unprecedented retooling of the nation's infrastructure. Many businesses were substantially or completely repurposed. The auto industry, for example, was fully transformed; civilian automobile production was brought to a complete halt less than two months after Pearl Harbor and wasn't resumed until the war's end.<sup>911</sup> The Anthony Hydraulic Company in Reuben's hometown of Streator was another example of a commercial company remade for wartime reproduction. As historian Paula Angle relates in her history of Streator, the Anthony Company "was extensively engaged in war production, supplying everything from trench shovels to trailers for delivering bombs. The plant employed three shifts seven days a week, with a payroll over twice that of peacetime."<sup>912</sup> In the broader Illinois Valley, the local Westclox Company was barred from clock production until February of 1943.<sup>913</sup> The plant was instead repurposed to produce fuses for everything from bombs to parachute flares.<sup>914</sup>

This massive and sudden shift from timepieces to time bombs carried massive risk for all involved, especially those on the factory floor. Reuben's backyard was no exception. The Green River Ordinance Plant near Amboy was notoriously dangerous for its poor air quality and other potential hazards. According to workers, there was powder everywhere, turning shirts and skin yellow. Hand and foot injuries were all too common, as were burns caused by filling shells with hot pentolite.<sup>915</sup> In 1944, an explosion caused by one of the shell-loading lines resulted in death and multiple injuries. As the flames spread to the nearby boxes of loaded rockets, heroes like first responder Ken Shulte and trucker Charles Sudano risked their lives to carry out the wounded for treatment to women like Judy Hofmann, who had taken 12-week classes on top of her 48 hour work weeks to study nursing.<sup>916</sup>

### *Occupational Disease and the "Radium Girls"*

Other threats were less spectacular but just as dangerous; respiratory disease and skin infections cost the lives of countless men and women on the production line long after the war's end. At the Green River Ordinance Plant, workers on loading lines were exposed to lead and explosive chemicals that could bring their levels of hemoglobin to dangerous lows.<sup>917</sup> Perhaps the most dramatic examples of workplace disease were cancers and bodily deformations suffered by young women painting aircraft dials with radium at the Ottawa IL Luminous Processes Plant. Many of the workers knew that their predecessors at the Radium Dial Company—the famous “Radium Girls”—had died of radium poisoning contracted through their work, but they were assured new practices and procedures now made the process safe (they also had no idea that Joseph Kelly, the former owner of RDC, also owned Luminous Processes). In the words of one Ottawa resident recorded in the groundbreaking 1987 documentary film “Radium City:”

You've gotta fight for everything you get here. You gotta get up in the morning, you gotta go to work, and a lot of times you're doing something you don't like to do, but you gotta do it to make a living. And I'm sure these people didn't like to go down there to Luminous, you know, especially if they were thinking, “this stuff is bad for us,” after some of their friends died. But those people know when to come down here, they know when to hit ya. When you're broke, when your family's in bad need of money—that's when they hit ya. And that's powerful. That's strong stuff.<sup>918</sup>

During the War, FDR and Albert Einstein met with Kelly, who subsequently used his Illinois Valley plant to reprocess radium into polonium for an atomic bomb. Ottawa citizens, eager to help in the fight, went to work unaware of the risks they were enduring. Again from “Radium City:”

During World War II, just about everybody was doing defense work. And just about everybody in Ottawa went to work at Luminous because they were patriotic people, and naturally during a war they are doing what they can to help with the war. Nobody really knew anything about any kind of technology, you know, not the average people, and they didn't know what an atomic bomb was back then. You know if they told them it was a bomb that might help win the war, I'm sure they'd have painted all of 'em, not even worried about it.<sup>919</sup>

At the War's end, Kelly emerged a rich man. Meanwhile, the poisoned workers—both living and dead—became test subjects at Argonne National Laboratories, a government facility built outside the city to study the effects of chronic radiation exposure.

### *The Seneca Shipyards*

While the Anthony Hydraulic Company, Green River Ordinance Plant, Westclox Company, and Luminous Processes were all famous (or infamous) examples of wartime production in Illinois, perhaps none were as famous as the Seneca Shipyards, home of the LST.

In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, the US Navy commissioned the building of a new type of ship—Landing Ship Tanks, or LST for short. This new craft would play a vital role in the war effort, transporting troops and tanks in amphibious operations. However, with all the coastal shipyards occupied building carriers, battleships, and the like, the Navy looked to inland shipyards for LST production. Their gaze soon turned toward Seneca, a local shipyard roughly 25 miles from Soderstrom's Streator. At over 200 acres and stretching three-fourths of a mile along the riverside, the “prairie shipyard” was an ideal site. Its layout allowed for 15 of the 327-footlong ships to be berthed in parallel into the Illinois River, while its sandstone base could support the considerable weight of 5,500 tons of steel per ship.<sup>920</sup>

By June, the first ships were laid. It was a massive effort, requiring more than 1,500 welders alone. Entire communities were built up around the shipyard as over 10,000 shipyard workers flooded the formerly quiet

village of 1,235 residents.<sup>921</sup> In the words of historian R.G. Bluemer:

To handle the expanding workforce, the LaSalle County Housing Authority established a project called Seneca Defense Housing consisting of 675 family housing units and enough dormitories to house 350 single men on 45 acres. On June 16 (1942), another news report described the need for a further expansion so that 600 additional families could be accommodated on a 60 acre site just north of the Illinois River near Rt. 186. The early construction proceeded so quickly that housing was ready for 200 families within the week. In the meantime, new restaurants opened; vacant buildings were being used; the bakery business flourished; and trailers were parked in every available open space in town and on the farmers' fields.<sup>922</sup>

The work was intense. Time was of the essence; scaffold was kept to a minimum to streamline production. There were two 9-hour shifts per week, with each person working a 54-hour week.<sup>923</sup> With extreme hours came exhaustion and danger; a disturbing number of workers at the Seneca shipyard died from all manner of accidents. Joseph Gore died from a 30-foot fall from the upper deck of an LST. Dallas Fluegal was crushed by a ventilator, while Wallace Dean and William Jones were electrocuted, both in separate incidents.<sup>924</sup> These were just a few of those who gave their lives in service to their country at Seneca.

By December 13 of 1942, crowds from all over the Illinois valley flocked to see the launching for the first ship. The honor of the christening went to a female welder, Mrs. Harriet Williamson.<sup>925</sup> Despite record production times, the need for LSTs grew ever greater; as one crewman was quoted as telling his ship-building brother, "I will tell you it takes several months from what I hear to build an LST, but I know from experience it takes but a few seconds to sink one, so you see that's one reason why production should keep speeding up instead of cutting down."<sup>926</sup>

The workers responded by churning out ships even faster. By the end of the war, Seneca could go from scrap to ship in under two months. Over 88 LSTs were used for the invasion of Anzio in 1944, and the ship featured prominently in operation Dragoon in southern France and the invasion of Sicily.<sup>927</sup> It's most famous appearance, however, came in the invasion of Normandy (D-Day) in June of 1944, where they played a critical role in the most crucial battle of the war.

Success abroad had a perverse effect on the men of the shipyard, however. As the war's end came ever closer, the men on the line began to worry about the close of the yard and their post-war employment. Yard Manager Donald Leach sent a motivation letter in the wake of the victory at Normandy to address the increasing despondency, writing:

We call upon workers to stick to their jobs—back up the navy—and prepare to pour on the Japanese the cumulative power of our fleet and our production lines—so that the fleet will be effective and our soldiers and sailors will have the necessary arms and ammunition to take an instant advantage of the opportunities which will be presented to shorten this war.<sup>928</sup>

The workers persevered, and by September of that year they celebrated the production of the yard's 100th ship, with Hollywood actor Cesar Romero speaking before a crowd of over 8,000 to thank the workers for their hard work and sacrifice.<sup>929</sup> The yard stayed in operation for another 8 months, completing its last ship by May 1945.<sup>930</sup>

## CRITICAL TO VICTORY

The Seneca shipyards played a big role in the lives of many families, and the Soderstroms were no exception. Reuben's son Carl worked to procure more than 863,500 tons of steel required to meet construction quotas.

He far exceeded that number, securing so much steel that officials had no idea what to do with the excess at the time of the yard's close (most of it ultimately went to rust). Reuben's brother Paul also worked at the shipyards as a security guard, a job for which his past work in the army under General Pershing made him a perfect fit.

Reuben, for his part, publicly and often extolled the efforts of those working for the war's end, including those at Seneca. As he told the delegates at the Illinois State Federation of Labor in 1944:

Wage earners of America have won the battle of production for the Allied Nations. Without their amazing production accomplishments it would not have been possible to turn the tide of victory against Hitlerism and Fascism. The vast and amazing quantity of ammunition, guns, tanks, planes and ships produced by the workers of the United States in Record time has shortened the road to victory and has saved countless thousands of American lives.<sup>931</sup>

Reuben knew without American labor there would be no American victory. He was particularly proud of Illinois labor and its contributions; as he told the labor delegates at the Illinois State Federation of Labor conference that year, "Ten percent of all implements of war that have been produced since December 7, 1941 have been produced here."<sup>932</sup> By the end of 1944 Illinois manufacturing was 19th in the nation in shipbuilding, 12th in aircraft contracts, seventh in dollar value of war supplies, fifth in ordinance and second in all other categories. The state also provided 40% of the forge and foundry capacity and produced 50% of all airborne radio and radar for the nation.<sup>933</sup>

Across Illinois and the nation, American laborers had played a critical role in the American war effort. With great courage and at significant cost, workers did all they could to ensure that those fighting overseas—many of them brothers, husbands, and sons—had the tools they needed to win the fight. Through sweat, service, and sacrifice—including, sometimes, the ultimate sacrifice—union men and women played a decisive factor. In the words of Reuben Soderstrom:

Labor did more than any other element to win the war. Victory would have been impossible without labor. In the final analysis, it means that labor and labor's teamwork with the armed forces won the war.<sup>934</sup>

# CHAPTER 34

## 1945

### SODERSTROM PREPARES ILLINOIS LABOR FOR PEACE

*“Within the framework of our democracy it is possible to solve our problems peacefully by the use of intelligence and reason, and this desired goal should be attained by following the guidance of men of good will and by respecting the contributions which industry, government, workers and veterans have made, and can continue to make, to build up an industrial economy in America which will be profitable and satisfactory to workers who must remain in it or to veterans who must become a part of it.”*

-Reuben Soderstrom  
Labor Day, 1945

#### REUBEN RESPONDS TO NATIONAL VICTORY, LOSS

*Soderstrom: “Government Can Accomplish Anything”*

The year 1945 began in victory for Reuben and his allies. President Roosevelt, fresh off a successful re-election campaign, took the Oath of Office for an unprecedented fourth time on January 20th alongside his new Vice President, Harry Truman. Speaking to those gathered at the nation’s capital braving the winter cold as well as the countless others listening across the nation, FDR captured the feelings of a war-weary but hopeful nation, telling the country:

As I stand here today, having taken the solemn oath of office in the presence of my fellow countrymen—in the presence of our God—I know that it is America’s purpose that we shall not fail. In the days and in the years that are to come we shall work for a just, an honorable peace, a durable peace, as today we work and fight for total victory in war. We can and we will achieve such a peace.<sup>935</sup>

There was strong reason for such optimism. In the past few months the United States and its Allies had seemingly steamrolled across Europe. Allied forces had turned the tide in the famous Battle of the Bulge, beating back Hitler’s last-ditch offensive in the Ardennes. German forces were now in full retreat, abandoning their heavy equipment and armor in their wake. In the Pacific, the Battle in Leyte Gulf left the Japanese Navy hopelessly crippled, its fleet almost completely destroyed. Just two weeks after his swearing-in Roosevelt departed for Yalta to plan the contours of the post-war world.

Across the nation a new feeling, complex and at times contradictory, began to take hold. On the one hand was a growing sense of ease and inevitability, a confidence in things to come. This was certainly true for organized labor, whose Political Action Committee (PAC) had just completed a successful campaign to re-elect not only the President but labor-friendly candidates across the country. Enduring withering attacks, including charges by the House Committee on Un-American Activities that the organization was “a subversive Communist organization” seeking to bring totalitarianism to the United States, labor’s PAC could

credibly claim responsibility for the election of six governors, seventeen senators, and 120 congressmen. Organized labor “was weathering a war, when it might have expected major setbacks, with most of its New Deal advances intact and in some cases pushed ahead, with its membership and organizational strength increased, and with a political organization tested and not found wanting in several campaigns,” writes labor historian Joseph Rayback. “Never at the close of any war in the nation’s history had labor appeared so powerful.”<sup>936</sup>

This confidence, however, was mixed with a heavy apprehension about the peace to come, particularly among those who had lived through the trying years that followed the end of the last World War. Reuben was among those who worried that the War’s end could bring its own devils, including skyrocketing prices and massive unemployment. He was determined not to see history repeat itself; as a proud progressive, he believed the key to winning the peace was an active and interventionist government ready to do whatever was necessary to steady the country as it made the transition from a wartime economy. The war, he argued, had shown just what government was capable of achieving when it was willing to bring its full power to bear. Now he wanted to see the nation’s politicians and policymakers fight the emerging threats to America’s working class every inch as aggressively as they had the Nazis. As he wrote in his Labor Day address to laborers across Illinois:

Labor has learned some impressive lessons on the First World War of 1918 and in the Second World War of today. The most illustrious lesson is the clear demonstration that government can accomplish anything. Government can do anything. It can take the youth of America and send it to the battle-fronts of the world. It can regulate the amount of food, heat, tires or gasoline that the family might use. It can take over railroads. It can take over coal mines. It can take over Montgomery-Ward or any other obstreperous corporation. When government is properly directed it can defeat the enemies of democracy, it can make things favorable for the people who live under it. This is the proper function of government. Failure to use the government to secure needed legislation is potentially dangerous to the welfare of wage-earners because this would continue to keep things unfavorable to the people of this State.<sup>937</sup>

Reuben was determined not to fail. Through all the momentous and game-changing events of 1945, both foreseen and unexpected, Reuben worked to ensure that Illinois and the nation would have such a government properly directed, with strong laws protecting and supporting hard-working men and women. It would be no easy task.

### *The Philadelphia Charter and the AFL Bill of Rights*

One of the central tenets of Soderstrom’s vision was the conviction that change had to happen not just on a state or even national level; labor had the opportunity and responsibility to re-fashion the world. Earlier Reub had reported to the workers of Illinois on international efforts to reform global labor policy. Nearly a year had passed since the International Labor office of the League of Nations had called on member states to take “all necessary steps” to “promote improvement in such fields as public health, housing, nutrition, education, the welfare of children, the status of women, conditions of employment, the remuneration of wage earners and independent producers, social security, standards of public services and general production.”<sup>938</sup> As editor of the Illinois Federation’s *Weekly Newsletter*, Soderstrom committed several issues to highlighting the meeting of the International Labor Conference at Philadelphia, where a post-war international agenda for Labor was being set. The declaration they produced, the “Philadelphia Charter,” was to Reuben a meaningful and promising start to expanding abroad American principles of labor—principles he as President of the ISFL had long championed. As he wrote:

The Conference declaration represents a great stride towards the freedom of the workers of all nations. The Illinois State Federation of Labor has long insisted that “The freedom of the individual person from enforced

service in the field of labor is the basic freedom from which all other liberties flow and without which they are of no avail.” The Declaration of Philadelphia recognizes the validity of the principle thus set forth by the Illinois trade unionists through the Illinois State Federation of Labor.<sup>939</sup>

As 1945 dawned, Reub and labor looked forward not only to the end of the war but the creation of a new peace built on labor principles. As AFL President Green wrote in his 1945 New Year Message:

As we enter our fourth year of war, American workers are determined that it shall be the last. Labor issues this New Year warning to the enemy—that in the months ahead the soldiers of production will back up the fighting forces of the United Nations with the greatest output of planes, tanks, guns and ships in history...Victory over Hitler and Hirohito will not, however, end labor’s responsibilities to the cause of freedom. We will not consider this war won until our chief post-war objectives are won. They are (1) Establishment of permanent peace under world democracy and (2) Jobs for all in peace-time America...Great opportunities lie ahead of us after the war ends.<sup>940</sup>

This call for the creation of a lasting peace built on worker freedom and security was soon codified in an “AFL Bill of Rights.” Published in the spring of 1945, the International Bill of Rights proposed by the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor called for:

1. Freedom of belief and worship
2. Freedom of speech and the press
3. Freedom of Assembly
4. Freedom of Association
5. Freedom from interference with personal privacy of person, home, and property
6. Freedom from involuntary servitude
7. Right of individuals to a fair public trial when accused of crime
8. Right of individuals to speedy determination of criminal charges prior to detention.<sup>941</sup>

As a member of the American Federation of Labor Peace and Postwar Problems Committee, Reuben had played a substantial role in developing this Bill of Rights, and several of the specific protections enumerated had personal resonance. The rights to a fair public trial and speedy determination of charges before detention were not just lofty ideals but direct responses to the injunction orders that had long plagued labor leaders, including Reub himself. Soderstrom had often been sanctioned by these judicial decrees, issued without trial or formal charges, barring him from speaking to or assembling with striking workers; often his movement in his hometown of Streator was so restricted that he became a virtual prisoner in his own home, denied the right to even make a visit to friends and family. Since these orders could stand against him for months on end without any legal proceeding, organized labor had no way to challenge these laws by fiat, which typically stayed in place until a given strike was broken by management. Reuben had long held these injunctions to be a gross violation of his personal rights, and now that he had the opportunity he was intent on codifying such orders as not only immoral but illegal.

The condemnation of involuntary servitude was also an issue dear to Reuben’s heart. Throughout the war, he and Secretary Victor Olander had opposed any and all attempts to prevent by force workers leaving their jobs, compelling them to work in the name of national emergency. To Soderstrom and Olander, forcing men and women to serve their employers without consent was expressly forbidden by the 13th amendment of the constitution which declared “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”<sup>942</sup> As Olander pronounced at the Principia Conference on Employer-Employee Relations that February, with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment:



The American workers then attained the full status of personal freedom under the constitution. This change in legal status was revolutionary. They then, and not until then, came under the beneficent shelter of the Bill of Rights. The United States of America thereupon became the only great nation in the world to inscribe in a written constitution not subject to suspension a declaration of the complete personal freedom of all individuals in the field of civilian labor. The government thereby declared it would no longer endow the “master” with the power to hold the “servant.”<sup>943</sup>

Now, with the war fast coming to a close, America had the opportunity and responsibility to honor this right for its own citizenry as an example to nations around the globe. Olander continued:

Why hide our great virtue of personal freedom even from our own people? Why not proclaim it from the housetops until every man woman and child under our flag becomes fully aware of the great truth that we are a completely free people, the only free people the world has ever known! When someone would point to our mistakes, our errors, or our sins, we can truthfully say that we have not fully known ourselves, that we have failed to make the best use of our great liberty because we have been largely ignorant of its true nature...In a very real sense, our Republic has been true to its destiny from the very beginning. There are irresistible forces within the very nature of our national life that will continue to carry us forward. We would do well to explore them. There is, indeed, something very great 'hidden beyond the ranges' within our national being which we shall eventually find.<sup>944</sup>

For Reuben, Victor, and countless others, the country—the world even—appeared on the verge of a new promised land, and in this uniquely malleable moment the American principles of freedom and justice, as defined in the constitution and safeguarded by workers united, would be the key to ending the long exile of oppression and war.

### *Roosevelt Dies, Truman Ascends to Presidency*

On April 12, 1945, Franklin D Roosevelt died in the living room of his cottage in Warm Springs, Georgia. For the nation that he had led through both the Great Depression and the Second World War, it was more than losing a President—it was more akin to the death of a family member. As Reuben wrote in the days following the death of a man he had often called a friend:

The death of President Roosevelt is a tragic event for all mankind. In every land the peoples of the earth were looking towards him as the great humanitarian who, while leading the United Nations to victory in the great war, was earnestly and energetically seeking the means of assuring permanent peace for the future. He had become recognized everywhere as the very personification of the spirit of America. The great labor movement of the country will feel his loss keenly.<sup>945</sup>

Yet, labor could take comfort in the fact that his successor, Harry Truman, was a man they had come to trust. In the lead up to the 1944 election, President Roosevelt had preferred his head of the offices of Economic Stabilization and War Mobilization, James Byrnes, to be his Vice President. Labor, however, was strongly opposed to the man popularly known as the “Assistant President.” Byrnes was firm believer in compulsory labor, and as Director had repeatedly sought to freeze workers to their jobs, a move opposed by organized labor and employers alike.

Truman, in contrast, had earned labor’s trust during the course of the war. As head of the Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, the then-Senator led a successful investigation of war production that rooted out waste, inefficiency, and war profiteering. The Truman Committee (as it was

popularly known) soon developed a reputation for honesty and integrity, and was popular in labor circles. In part through labor's support, Roosevelt was persuaded to accept Truman as his Vice Presidential candidate. Soderstrom said, in the wake of the President's passing:

All eyes turn hopefully towards his successor, the new President, Harry S. Truman. Mourning the loss of the old great leader, the people of the nation, as if one voice, are calling for a full measure of support for the man who now is at the helm of the Ship of State. Any who fails to respond will encounter public resentment. In its sadness, America is now more united than ever before in its history.<sup>946</sup>

### *Cautions Against Celebration in Victory*

Such unity was soon rewarded. Less than one month after the President's passing, the German High Command signed an unconditional surrender of all German forces, officially ending the war in Europe. The news was greeted with cheers across the nation. As now President Truman proclaimed to the jubilant nation:

The allied armies, through sacrifice and devotion and with God's help, have won from Germany a final and unconditional surrender. The western world has been freed of the evil forces which for five years and longer have imprisoned the bodies and broken the lives of millions upon millions of freeborn men. They have violated their churches, destroyed their homes, corrupted their children, and murdered their loved ones. Our armies of liberation have restored freedom to those suffering peoples, whose spirit and will the oppressors could never enslave.<sup>947</sup>

While thankful for the "solemn but glorious" hour of peace, the President urged the country not to forget or shrink from the task still at hand:

Much remains to be done. The victory won in the West must now be won in the East. The whole world must be cleansed of the evil from which half the world has been freed. United, the peace-loving nations have demonstrated in the West that their arms are stronger by far than the might of dictators or the tyranny of military cliques that once called us soft and weak. The power of our people to defend themselves against all enemies will be proved in the Pacific war as it has been proved in Europe.<sup>948</sup>

Reuben, for his part, did not linger on the victory. While he reproduced the President's Proclamation in full, he did not issue any accompanying statement or speech. In fact, save for Truman's remarks, Soderstrom's *Weekly Newsletter* makes no further mention of Germany's surrender. The pages are instead filled with news on the Illinois and federal legislative sessions and court cases; updates on Federal school legislation receive more ink than all words related to VE-day combined.

For Reub, the absence of war was not victory, and mistaking it for such was a dangerous exercise. The fight was still going, and neither the surrender of Germany nor Japan would mark its end. War itself, he maintained, was the enemy, one that had to be fought as fiercely at home as it was abroad. As he wrote on Labor Day of that year:

Enlightened people everywhere are beginning to understand that there should be some better way of settling international questions and issues than to shoot it out. Even victorious peoples have misgivings about the efficacy of war. Grave doubts are often expressed with respect to the good attained through force and violence, through war and killing. People of good will become finer, it is true, under the stress and emergency of conflict and struggle. Those who do not possess these fine qualities, however, are caught in war hatreds, become resentful and grow progressively coarser and spiteful. For the common man no permanent good has come out of warfare during our time and now the backwash of international conflict threatens to create more and greater

economic problems than those of the past.<sup>949</sup>

## REUBEN'S LEGISLATIVE FIGHT

### *Calls for Labor College, Ambitious Agenda against Strong Opposition*

Soderstrom may have despised war, but he still spoiled for an intellectual tussle about policy. This was especially true in the Illinois statehouse, where he hoped to reverse the losses labor had suffered in the 1943 session. Republican control of both the House and Senate did not bode well, however; as Reuben wrote at the year's start:

While much could be done for wage-earners nothing really startlingly beneficial or progressive is expected from the coming session of the Illinois Legislature. The prevailing platform pledge, made by the dominant political party to the effect that elected members of this party would 'safeguard and protect all legislative gains which Illinois labor has heretofore won' does not advocate needed new legislation for working people.<sup>950</sup>

Still, long odds had never stopped Soderstrom before and he showed no indication that they would now. The moment was too crucial and the stakes too high, he said, to turn away or back down:

There is much to do on the home front. A multiplicity of problems growing out of reconversion from a war economy to a peace economy will confront the lawmakers. Employment for demobilized soldiers and re-employment for workers thrown out of jobs in war plants are among the adjustments which must be made. Unless admittedly needed post-war legislation is enacted during the war in all likelihood it will never be passed.<sup>951</sup>

Despite facing fierce resistance Reuben unveiled an ambitious and wide-ranging legislative agenda. He wanted to improve existing laws on unemployment insurance, workman's compensation and occupational disease, old age assistance, child labor, and equal pay for women. He also sought to bring Illinois labor laws governing intrastate industries up to the standards that employees of interstate industries enjoyed under federal protections with a new anti-injunction law, a wage and hour law, and a "little Wagner" act that would forbid unfair labor practices.

Reuben also sought a bevy of new bills aimed at helping state employees, from wage increases, semi-monthly pay and a minimum wage for teachers to universal access to civil service exams so those without a high school or college degree could apply for public service. As someone whose schooling ended in the 7th grade, Reuben knew very well that a lack of formal education did not mean a lack of intelligence or ability, and he wanted to ensure that everyone, regardless of their background or wealth, could serve their government.

While moving to ease education requirements for public service, Soderstrom also called for the establishment of a new Labor College at the University of Illinois. As a former chairman of the House Education Committee, and twice during his 16-year tenure as a state representative and a member of the Non-Alumni Advisory committee for the University of Illinois, his voice carried considerable weight. A Labor College made common sense, he declared, arguing:

The Labor College will have a real trade union division which will supply labor experts, labor analysts and labor economists to look after the needs of those working to advance labor's great cause. The Labor College will be set up to serve the working people of Illinois just as the College of Agriculture in the University of Illinois serves the farmers of this state.<sup>952</sup>

Lastly, Reuben called for voter reform. Secret primaries would allow voters to cast their ballots according to their conscience, he reasoned, while extending polling hours would make voting possible for the thousands of Illinois laboring men and women who were otherwise unable to vote during the working day.

### *Manufacturers' Men Use Dirty Tricks to Cheat Women, Children*

The fight was every inch as treacherous as Reuben had anticipated. As they had in years passed, Soderstrom and Olander made sure to attend every bill hearing, pushing their bills through often hostile committees. That March Victor took point on the anti-injunction bill, facing off against Otto Jaburek of the Associated Employers of Illinois and David Clarke of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association before the Senate judiciary committee.<sup>953</sup> With the help of Senator John Lee of Chicago, Victor was able to get the proposed act, designed to bring Illinois law into conformity with the federal Norris-La Guardia Act, reported out of committee.<sup>954</sup> Reuben, meanwhile, worked the House Committee on Civil Service on behalf of the Civil Service legislation, getting his bills reported with unanimous recommendation.<sup>955</sup> They both also worked with Lottie Holman O'Neill, a veteran legislator and longtime friend and ally of Soderstrom's, to hold a hearing on a new Equal Pay for Equal Work Bill. Unlike the Act that had passed in the previous session, this bill would make employees who discriminate on account of gender liable for both lost wages and damages.<sup>956</sup>

While Reub and his allies were able to get some bills reported out of committee early, the Equal Pay bill fell victim to the "quorum conundrum," with opponents motioning for a committee roll call any time a pro-labor legislator voted to move a bill out of committee. As Reuben explained to his supporters:

Due to the fact that practically all members of both branches of the Illinois legislature serve on several committees, and hearings are going on constantly when the houses are not in session, it is rarely ever that a quorum of a committee sits through an entire hearing, and frequently bills are reported out with but a few members of the committee present, the question of 'Quorum' being rarely ever raised—excepting on bills introduced on behalf of labor.<sup>957</sup>

These quorum calls weren't reserved for the Equal Pay Act. Anti-labor legislators also used quorum delays to hold back unemployment compensation amendments, labor relations bills, and more. Before long the Industrial Affairs Committee, where the quorum delay was invoked at nearly every meeting, became a carnival act. Reuben reported:

The Industrial Affairs Committee of the Illinois House of Representatives has not been permitted to function properly at any time during the present session of the legislature. At almost every meeting of this committee, some member of the committee, friendly to the Manufacturers' Association and unfriendly to the common people, has raised the question of 'quorum.'

When the question of "quorum" was raised last Wednesday, Representative Allison, who was in attendance at the hearing, arose to his feet and asked Representative George A. Williston, chairman of the committee, "How many bills have been considered by this committee and reported out this session?" The Chairman answered, "None." Representative Allison then remarked, "This committee ought to be disbanded. I intend to start a move to wipe out this utterly useless misnamed Committee on Industrial Affairs."<sup>958</sup>

Of all the disgraceful acts of the Industrial Affairs Committee, perhaps none was more shocking than its treatment of the Women and Minors Bill. This proposed act, meant to reenact minimum wage standards for women and children, was put before the senate committee on June 28. Reuben and Victor both attended to argue for the bill, alongside President Agnes Nestor of the Chicago Women's Trade Union League and Director Gordon of the State Department of Labor. In preparation, it was decided that Reuben should follow

the bill's sponsor to open arguments in support, while Olander would act as the closer, saving his speech for rebuttal.

After Reuben and the others had spoken in support and the Illinois Manufacturers' Association finished their argument in opposition, Victor got up to speak. During the transition, Senator Ray Paddock walked out for a moment (presumably to use the facilities), allowing Senator Hugh Luckey to cut Victor off mid-sentence and call quorum. The Chairman quickly announced there was no quorum present, closed the hearing, and darted out of the room before Paddock could make it back from the bathroom. Meanwhile, an army of lobbyists from the Illinois Manufacturers' Association formed a human blockade outside the committee room door to prevent other committee members from getting in before the Chairman could escape.

Supporters of the bill were nearly apoplectic with rage, Reub included. "Dirty ball" was nothing new in Springfield, but this seemed to be a new low. Not in the recent memory of the Senate had a gang of lobbyists (described by one Senator as a "Hindenburg Line") physically barred Senators from entering their own committee meetings! When the Senate gathered later that afternoon, Senator Clyde Trager went before the full assembly to describe what had happened. When it became clear that he was going to ask the Senate to remove the bill from the Chairman's grasp and put it to a full vote, Lieutenant Governor Cross, presiding over the Senate, quickly recognized anti-labor Senator Ed Laughlin, who moved to adjourn before the Senate could act.

The Senators, however, had had enough. Whether they supported or opposed the bill, they could no longer tolerate efforts to prevent their fellow legislators from even putting it up for a vote. Laughlin's motion to adjourn was rejected by a vote of 32 to 0, and the Women and Minors Minimum Wage Bill was discharged from the Industrial Affairs Committee and put to a full vote. Free from the hands of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association and its stooges, the bill passed with several votes to spare.<sup>959</sup>

### ***Soderstrom to Con-Con Supporters: "Tell It to Hitler!"***

Legislative shenanigans weren't limited to the Senators and Representatives in Springfield, however. At the start of 1945 many in Illinois began clamoring for a new constitution convention, or "Con Con" for short, an issue that would bedevil Soderstrom for years to come. Those who remembered the last failed Con Con, held in the wake of the First World War, largely opposed such a move. Reuben thought it was a particularly daft idea, and he didn't mince words about it. That January, Soderstrom made headlines with his vocal opposition, saying:

An attempt is now being made to provide for the calling of a constitutional convention to revamp the basic law of Illinois. Those engaged in this campaign say that the present state of the constitution is 'a horse and buggy affair' fit only for the pioneer days. The plain implication is that they believe that constitutions deteriorate with the mere passage of time. In effect they allege, unwittingly perhaps, that the American form of government, in its federal and state constitutions, is a wobbly structure, the foundations of which must always be insecure at some point. 'Tell it to Hitler!' is sufficient reply for the moment.<sup>960</sup>

This wasn't to say that Reuben rejected the idea of a revised constitution outright; there were some changes he supported. But his prior experience led him to the firm conviction that such revisions should not be attempted during or immediately after a war. As he wrote to legislators considering the Con Con:

Calm consideration, even tempered deliberation, is difficulty in time of peace, and every thoughtful person knows that it is impossible in time of war. Constitutions should not be written in stirred-up war-time atmosphere. Writing of a new constitution ought not to be attempted during even the immediate post-war

years. At least five years ought to elapse after the shooting stops. Less than five years is likely to produce a proposed new constitution similar to the one of 25 years ago. In all likelihood, it would not, and ought not, survive the wrath of the people.<sup>961</sup>

Soderstrom faced stiff opposition from all sides, however. Liberal politicians, including the powerful Chicago Mayor Kelly, were eager to change congressional reapportionment to favor the more heavily Democratic north, while the Republican Governor Green was equally excited by the idea of strengthening the power of his office.<sup>962</sup> Even the usually friendly Chicago Sun attacked Reuben. In an editorial entitled “Facts for Mr. Soderstrom,” the newspaper attacked Reub as a reactionary, holding back the state from the “liberal” changes constitutional conventions had brought other states, using neighboring Missouri as an example.

Reuben threw the Sun’s example back in their faces, noting that the new Missouri constitution employed clever language to make segregated education the law of the land, unalterable by any legislature. He sarcastically forgave the editors of the Sun for their sloppy research, writing:

Well, constitutions make dry reading. They are difficult to interpret. A good deal of thought is necessary to a complete understanding of the terms used. Newspaper editors are busy men—very busy! Editorial rooms are noisy, bustling places. The ‘news’ must be rushed to print. There is little time or opportunity for concentrated study on such a heavy subject as constitutional law!<sup>963</sup>

The *Sun*, wounded by Reub’s jousting, returned with more personal and vicious attacks. Soderstrom, meanwhile, received many words of support, including more than a few from some unlikely sources. Even industrialists like Harold McLain, president of The Railways Ice Company of Chicago, sent letters to Reuben reading:

I observe with some disgust and anger the article in The Chicago Sun yesterday captioned: “United Against the People” and which indulges in a typical, vile smear against you because you happen to differ with the Sun’s editorial viewpoint...I am sure a great many good citizens, in addition to your friends, experienced only a sensation of gratitude for your courage and adherence to principle when they saw this unfair article in the Sun.<sup>964</sup>

Ultimately, Reuben prevailed. Despite enormous political pressure, the Illinois House of Representatives voted 81 to 65 against calling a convention. Reuben had prevailed against some of the state’s most adept politicians, further strengthening his hand in Springfield.<sup>965</sup>

### ***Counts Legislative Wins, Attacks Opposition***

The defeat of the dreaded Con Con was only the start. As the 1945 legislative session wound to a close, it became clear that labor was about to enjoy an unexpectedly fruitful year. In all, over forty pro-labor bills were passed. From education to health care to environmental protection, there seemed to be no corner of public life Reub and the ISFL left untouched. Thanks to ISFL legislation passed in the 1945 session, physicians and hospitals could no longer refuse emergency care just because patients were unable to pay. Slums were cleared and replaced with new, affordable housing. Rural communities were given the resources necessary to construct public libraries for their citizens. Public positions were opened to people from all walks of life, along with better salaries and benefits. And of course there were improvements to unemployment compensation, workmen’s compensation, women’s rights, the rights of minors, and veterans’ benefits. Perhaps most importantly, Reuben’s Labor College also became a reality. The University of Illinois received \$150,000 for the purpose of inaugurating labor courses.

In the end only a handful of laws Reuben pushed for didn't pass. The injunction limitation bill and the wages and hours bill Soderstrom had sought to bring Illinois protections in line with federal law failed to receive enough votes. Reub's voter protection and extended polling hours bills also failed to pass. The legislative failure that angered Soderstrom the most, however, was that of the Equal Pay Bill, which after such a hard fought victory in the Senate never got the chance for a floor vote in the House. In his closing legislative review that year, Reub bitterly wrote:

The House Committee on Industrial Affairs is notoriously the burying place for Illinois labor legislation. Its members are, figuratively, merely legislative grave-diggers and pallbearers, some even with sneers of contempt for Illinois labor, and others with sincere tears of sympathy for the workers, but all participants in the burial process. The officers of the Illinois State Federation of Labor publicly characterized the situation as "unconscionable."<sup>96</sup>

Unfortunately, the Committee on Industrial Affairs wasn't labor's greatest foe that session. Governor Green, long an opponent of Illinois labor, vetoed two of Reuben's hardest-won pieces of legislation. The first, an environmental protection bill Soderstrom had been advocating for years, would have placed a small tax of four cents per ton on companies that strip-mined coal, with the funds collected used to restore land devastated by the strip-mining process.

As stunning as that veto was, Green's second veto was an even bigger body blow. Out of all the favorable labor bills enacted, Soderstrom was proudest of the union recognition law. This bill gave Illinois trade unions direct and official recognition, and allowed state and local governments to collectively bargain with public employees. While Governor Green cited constitutional concerns in his veto message, according to ISFL attorney Dan Carmell the weakness of such claims indicated to him that "the import of what the Governor says is that he does not want labor unions to have the results of their bargaining put into writing."<sup>97</sup>

Despite these setbacks, Soderstrom was greatly pleased with the overall result the ISFL had achieved. Later that year at the Illinois Federation's Annual Convention, he boasted:

There wasn't a single legislative proposal which was dangerous or harmful to the welfare of the workers enacted into law... I am very happy and very proud to be able to report to you that the work of the Illinois State Federation of Labor in the last session of the general assembly can again be chalked up as a great success.<sup>98</sup>

## PLANNING FOR A POST-WAR NATION

### *Leads National Response to Unemployment Compensation Problems*

While Soderstrom's victories in the Illinois legislature were impressive, Reuben's finest hour in 1945 came on the national stage – almost by accident. The surrender of the Japanese on August 10, one day after the bombing of Nagasaki, took American post-war planners by surprise. Most officials preparing for the transition to peacetime had expected the war to go on for at least another year. This left many government services and security programs overwhelmed, including unemployment compensation. Those responsible for delivering services likewise often took out their frustrations about being overwhelmed and underfunded on the very people they were supposed to help. Before long Reuben's tiny Springfield office was overwhelmed with letters detailing abuse and humiliation at the hands of unemployment administrators. That winter Reub wrote to Illinois Director of Labor Robert Gordon seeking relief:

Dear Friend Gordon,

Numerous complaints have come to me against the officious and dictatorial attitude of those administering the Unemployment Compensation law in LaSalle County...The personnel in the Streator division act as if the funds were coming out of their personal reserves and are charged with saying many sharp things to unemployed people in the presence of others, which has proven embarrassing. This type of conduct is not only an unnecessary display of bad manners but is very harmful to Governor Green's administration.<sup>969</sup>

Many seeking benefits in the months following V-J day shared similar experiences, and it was with these stories in hand that Reuben embarked for Washington to address the issue. For the last twelve years, the US Department of Labor had held an annual National Labor Conference on Labor Legislation, and Reuben had traditionally attended as an Illinois representative. These conferences had historically been rather one-sided; "In the past," explained the *ISFL Weekly Newsletter*, "A.F. of L. participation was limited pretty much to a policy of going along quietly, with polite watchfulness."<sup>970</sup> This time, however, Reuben was preparing for an altogether different affair. On the evening of December 4, the night before the general Legislative Conference was scheduled to begin, Soderstrom met with Washington AFL officials to discuss using the Conference to craft a national plan on Unemployment Compensation policy to address the abuse and humiliation so many unemployed workers faced. They decided to request the US Secretary of Labor to appoint a special committee to craft an official stance. Lewis Schwellenbach, who had replaced Francis Perkins as Secretary of Labor, honored the request, and the following day a committee was formed. It wasn't long before Reuben, who had opened the Conference with a fiery speech that had stirred the delegation, was named Chairman, presiding over a vast group including representatives of not only the AFL but the Railroad Brotherhood and the CIO, as well as Labor Commissioners. Familiar with the problems at hand and firm in what he wanted done, Reub ran the committee like a well oiled machine, and before the day's end his committee completed a full report that called for:

1. State Unemployment Compensation agencies to interpret and administer their laws in a liberal manner and to stop trying to humiliate and embarrass both workers and veterans registering for unemployment.
2. President Truman to veto bills returning employment offices to the States (making them less accountable and harder to oversee).
3. An increase in the weekly benefits to at least \$25 and an extension to at least 26 weeks.

When the plan was presented to the full Conference the following day it met stiff resistance from conservative members. According to a later account of the event (most likely written by Olander):

Sharp clashing developed all through the debate as President Soderstrom and his steering committee defended the report. The defense was able—referred to by those who watched it—as brilliant! The report was finally adopted by an overwhelming vote of 78 to 8....

It was a great victory for the AF of L because the leadership offered by the American Federation of Labor representatives was wholeheartedly subscribed to and accepted not only by Railroad Brotherhood delegates, but also unanimously approved by the representatives of the CIO. President Soderstrom was showered with congratulations on every side. For him it was a breathtaking personal triumph and he was smilingly happy about it all. Without planning to do so he had given the national representatives of the American labor movement a sample of the aggressive and militant leadership which has made the reputation of the Illinois State Federation of Labor singularly outstanding throughout the United States.<sup>971</sup>

### ***Calls for Reconciliation between Workers, Veterans***

While Reuben's victory in Washington set a high standard, many veterans returning from war found increasing difficulty returning to civilian life. Many of the laborers who had worked so hard to help build the



engines of war likewise found themselves out of a job, searching desperately for new work. This of course led to rising tension between wage earners and veterans, a pressure eagerly fed by the popular media. As 1945 came to a close, Reuben saw the convergence of veteran and wage-earner interests as the single most important goal of organized labor. That Labor Day, Reub took the opportunity to deliver not a defense of labor or a listing of accomplishments, but a message of goodwill, a call for reconciliation between those who fought the war and those who built the tools to wage it:

Various attempts are being made through publicity channels, in industry and in Congress and other governmental places, to pit the veteran against the wage-earner, and particularly against the union worker. These tendencies are dangerous and should be cried down - nipped in the bud - before they develop into class antagonisms that could produce dire divisions between fine groups of veterans and workers—Real Americans—who need to be united through this post-war period.<sup>972</sup>

For Reuben, these groups were not wholly separate classes. Just the opposite—they were, at the end of the day, one and the same:

When the member of the armed forces is returned to civilian life he starts looking for employment. He wants useful and remunerative work. He joins the ranks of wage-earners. If he belongs to a union, the path to his job is straight and direct because he is protected by his union agreement, which goes much further than any law designed to protect job rights of veterans.

Over seventy percent of our soldiers and sailors come from the homes of wage-earners. Hundreds of thousands of them are union members. Those who do not belong to unions will be cordially invited to become members when they come in to industry at the end of the war. Labor unions are conscious of the necessity of maintaining good wages, decent hours of work, and proper and comfortable conditions and should be given full credit for preserving these features and advantages at home while those in the Army and Navy were wearing the uniform of the United States.<sup>973</sup>

In the end, according to Soderstrom, workers and veterans must be united to overcome the mistakes of the past and build the future that seemed so possible, if so fragile:

Workers respect our veterans. And the majority of veterans do respect our workers. The common people must not be divided against themselves through the maneuvering of war-worshipping Tories who are attempting control of government, nor by reactionaries, who can be classified as dictators or industrial overlords. The majority of the veterans, union wage-earners, and the public officials are good, wholesome people, and should not be tricked into hating each other.<sup>974</sup>

By war's end, there was little doubt that the key to winning the peace lay in making the veteran a union worker, and in helping union workers see veterans as brothers.

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# WARTIME PRODUCTION

A large number of wage earners in Illinois had contributed to the massive manufacturing war effort. From July 1, 1940, until January 1, 1945, Illinois' manufacturers had produced 246,845 airplanes of all types including 28,471 heavy bombers; 56,696 Navy vessels; 2,422,099 machine guns; 5,942,385 rifles; 5,163,825 carbines, 1,926,405 sub-machine guns; 75,000 tanks and 130,017 tank guns; 55,252 field artillery weapons; 110,945 2 ½ ton trucks; 8,658,523 light duty trucks; 37,198,000,000 rounds of small arms ammunition; and 59,646,000 grenades.<sup>975</sup>

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# REUBEN'S WARTIME ROLES

*Rueben G. Soderstrom served on multiple war boards and committees during the course of the Second World War. His list of service includes:*

War Production Board (Labor Advisory Committee)  
National Management-Labor (Policy Committee of the War Manpower Commission)  
Advisory Committee for Industrial Safety Program of the 6th Service Command  
Federal War Savings Committee for Illinois  
American Federation of Labor Peace and Postwar Problems Committee  
Illinois State Council of Civil Defense  
Illinois Health and Safety Committee of the Illinois Industrial Commission  
Illinois Statewide Public Health Committee  
Illinois Developmental Council  
Illinois State Planning Commission

# CHAPTER 35

## 1946

### TENSIONS RISE BETWEEN VETERANS AND THE “SOLDIERS OF PRODUCTION”

*“In all the industrial centers of Illinois tens of thousands of working people, ‘soldiers of production’ so-called, are already laid off or are being confronted with early separation from their jobs. They are no longer wanted in war plants. They are being released from steady jobs, and no places are found for many who are so released...If government and industrial management fail to meet the challenge of unemployment, labor must do so without stuttering or fumbling. The intensifying of the unemployment situation will undoubtedly produce a new crash similar to what happened in 1929. Either the business world must offer a means for all to earn a decent living, or the Government must step in and do it.”*

-Reuben Soderstrom  
1946 ISFL Convention

#### REUBEN QUELLS VIOLENCE AS WAGE WAR RAGES

##### *Prepares for the War to Come*

Celebration seized the nation. The summer of 1945 witnessed the end of the greatest war the world had ever known, and Americans abroad and at home reacted with a wild mix of joy and relief, releasing years of pent-up emotion long subdued for the sake of the fight. Soderstrom’s hometown proved no exception; Streator began celebrating seconds after the formal announcement of Japan’s surrender. When the Mayor ordered the taverns closed, the revelers took their drinks with them, dancing down the city streets.<sup>976</sup> Church bells and fire sirens rang out across the Illinois Valley as soldiers and citizens joined in a sea of merriment.<sup>977</sup>

Reub was thrilled the war was over but already looked to the future with guarded optimism. He’d been through this before as a younger man, witnessing the end of the last World War. He had joined in the celebration only to watch helplessly as the nation quickly drowned in unemployment and inflation. By his estimation, a weak government and laissez-faire policies, hamstrung by a largely disinterested public, had been responsible for a decade of anti-labor legislation that resulted in depression, chaos, and ultimately the return to a war worse than the last.

He was determined not to let that happen again. The nation, he said, must win the peace, and the only way to do that was through powerful and protected unions. It was the lack of labor protections, he asserted, that prompted the descent into war. As he described to the assembled delegates at the 1945 ISFL Convention in Springfield during his annual message on October 29:

Things moved rather slowly in the old days—the good old days. It was dangerous to belong to a trade union. Employers employed spies to report union activities. Labor organizers were tarred and feathered, beaten and often murdered. At times it looked as if the whole labor movement would collapse...Today, at the close of a

great world war for survival, trade union members cling to their labor organizations because they know full well therein lies their future safety.<sup>978</sup>

Laborers had to stand up and fight for one another because, as experience had taught them, no one else would. Their contributions to the war would soon be—in some cases, already were—forgotten by a country eager to ignore such sacrifice. As Reuben said:

This much ought to be said...Seventy percent of the men and women who served in the armed forces of the United States during the Second World War came from the homes of wage-earners. About 85 percent of all the bombs, tanks, ships, planes, guns, and ammunition used in the Second World War were not only produced by wage-earners but produced by union wage-earners. With the exception of tilling the soil the workers performed every other essential war duty. They worked in the factories, mills, mines, shops and transportation systems and kept both the home-front and the battle-front supplied with whatever it needed.

I mention this to you because the politicians are afraid labor will get the spotlight if they do so. I mention this to you because most newspapers are too biased and too blind and too unfriendly to do so. I mention this to you because employers are silent. They are envious and would like to cheat labor out of the credit for the great contribution it made to bring victory to the nation.<sup>979</sup>

As 1946 began Soderstrom rallied labor for the coming battles over wages, prices, and public opinion.

### ***“Soldiers of Production” Forgotten***

Soderstrom and his board were concerned for those returning from war. As they warned, “Victory without employment for veterans becomes a pathetic homecoming.”<sup>980</sup> Reuben saw veterans as new constituents who, once employed, would eventually join the union ranks. At the moment, however, veterans enjoyed not only popular support but preference in hiring. Because of such policies, returning warriors had comparatively easier times finding employment. According to the US Department of Labor, by the spring of 1946, one out of every six factory workers was a veteran.<sup>981</sup> Although GI’s had 52 weeks’ unemployment pay, 99% of those receiving payments didn’t remain on the rolls long enough to exhaust their benefit entitlement.<sup>982</sup>

Laborers who had served in the war industry, in contrast, had no such protections. The preference for veterans meant that experienced wage earners were losing their jobs to returnees who had only a few months’ experience.<sup>983</sup> The result was devastating to working families. As Soderstrom’s own Executive Board reported at the 1945 ISFL Convention:

In all the industrial centers of Illinois tens of thousands of working people, ‘soldiers of production’ so-called, are already laid off or are being confronted with early separation from their jobs. They are no longer wanted in war plants. They are being released from steady jobs, and no places are found for many who are so released....

If government and industrial management fail to meet the challenge of unemployment, labor must do so without stuttering or fumbling. The intensifying of the unemployment situation will undoubtedly produce a new crash similar to what happened in 1929. Either the business world must offer a means for all to earn a decent living, or the Government must step in and do it.<sup>984</sup>

Worse still, manufacturers used popular concern and anxiety over finding work for returning soldiers to pit veterans against wage-earners. The report continued:

War develops a spirit of sacrifice, which disappears in a measure when the need for giving support to a large

fighting force diminishes. Certain industrialists seem to desire large pools of idle labor from which they may draw at will. There is evidence, too, that reactionary employers actually hope to set veterans against workers. All this will tend to weaken the labor movement. That is the purpose.<sup>985</sup>

### *Labor Defends the Right to Strike*

By the war's end, the nation's working class was beset on all sides. They faced a rapidly growing threat of unemployment and management eager to pit returning soldiers against labor. On top of this, they were still living on substandard wages. The working class had sacrificed much over the last several years. Throughout the fight, workers had endured "wage stabilization" measures that had kept their salaries artificially low. Price controls had helped to keep inflation in check, but wartime wage freezes still resulted in a cost of living that was 30% higher than it was in the pre-war era.<sup>986</sup> True, more working men and women were employed, but in real terms they were earning much less.

Factory owners, in contrast, emerged from the conflict with record profits never dreamed of in the pre-war era. According to the Office of Price Administration and the Senate Small Business Committee, profits across all manufacturing by war's end were 450% higher over the 1936-1939 period. Many sectors saw even higher growth; transportation equipment businesses, for example, increased profits by over 650%, while department and specialty store profits jumped by a stunning 1,324%.<sup>987</sup>

The first thing Reuben and others wanted the business world to do was bring wages up to a reasonable level. Such an action wouldn't only benefit those currently employed; Soderstrom and other labor leaders "concluded that postwar prosperity depended fundamentally upon the amount of purchasing power in the hands of lower income groups."<sup>988</sup> There was no question that industry could afford such an increase. According to estimates from the Office of War Mobilization and Reconversion, general industry could maintain their prewar profits and raise wages a full 24% without affecting prices.<sup>989</sup> Management balked at the idea, refusing to consider any wage increases unless the federal government allowed them to increase prices—a move labor argued would undermine the real value of any increase in wages.

Ultimately, labor turned to the traditional practice of collective bargaining to end the stalemate. Central to such bargaining, of course, was the right to strike. Without the real threat of strike, Soderstrom, Olander, and others argued, organized labor would be a toothless tiger, unable to be taken seriously. "The creative adventure of the conference table loses all color of reality if the workers have been deprived of their right to reject management's offer and quit, or if management has lost its right to refuse the workers' terms and close the plant," testified William Davis, former chairman of the National War Labor Board, before the US Senate Committee on Education and Labor that January. "It is, in the last analysis, the pressure of this right to strike or to lockout that keeps the parties at the conference table."<sup>990</sup> Such a move carried risks, however, particularly in the field of public opinion. As Davis continued:

Especially in times of emergency like the present times, those who are not involved in a dispute—the general public—are too prone to think of a strike as an unmitigated evil. The man on the street is not likely to know, or very much to care, about what the controversy means to those who are in it. He wants peace and production. He resents the stoppage and the strife. He is likely to feel as though the strike were an insult or an injury aimed at him.<sup>991</sup>

Even the new President seemed to abandon labor. When unions began their call for collective bargaining, they were initially supported by the President, who called such negotiation "not an easy way to solve the wage problem, but the sound way...the American Way."<sup>992</sup> He created a new Wage Stabilization Board, replacing the National War Labor Board, to determine whether and under what conditions wages could be altered.

When unions actually exercised their rights, however, Truman grew furious at the interruption, adopting a “plague on both your houses” stance on the exploding number of labor disputes. Publically, he stated his belief that labor and management possessed “too much power,” saying at a press conference “I think it is necessary the government assert the fact that it is the power of the people.”<sup>993</sup> His private sentiments, in a letter to his mother, were more direct: “The Congress are balking, labor has gone crazy, and management isn’t far from insane in selfishness.”<sup>994</sup>

Labor and industry came to a standoff. It soon became clear that a wave of strikes would hit. Less certain was how those grudge matches would play out.

### *The Battle for Public Opinion*

The wave of strikes that followed the war shook the nation. According to labor historian Joseph Rayback:

While the number of strikes did not increase in comparison to the number before the end of the war, more workingmen were involved and the conflicts lasted longer. Between V-E and V-J days the number of man days of idleness averaged much less than 2,000,000 a month...By January of 1946, the number of man days of idleness due to strikes reached a total of nearly 20,000,000—3 percent of working time; in February, 1946, the figure reached 23,000,000—more than in the years 1943 and 1944 combined.<sup>995</sup>

Management prepared a campaign to paint organized labor as unrepresentative, violent, and – most importantly – un-American. There was ample reason to trust in the effectiveness of such a campaign. After the First World War, the steel, shipping, and railway industries had all been able to break strikes using these tactics, resulting in massive wage cuts and a decade of decline for unions. Given the familiar threats of massive unemployment, chaos, and communism, employers believed they could easily repeat their previous success.

The world of work had changed radically since the 1920s, however. First, many of the things unions were fighting for after the last World War—particularly the right to organize and bargain collectively—were now universally accepted principles. Second, organized labor had proved its patriotism during the war. It actively worked with the government throughout to curb strikes and encourage sacrifice, accepting wages much lower in adjusted value than their WWI counterparts, who had seen their wages increase during the conflict. As a result, unions were now on the offensive, fighting for higher wages, instead of fending off wage cuts. Perhaps most importantly, unions were much larger and far more representative than they had ever been. According to the US Conciliation Service, American unions had over 14.5 million members, encompassing a full 47% of all US workers. This was in stark contrast to the situation even a decade after WWI, when unions represented a mere 3.5 million workers.<sup>996</sup>

Despite a hostile press and an initially disapproving public, the strikes of late 1945 and early 1946 eventually worked in labor’s favor. The disciplined AFL and CIO maintained a peaceful atmosphere, ensuring there was little violence. They issued pamphlets, press releases, and radio talks to make their case. Time and again, they refocused the argument on industry’s ability to pay. In the General Motors strike, for example, when the company claimed they couldn’t afford a pay increase, UAW head Walter Reuther simply called for GM to open their books for inspection to prove it. Their refusal, paired with Ford’s and Chrysler’s agreements to meaningful increases, left the company without a sustainable defense.<sup>997</sup>

Labor leaders also pushed for progressive governmental policies that helped them win popular support. Reuben was a master at this tactic. During the height of the strike wave Soderstrom issued an open letter to Illinois congressmen calling for the federal government to roll back existing prices on living necessities and to remove the income tax on the working poor:

High prices and high taxes are causing the unrest of the labor world resulting in strikes. The Federal government controls both prices and taxes...Prices of living necessities ought to be rolled back to where they were in the early part of 1943. Income taxes ought to be removed from working people earning \$3,000 a year or less...If this were done, there would be no need of strikes and likely there would be no strikes.<sup>998</sup>

The letter made front-page news in papers across Illinois. By focusing attention on taxes and prices, Reuben offered solutions that would help everyone, not just union members, aligning popular issues with labor interests. His argument also kept attention trained on the issue at the heart of the strikes – the unbearably high cost of living.

In casting the federal government's established authority to control prices as the solution, Reuben also subtly reinforced the need for government price controls. With the war's end, industry had been clamoring for the removal of price controls, claiming that low prices were preventing them from raising wages. Reuben was steadfastly opposed to the end of price controls believing that self-centered industrialists, already earning record profits, would push the economy into chaos with radical increases the moment they had the chance.

Wages, Reuben argued, should not be pegged to price. This principle, accepted by many in the labor movement, was most clearly articulated by AFL President Green. In a speech given in Illinois that January at an event hosted by the Chicago Federation of Labor, Green proffered the idea of an "American wage:"

But now in these later days, we have been reading in the newspapers that there are those, men who have lacked experience in the study of economics, who maintain that the wage of an American worker shall be based on fluctuations and uncertainties. Can we accept that? The American Federation of Labor does not maintain such an economic philosophy. It is true that we insist that the cost of living shall be considered when the wage question is being considered but first and above all we demand and maintain that the wages paid to working men and women shall be an American wage—enough to keep the worker and his family in decency and comfort.<sup>999</sup>

For months after the war's end, the strike war raged across the nation. As McCullough describes:

Picket lines became an established sign of the times...The whole country was in the grip of strikes. Some 200,000 meatpackers had struck by now. There was a glass workers' strike, a telephone strike, a coffinmakers' strike, a huge strike at General Electric. In Pittsburgh a strike of 3,500 electric company employees caused plant closings that affected 100,000 other workers. Streetcars stopped running, office buildings closed.<sup>1000</sup>

With tensions dangerously high, it seemed only a matter of time before some vicious act threatened to set the nation ablaze in flames of violence. As it would happen, that act occurred in Reuben's own backyard.

### ***Industrialist Guards Kill Unarmed Labor Protesters in Illinois***

On Wednesday, February 6, picketers of the Toledo, Peoria, and Western (TP & W) railroad confronted an eastbound freight at a railroad crossing in Gridley, Illinois. The picketers, armed with insults (and, by some accounts, rocks), attempted to stop the train. Four guards—equipped with revolvers and shotguns and encased in a steel-reinforced caboose with specially-constructed gun openings—responded by firing into the crowd, leaving three protesters wounded and another two, Arthur W. Browne and Irwin K. Paschon, dead in their wake; they were the first fatalities directly attributable to strike violence in a postwar labor dispute.<sup>1001</sup> Although the guards later claimed Browne had a gun, the strikers and the cab's brakeman all denied the assertion, and no gun was ever found at the scene, on the strikers, or with the bodies. Most damningly, the



coroner determined Browne had been shot in the back, making any claim of self-defense less than credible.<sup>1002</sup>

In the wake of the shooting, a combined memorial and protest meeting was held at the Peoria Armory by the local labor movement in honor of the dead. Working men of all classes, colors, and creeds attended, both to pay their respects and give voice to their rage. After months of strikes and soaring tensions, the mood was volatile to say the least. Just days before, TP & W owner George McNear—a man so disliked and disagreeable that he had the dubious distinction of being the first owner to have his railway taken under government control during the War—had responded to the deaths by saying, “I don’t know the circumstances of the shooting, but I think it is a shame that we can’t go ahead and operate our trains.”<sup>1003</sup> The callous remarks had left many in Illinois labor spoiling for a fight.

As the leader of labor in Illinois, Reuben was among the principal speakers at the rally and had to maintain a tight balance between anger and action, righteousness and reconciliation. Speaking to a group over 3,000 strong, Reub called on those assembled to stay the course, telling them:

Good will is something that is greatly needed. At this great memorial meeting in this hour of sadness and anxiety and unusual excitement, we can all agree that the rule of reason and restraint is the one to observe. May I say at the outset, that I intend to verbally observe that rule. We of the American Federation of Labor intend to gird all our forces, to rally all our friends, to resist and defeat the attempt... made by the T.P. and W. Railroad company and its manager, Mr. McNear, to undermine the fundamental rights of the trade union movement and the millions of people who look to the trade union movement for protection.

Whatever we do here, we must do peacefully. It must be done legally. First, the Illinois State Federation of Labor will support the membership of the labor movement in any legitimate effort to bring the T.P. and W. and its management to terms. Second, the Illinois State Federation of Labor will support the FBI, the State’s Attorney in Peoria, and law enforcement... in any legal plan designed to prosecute those who are responsible for the crime committed in the name of the T.P. and W. Railroad Company. In this way the spirits of the two martyred brothers will go marching on. The souls of these two brothers will march onward to establish justice and right and humanity.<sup>1004</sup>

Reuben’s call for restraint was heeded. Due in no small part to Soderstrom’s diffusing of the situation, the murders in Gridley did not devolve into a series of retaliatory acts of violence. Reuben had helped turned the tide, and the strikes of 1945-1946 would go down in history as the most violence-free of their kind.

Soon after the Gridley shootings, the “strike fever” that had clutched the nation began to ease. President Truman and his Wage Stabilization board helped to negotiate an agreement between labor and US Steel that allowed for a \$5 per ton increase in steel prices in return for an 18 ½-cent per hour wage increase. Agreements along these lines soon spread across a variety of industries, setting a new, more appropriate standard wage. The fever, it seemed, had broken, replaced by a relative peace. It would not last long.

## REUBEN REACHES OUT

### *Seeks Mutual Understanding with Industry, Government*

With peace and reduced mass strikes taking hold, Reuben and the Illinois Labor Movement were able to explore new opportunities expand labor’s post-war role. One of their primary tasks quickly became promoting understanding between organized labor and other segments of society. In the Windy City, the Chicago Federation of Labor began a new series of labor-management monthly luncheon meetings. The first of these meetings, held in the Casino of the Morrison Hotel, was attended by roughly 350 representatives of organized

labor and employers. The first speaker was none other than William Green, President of the American Federation of Labor. In a wide ranging speech, the AFL President praised the series, telling his audience:

I urge the representatives of Labor and Management, here in Chicago, to utilize this instrumentality which is being created by the Chicago Federation of Labor for the purpose of promoting goodwill and cooperation. There is no reason why there should be a destructive feeling between Capital and Labor. The call for the moment is tremendous. And may I say, in closing, in all you do and in all you undertake to do here I assure you, from the bottom of my heart, of the full assistance and complete support of the American Federation of Labor.<sup>1005</sup>

Reuben, meanwhile, met with various groups like the United States Employment Service (USES). Speaking at a luncheon session of their annual conference, he chose to communicate to his audience not what organized labor wanted from them, but the wants of the individual worker who came through their office:

(He wants) to be received as an important individual and, to the extent possible, be given a private and complete interview...If he belongs to a union he wants the jobs you refer him on to be in union shops...For the minority worker, discriminated against because of race, sex, religion or national origin, and now even at a greater disadvantage with the wartime labor shortages disappearing, you've got a real service to perform. He expects you to be able to persuade employers to hire him solely because of his qualifications to perform the work involved...

He wants a service where he is welcome and his problems and needs are understood; where he can get taken care of quickly and efficiently. A service that has all the information about all the jobs—and the good, the best jobs—not just jobs. A service where he can get special help when he is not quite ready for, or too sure of, what kind of job he wants; that is available in the same manner and with equal efficiency no matter where in the country he may be. A service in which the staff are professionally able and thoroughly trained.<sup>1006</sup>

For USES to be such a service, however, Soderstrom firmly believed it must remain under federal control, at least for the time being. Reuben fiercely rejected any and all calls to return control of unemployment to the state, writing to Washington to make his argument. In a written statement to the US Senate Committee on Education and Labor presented to Chairman James E. Murray, President Soderstrom testified:

It is (the ISFL's) considered judgment that the responsibilities which the Employment Service had to assume during the war years could not have been discharged if the Service had remained under 48 separate administrations...With the war behind us, we are now engaged in reconversion of our industries for peacetime production. The United States Employment Service, on the basis of its war record, can make an equal contribution in the post-war period to its war-time contribution if it is permitted to operate uniformly on a nation-wide basis and is not broken up into 48 independent segments. The labor market, just like business, finance, and industry, is national in character. Hence, problems relating to these markets must be approached on a national rather than state basis...<sup>1007</sup>

Reuben was not shy about what he thought was the real reason behind the push for state control. State directors, he said, wanted control so they could create policies favorable to state businesses at the expense of unemployed workers, lowering benefits and consequently, employer payments into reserve accounts. All this, of course, would slow (or even kill) the postwar reconversion:

Organized labor has no quarrel with employers, or Congress, or with State Unemployment Compensation Directors. We want industry to be financially strong and healthy in order to provide jobs with good pay...(but our national objective of speedy reconversion, full employment, and continued peace and prosperity cannot be

accomplished by transferring the present unified Employment Service machinery to the caprice of 48 separate State administrations.<sup>1008</sup>

Ultimately, Reuben and his allies helped to push back an effort to decentralize the USES. It remained a national agency, invested in and equipped to fight unemployment on a national level. Throughout the postwar period, Soderstrom worked with and counseled the U.S.E.S. to help find work for laborers, especially for workers whose skills and trades made it difficult for them to find work in the new economy.

### *The Return of John L. Lewis*

Throughout 1946, labor generally and Soderstrom specifically reached out to a variety of organizations and institutions to promote understanding and build on areas of agreement. Of all the olive branches Reub extended that year, however, none was more sudden or complete as the one extended to a man he once called “the most imaginative, the most efficient, the most experienced truth-twisting windbag that this nation has yet produced”: John L. Lewis.<sup>1009</sup>

Lewis had been negotiating his return to the AFL for some time. In October 1942, his United Mine Workers (UMW) had seceded from the CIO, the organization which Lewis himself had first created. While financial differences were the official reason for the split, the UMW’s withdrawal largely centered on a personal fallout between Lewis and CIO President Murray, who in exasperation had attacked Lewis as someone “hell bent on creating national confusion and national disunity.”<sup>1010</sup> Although he initially threatened to broaden the UMW to extend its jurisdiction over all unorganized workers, Lewis instead approached Green in late 1943 to ask for readmission to the AFL. Despite their checkered past, AFL President Green welcomed Lewis (and his funds) with open arms. By 1946, the negotiations were complete, and the AFL announced UMW locals were eligible for re-affiliation with local and state bodies, including the ISFL.

Soderstrom must have received the news with mixed feelings. Having the United Mine Workers back in the fold unquestionably strengthened the AFL, whose current mining constituency, the Progressive Miners of America, was a fraction of the UMW’s size. Reuben was certainly less enthused about Lewis’s return. Lewis’ uncensored attacks on Roosevelt—whom Reuben considered the best friend labor ever had—had earned him Reub’s anger. When Lewis tried to unseat FDR in 1940, Reuben made headlines attacking him, using his ISFL Convention address that year to rip Lewis:

When John L. Lewis tells you that the President of the United States will meet with “Ignominious defeat”—he’s just dreaming. When Lewis tells you that he will form CIO construction unions and substitute them for the regular AF of L building trades organizations, he is just talking through his hat. When he tells you that he will take those building unions and use them to destroy the American Federation of Labor he is indulging in some more imaginative prevarication.<sup>1011</sup>

When Lewis called a miners’ strike at the height of the war, he drew the ire of many without and within organized labor, Reuben included. He and others considered Lewis’s actions harmful to labor and ultimately un-American.

Still, while Reuben shared Lewis’s temper, aggressive oratory, and pugilistic instincts, he differed from the UMW leader in several key respects. Lewis let his personal feelings drive his public policy, and had a habit of turning friends into enemies; even his top lieutenant in Illinois, former State UMW and CIO Chief (and former Soderstrom opponent) Ray Edmundson had spent the last few years in an ugly battle with him for control of the UMWA.<sup>1012</sup> Reuben, in contrast, was as quick to forgive as he was to anger, at least publicly. He was also able to work with those he disagreed with, reaching accord with organizations and leaders on

issues even if he didn't trust (or like) them personally. These traits had allowed him to maintain fruitful relationships with the likes of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association and Governor Green, working with them to craft and pass beneficial legislation even as they battled fiercely on other issues. Most importantly, Reuben was able to distinguish between the personal and the professional, between what was in his own best interests and what was in the interest of those he represented.

In light of this, it is perhaps not surprising that when the UMW returned, Reuben wasted no time on rehashing the past, and instead embraced the homecoming. The pages of his *ISFL Weekly Newsletter* welcomed union mine workers, repeating President Green's assertion that:

The strength, standing and influence of State Federations of Labor and City Central Bodies will be greatly increased through the affiliation of the membership of the United Mine Workers of America...The loyalty and devotion which the members of the United Mine Workers of America have shown to the principles and economic philosophy of the American Federation of Labor have challenged our admiration.<sup>1013</sup>

Predictably, Lewis didn't waste any time in picking a fight on his miners' behalf. In the spring of 1946, he emerged demanding not only increased wages but funds for health and welfare. Forgiving past transgressions, Reuben threw his support behind the UMW leader, giving him the front page of the *ISFL Weekly Newsletter* to make his case. Lewis accepted, writing:

In the 1946 conference the mine workers have proposed the establishment of a welfare fund, asking its acceptance in principle by the operators, and said that the manner of raising the fund and all the details of it were negotiable questions...Nearly every country in the world has such funds for its mine workers, including Great Britain, backward Spain and even more backward India. Even in India they have such a fund, and the mine workers want one in America and feel that their right to have it is accepted by the majority of the American people. The mine workers have no intensions to negotiate a contract now or later that does not provide for such a fund and for such protection to the mine workers. It is a condition precedent to the making of any agreement.<sup>1014</sup>

With the help and support of the AFL broadly and Reuben's ISFL specifically (as Illinois was the center of American mining), Lewis was able to enter into negotiations with a strong, unified hand. When the operators refused to bargain, the Federal Government seized the mines and made the deal for them, establishing hospital and welfare funds for US miners.

## NATIONAL GOVERNMENT ASSAULTS UNIONS

### *Truman Threatens to Enslave Labor*

The coal strike sparked a second wave of protests that, combined with the earlier steel and auto strikes, had turned 1946 into a year of seemingly unending economic turmoil. As historian David McCullough illustrates:

Even without the coal strike it had become the longest, most costly siege of labor trouble in the nation's history. At one point more than a million workers were out on strike...From the day John L. Lewis pulled his men out of the mines, every major industry was affected. Without coal, the steel plants were again banking their furnaces. Ford and Chrysler were forced to close. Freight loadings were off 75 percent. In Chicago the use of electricity was ordered cut in half.<sup>1015</sup>

In the midst of all this, yet another massive strike was brewing amongst America's railway unions. On May 23, two days before Lewis's column appeared in the *ISFL Weekly Newsletter*, a nation-wide strike began as

engineers and trainmen finished their runs. The impasse, which occurred despite a government seizure of the railways and generous terms, seemed to push President Truman past the edge. Upon receiving a telegram notifying him of the strike's start, the President went to his upstairs desk and penned a seven-page speech that gave a clear indication of his state of mind. It read in part:

At home those of us who had the country's welfare at heart worked day and night. But some people worked neither day nor night and some tried to sabotage the war effort entirely. No one knows that better than I. John Lewis called two strikes in war time to satisfy his ego. Two strikes which were worse than bullets in the backs of our soldiers. He held a gun at the head of the government. The rail unions did exactly the same thing. They all were receiving from four to forty times what the man who was facing enemy fire on the front was receiving. The effete union leaders receive from five to ten times the net salary of your president. Now these same union leaders on V.J. day told your President that they would cooperate 100% with him to reconvert to peacetime production. They all lied to him.<sup>1016</sup>

The speech was indicative of the mood, misgivings, and misconceptions that had soured the President and, in many ways, the nation. Of course rail workers earned nowhere near what Truman indicated, and labor leaders earned less, not more, than Truman. But these frankly popular delusions drove the President and public alike to strike out against labor. The next day Truman informed his cabinet that he was going to draft the railway workers into the Army, and on May 25, before a joint session of Congress, the President asked for a bill giving him exactly such authority. Truman's request was met with thunderous applause, and the House of Representatives took less than two hours to approve his request by a vote of 306 to 13.

Reuben was stunned. It was a brutal and surprising defeat for labor. Not only was the spectacle an overwhelming rejection of labor by the President and the House; it was in Soderstrom's opinion an outright denial of their constitutional rights. The *ISFL Weekly Newsletter's* headline following the vote read "Truman Forced Labor Bill," leaving no question as to what Reub thought of the legislation. Soderstrom and Olander immediately sent telegrams to all U.S. Senators calling on them to provide hearings for representatives of labor on the House's bill, now under consideration in the upper chamber. In making their request, Reuben and Victor gave their unambiguous opinion of the measure:

During the first half of the life of our great nation, our people were torn by heated discussions on the subject of slavery, which is simply another name for forced labor. After about ninety years the question was settled by the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, forever prohibiting involuntary servitude under the American flag. Every effort should now be made to maintain its full integrity and force against the danger of the blight of forced labor again being initiated under the flag of our Republic... We now express the earnest hope that because of the difficulties arising out of the war for freedom of the peoples of the world our governing authorities will not now sacrifice the freedom of the Workers of America.<sup>1017</sup>

Soderstrom and Olander weren't the only ones who questioned the constitutionality of such measures. Truman's own Attorney General wrote that "the Draft Act does not permit the induction of occupational groups and it is doubtful whether constitutional powers of the President would include the right to draft individuals for national purposes." Truman's reported response—"We'll draft them and think about the law later"—indicated that the President himself hadn't much thought through the impact his actions would have on individual rights.<sup>1018</sup>

Ultimately, cooler heads prevailed. The Senate deleted the labor-draft provision from Truman's bill, and the act in its entirety died in committee. Labor had won the fight, preventing the most blatant violation of an individual's right to their own labor since the New Deal. The victory would be short lived.

## *Congress Constrains Workers' Freedom*

Although Soderstrom and his compatriots had fended off the Truman Forced Labor Bill, it proved only the first volley in a torrent of new anti-labor legislation. One of the most prominent examples was the Case Bill, which called for a 60-day “cooling off” period, outlawed secondary strikes, and even reinstated the use of injunctions against labor during a dispute. A viscerally anti-union measure, the proposed act would, in the words of Senator Robert Taft, “amount to putting everybody in jail and allowing every judge to make the law.”<sup>1019</sup> The AFL Executive Council suggested that perhaps it was Congress that needed a “cooling off” period, issuing a statement that declared, “Let Congress remember that anti-labor legislation is also anti-American legislation.”<sup>1020</sup>

Congress, unfortunately, paid no heed. It passed the bill by overwhelming margins. In the face of such draconian legislation, Soderstrom turned to the only person who could help – Harry Truman, the President who only two weeks earlier had called for the drafting of railway workers. Given recent events, Reuben knew that any message calling for the protection of labor rights or in defense of unions would likely fall on deaf ears. Instead, Reuben appealed to Truman’s humanity and common decency. Instead of threatening war, he turned to Truman’s desire for peaceful progress. In a telegram to Truman on behalf of the ISFL, Soderstrom wrote of the Case Bill:

Legislation of that sort can only result in an increase of the confusion and misunderstandings now troubling all thoughtful citizens. It seems to us that the road to more peaceful progress is not to be found in the use of harsh laws foreign to the general spirit of the nation. It can only come through a clearer appreciation of the morals involved. This will of course require patience and careful thought which you yourself exercised while you were in Congress. There is no other way. We appreciate fully the great difficulties under which you find yourself now laboring as chief executive of the nation and we know that situations in which prompt and decisive administrative action of a purely temporary character may be unavoidable. But we also believe that to make this the subject of laws is certain to be followed by serious consequences affecting the liberties of the people.<sup>1021</sup>

The appeal worked. Truman did veto the Case Bill on the very grounds Reuben had argued, saying in his veto message:

I have not considered (the bill) from the standpoint of whether it favors or harms labor, or whether it favors or harms management. I have considered it from the standpoint of whether or not it benefits the public...I have reached the conclusion that it will not...

Strikes against private employers cannot be ended by legislative decree. Men cannot be forced in a peace-time democracy to work for a private employer under compulsion...It is always with reluctance that I return a bill to the Congress without my approval. I feel, however, that I would not be properly discharging the duties of my office if I were to approve HR 4908.<sup>1022</sup>

While Soderstrom and organized labor were able to prevent enactment of the Case Bill, they were unfortunately unable to stop pieces of it from passing a few months later in the form of the Hobbs Act. Despite this, the worst pieces of the Case Bill were successfully fended off—for the moment.

The greatest blow to labor that year, however, came in November with the congressional election. Turnout for the 1946 was miniscule, resulting in the worst electoral defeat for labor since the start of the New deal. In the wake of the election only 23% of US Representatives and 24% of Senatorial candidates favorable to labor were elected.<sup>1023</sup> The results were no less disappointing in the Illinois Legislature, where Republicans outnumbered Democrats 88 to 65 in the House and 38 to 13 in the Senate.<sup>1024</sup> Without question, the

election of 1946 posed a significant threat to Reuben and labor in the year to come.

## REUBEN CALLS ON NATIONS TO OUTLAW NUCLEAR WEAPONS, ABOLISH WAR

Despite the struggles and setbacks that he endured in 1946, Soderstrom remained optimistic about the future. He continued to think big and speak boldly, calling for not just for job and social security but peace for all on a global scale. That year in Rockford, Reuben delivered a keynote speech that called for a radical campaign to orient the public towards peace:

Now that the war is over something ought to be done to create an atmosphere designed to establish a lasting peace on earth. It has been demonstrated many times that the great mass of the people all over the world are susceptible to propaganda. The attempt to establish a lasting peace on earth is in the field of propaganda, too, and would receive just as much support as war propaganda if it was just as sincerely, effectively, and attractively developed and presented as war propaganda has been.

Instead of having a state military department why not have a state peace department? Why not rechristen the national guard? It would really sound much better if this military outfit was called the outfit of peace, or some other name of tranquility. This would create a new psychology and would place the emphasis upon orderly procedure rather than force and violence.<sup>1025</sup>

While Reub's call may have sounded fantastical to his audience, it wasn't long before at least part of what Soderstrom called for became a reality. The National Security Act of 1947 created the new Cabinet-level level position of Secretary of Defense while simultaneously dissolving the Secretary of War and devolving the Secretary of the Navy into a non-Cabinet level post. Truman also redesigned the Presidential seal, turning the Eagle's head away from the arrows he clutched in his left claw and towards to olive branch, the symbol of peace, in his right.

Words and symbolic gestures, however, would not be enough. Reuben wanted more; he challenged all who gave lip service to peace to live up to their ideals, matching words with action:

In the future the family of nations ought to spend as much time and as much money developing good will and friendliness between countries as the individual nations do now to maintain military departments, military equipment and governmental occupational protectorates. In that way the average citizen would receive something in the way of peace atmosphere for his tax dollar. In that way the average tax payer would receive something more for his tax money than what he is receiving now—this temporarily exciting but always disturbing rumblings of war and killing.

However, those who desire a lasting peace on earth must do something to attain it. In other words—those who want something done must do it themselves. It seems to me it is high time for organized labor to speak out against war. Other elements in human society are merely playing with the idea. They say they want to outlaw the atomic bomb in the hope of retaining the institution of war...What they ought to do is to abolish war. What they ought to do is not only to outlaw the atomic bomb but try to outlaw the whole dirty business of war. And if labor wants this done labor itself must do it. At least labor must take the lead. People in the business world and most of our political leaders secretly believe in military force and the imitation glory attached to it.

Labor knows war creates more problems than it solves. Labor is better off without wars, and word should go out of this great convention that the labor movement of Illinois intends to do everything humanely possible to maintain permanent peace on earth.<sup>1026</sup>

Reuben took his own advice, carrying the message for peace to the 1946 AFL national convention, which that year was held in none other than the Windy City itself, Soderstrom's own Chicago. During the convention Reuben was able to get a host of ISFL resolutions introduced and passed as AFL directives. From the institution of a public relations campaign and the defining of political policy to proposals for social security amendments, Soderstrom set the agenda, shaping the national AFL agenda in his image.

As 1946 came to a close, he looked to the future with a mix of hope and trepidation. The end of the war and the peaceful resolution of major industry strikes had resulted in a relative calm that gave Reub reason to be optimistic. However, the large electoral defeat and popular anti-union sentiment made Soderstrom more than a little uneasy. His fears would soon be realized.



## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# THE UNION LABEL

*“Let’s use our power as consumers to advance ourselves and to help those who have entered into a contractual relationship with our unions!”*

-Reuben Soderstrom,  
“The Union Label”

The workingman’s wife stands at the door and waves goodbye to her 16-year old boy who is on his way to high school, not to work in a factory—the father returns after eight hours of service given to his employer, greets his family and is home for the evening. He is no longer required to slave night and day to keep body and soul together. There is contentment, happiness and love which makes life worth living. That’s what the Union Label stands for.<sup>1027</sup>

So wrote H.E. Scheck, president of the Chicago Union Label League. But how could a mere label—a logo placed on products, hung in shop windows, or worn by workers—come to mean so much?

Symbols are powerful tools. Using an image to label products, organizations, and ideas can connect the viewer more quickly and emotionally than written words alone. If you need proof, just take a look at the logo of your favorite sports team and see what thoughts and feelings spring to mind. Whether as simple and ubiquitous as a stop sign or elaborate as the Statue of Liberty, symbols, seals, and labels help us to immediately understand what something stands for.

It is not surprising, then, that by the 1930s virtually every AFL union had its own label. Union labels on goods were used to convey both quality and equality, the excellence of the product as well as the fair labor conditions under which it was made. Moreover, each union’s label used key icons to communicate unique details—where the organization came from, what it valued, and what it was connected to. A union label is a story, using specific imagery to convey powerful ideas and ideals. To really understand that story, however, you must know the union label’s history.

### *Origins and Ideals*

The idea of a workman’s seal is nearly as old as labor itself. Union labels can be traced back to the Guild Arms of the late middle ages and renaissance. Blacksmiths, stone masons, and other artisans would craft intricate seals for their organizations closely resembling the family crests and coat of arms from the same period.<sup>1028</sup> In the United States, the modern “Union Label” first emerged in 1869 when the Carpenters of San Francisco began to stamp their emblem—a shield bearing the tools of their trade—on all the millwork their members produced. The cigar makers of that same city likewise began putting a label on their products so customers would know it had been made by a union member. By 1880, buyers across the country relied on the label to identify which cigars were union-made.<sup>1029</sup>

These labels soon became an innovative way of invoking that most American of economic traditions: the boycott. As historian Kim Munson writes:

The idea was simple, yet ingenious: Identify union made goods and services by affixing labels, buttons or shop cards, and then actively encourage anyone that supported the ideals of the labor movement to buy those goods,

boycotting the rest. In an era when strikers and protestors were commonly beaten and/or shot at and killed, the use of labels, which offered a non-violent, economically based way of supporting labor and punishing abusive employers, was a very attractive alternative.<sup>1030</sup>

One New York member of the Cigar Maker's International Union took particular note of the union label's effectiveness. When Samuel Gompers founded the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (FOTLU) in 1881, he brought with him not just his union knowledge but his experience as a member of the *landsmanshaftn*, or landsmen—a Jewish humanitarian society dedicated to lending aid to Jewish immigrants in the United States. One of his first goals in building his new federation was to infuse unions with that same benevolent impulse.

It was precisely this expanded meaning of union that helped make the FOTLU and its successor, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), so effective. Gompers had brought the values of the landsmen to labor, so when it came time for the AFL to design their label, they honored that legacy by adopting the emblem of the *landsmanshaftn*, the “Hand-in-Hand,” as their own. The handshake officially became the official symbol of trade union brotherhood, adorning stationary, books, buildings, and flags.<sup>1031</sup> By the start of the twentieth century, union labels had become so numerous that in 1909 the AFL established an entire Union Label Department charged with promoting the purchase of union-made goods and services.

The union labels of the AFL were as varied as they were imaginative. Some were little more than a simple shape with the union's acronym and local number; others looked like the heraldic crests of old, while still more featured complex pictures or scenes. Despite this diversity, most shared several aspects in common. First, union labels quite often displayed the tools and/or products of their trade. Second, many possessed a patriotic element, like the American flag or the statue of liberty. It was important to unions (particularly those within the AFL) that they were known as American institutions protecting and fighting for American principles such as liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The most common element, however, was the hand-in-hand. This was partly because, as the emblem of the AFL, the handshake had become synonymous with organized labor. Another reason for the image's popularity, however, was the values it symbolized. The handshake implied friendliness and familiarity. It invoked the principles of equality, fair dealing, and mutual benefit. It was the perfect reflection of what unions were, what they stood and struggled for.

This struggle for fairness became much more difficult in the wake of the 1908 Danbury Hatter's decision. In that case, brought by the anti-labor American Anti-Boycott Association, the judge ruled that the AFL's threatened boycott of stores that sold products made by the offending hatter (called a “secondary boycott”) was an illegal conspiracy.<sup>1032</sup> This was followed by the Buck's Stove and Range case, in which the AFL's public call to refuse patronage of companies employing unfair labor practices was declared illegal.<sup>1033</sup> With these decisions it became increasingly clear that boycotting individual businesses was risky legal business.

That's what made the union label so important. Injunction judges may threaten jail if labor advised against buying goods from a company treating its workers poorly, but they couldn't find fault with the AFL supporting a factory or shop that gave a “fair shake” to its employees. Soon the union label became clearly associated with several practices—a unionized shop, the eight-hour workday, safe working conditions, and no child labor. These were the ideals that labor was fighting for, and a union label was a seal of approval assuring all buyers that the shop producing a labeled good adhered to those beliefs.

### ***Making the Case for “Buying Union”***

Of course, establishing the union label was just the beginning; advertising the label and educating the public soon became the next crucial step. Organized labor employed three methods to impart, inform, or affix a

Union Label: a cloth, paper, or stamp/imprint placed on the product; a shop card hung in a window or on a wall to let customers know the business employed union members; and a button or insignia worn by the worker demonstrating to the customer that they earn a fair wage in safe working conditions.<sup>1034</sup>

The AFL and its Union Label Department set out very clear goals for the use and proliferation of union labels. They created a five-point program to protect against the anti-union segment and capture market share, help promote unionism, guarantee the quality of workmanship, add to the prestige of labor, and signal a “no tread on our turf” mentality. According to AFL Union Label Department Secretary John J. Manning, the union label was a potent tool to attack anti-union shops where they were most vulnerable—the pocket book:

Belief in our own products will create belief in the buying public. You will find many of the buying public will change from non-union to union products when you set them the example. Most people like to help those who know enough to help themselves. You know the old saying, “Money talks.” Think it over. Let all union-earned money talk in the future and ask for the union label, card and button.<sup>1035</sup>

Manning aggressively pushed to increase awareness of the “union brand.” He made a public case for buying union in articles published throughout the country. He also declared a “union label month” to highlight the benefit of the union label. During the holidays he made an appeal for all union families to buy their gifts from union shops, asking readers to “let the trade union spirit guide you in all your holiday purchases and gifts this year.”<sup>1036</sup>

Businesses had mixed responses to this show of union solidarity. While many adhered to proper practice and proudly displayed their union support, others resorted to less savory tactics. A few unscrupulous manufacturers and merchants would use a union label even while refusing to employ union members. The AFL fought back, bringing cases against these businesses before the Federal Trade Commission. The FTC ultimately sided with unions, ruling the Atlantic Overall Company, King Overall Company and A. Greenbarg & Sons, all of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, had to stop putting “union made” on their overalls “unless such articles are in fact manufactured in a ‘Union Shop’ by persons who are members of a labor union.”<sup>1037</sup>

In Reuben’s home state, the Illinois State Federation of Labor had long been supportive of the union label. Every year the ISFL passed a resolution in support of the union label campaign. They called for “every affiliated local union...to appoint Union Label Committees to visit stores and carry on educational meetings and report their accomplishments to the president of the ISFL.”<sup>1038</sup> The ISFL utilized a variety of forums and mediums to increase union label awareness. They distributed thousands of flyers about the union label program from their booth at the Illinois State Fair.<sup>1039</sup> Radio station WCFL, operated by the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL), broadcast a regularly scheduled program every Saturday at 6:00 p.m. with Harry Scheck, President of the Chicago Union Label League, serving as the spokesman for the campaign.<sup>1040</sup>

The ISFL also encouraged locals to sponsor a Union Label Night, which would include speeches, vaudeville acts, and prizes specifically appealing to women and children.<sup>1041</sup> Supporters of the Union Label Night wanted to reach mom, the “purchasing agent” in the home of the trade unionist.<sup>1042</sup> Locals also hosted a variety of other assorted events. Typographical Union No. 177 in Springfield, for example, sponsored a contest where union members earned ‘points’ for wearing their union button, with the winner receiving \$5. “Every time you buy an article with the union label on it, you are hiring a union man,” wrote George P. Lischer, of Local 177.<sup>1043</sup>

In 1924, a union label store opened at 435 S. Dearborn in Chicago, selling \$20,000 worth of merchandise in one year.<sup>1044</sup> Within two years the store expanded. Demand increased beyond the storefront and pushed the

store to sell by mail order to accommodate union families who lived downstate.<sup>1045</sup>

Reuben Soderstrom was, of course, a strong supporter of the union label. In his role as ISFL president, Reuben often spoke and wrote in support of the union label, championing its cause and calling on all members to buy union. In 1946, President Soderstrom gave what was perhaps his most articulate and impassioned argument for buying union at that year's AFL Union Label Industrial Exhibition. Addressing those in attendance at the St. Louis Municipal Auditorium, Reuben detailed the benefits and potential of the union label, explaining:

The total number of organized working men and women in Illinois has been estimated at approximately 1,400,000. While it is true that those holding union membership do not constitute a majority of all wage-earners in this State, they, nevertheless, represent a purchasing power proportionately larger than that of the unorganized worker.

An improvement bordering on revolutionary proportions would be effected in the wages and working conditions of wage-earners, and heretofore undreamed of betterment between employer and employees would quickly result, if all union men and women, together with their families, friends and neighbors should suddenly become union-label conscious, and proceed to spend their money only for union services and union made goods.

The Union label is the best insurance of the quality and workmanship. It is the only guarantee that products are made in America. The Shop Card and Service Button gives best assurances that services are performed by skilled union members of the A.F. of L. unions. Patronizing manufacturers and merchandizers who display the official A.F. of L. insignia is the best way to maintain full employment—at high wages—which means a higher standard of living for all Americans. Many unions have increased their membership by adopting a Union Label, Shop Card or Service Button, then following up by publicizing their emblems and promoting the sales of the products or services upon which it appears. It is a symbol of cooperation between workers and management.

Unionized purchasing power is the right road to attain labor's aims, as well as a most logical method. The results would be a tremendous increase in the business of employers under union contract, at the expense of the business of non-union and anti-union establishments. By patronizing only union services and by purchasing union-made goods exclusively, the working people of Illinois could easily destroy the business of every employer hostile to organized labor within this State. Such a program would reduce the necessity for strikes, and at the same time build up organized labor's influence and prestige to a point higher than it ever was before in the entire history of the movement. Let's use our power as consumers to advance ourselves and to help those who have entered into a contractual relationship with our unions!<sup>1046</sup>

## CHAPTER EXCERPT

# THE INSTITUTE FOR LABOR AND MANAGEMENT IN ILLINOIS

Reub had fought for the establishment of a school of labor at the University of Illinois for years. During the last session of the general assembly, legislators passed a bill to establish the Institute for Labor and Industrial Relations. The House had even increased the appropriation. Now Reuben's beloved dream was ready to come to life. Herb Graffis, wrote a column in the *Chicago Daily Times* newspaper which outlined the purpose of the labor school:

The University of Illinois has been preparing the courses for its new Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations. The curriculum is 'designed to produce qualified personnel for positions of leadership in the area of labor relations.' The Illinois State Federation of Labor worked hard to get this Institute established and the outline of the curriculum points to labor unions gaining competent young men and women as future leaders. Management, too, will profit. The "statement of policy and program" for the Institute says the job is "to inquire faithfully, honestly and impartially into labor management problems of all types and secure facts which will lay the foundation for future progress in the whole field of labor and industrial relations."<sup>1047</sup>

The Executive Officer of Industrial Relations at the University of Chicago, Frederick H. Harbison, said:

Those who are preparing for a career in business, in government, or in university teaching must, we feel, learn to know more about unions and the part they play in our society. University professors and labor leaders... can both gain by sitting down to discuss basic, economic social and political problems and to jointly explore the avenues for their solution. The proper interplay of 'practical' and 'theoretical' minds is likely to open up broader vistas for both.<sup>1048</sup>

In May 1946 at the campus at Urbana, Professor Roland W. Bartlett, Chief of Agricultural Economics at the College of Agriculture for the University of Illinois, visited the 18th Biennial meeting of the International Glove Workers, where he outlined the general plan for the new Institute as a place for a library of collective bargaining agreements, wage agreements and history of the labor movement. He explained the school planned to offer a wide range of courses including extension classes, short on-campus classes and conferences:

Apart from the extension classes, the Institute... should be a center for information services which will be prepared to supply statistical and other kinds of factual data on any of the major problems related to specific industries, production techniques, wage payment plans, incentive wages, collective bargaining and similar topics.<sup>1049</sup>

# CHAPTER 36

## 1947

# SODERSTROM STEERS ILLINOIS THROUGH ANTI-LABOR STORM

*“Government, of course, was not instituted among men and women to confer special privileges on anyone, but rather to protect all citizens alike so that all might enjoy equality. In the national capitol at Washington, we are witnessing a revival of the old political sleight-of-hand performance of ruling by fooling.”*

-Reuben Soderstrom,  
1947 ISFL Convention

### LABOR FACES EMBOLDENED ENEMIES, SOURING ECONOMY

#### *Labor’s “Full, Rolling and Resonant” Voice*

The Peoria auditorium shook with raucous noise. Inside the packed, sweaty house, the delegates attending the Federation’s 65th annual convention were loud with an uneasy mix of excitement, anxiety, and fear. They were on their heels and they knew it. The U.S. Congress had just stripped organized labor of the basic protections it had struggled for generations to achieve, replacing them with draconian restrictions not seen since the Great Depression in the form of the infamous Taft-Hartley Act. It was a dark moment for labor and the crowd was anxious and looking for strong leadership to show them a path forward.

Reub waited in the wings as the crowd’s rumblings grew to a fevered pitch, readying himself to take the stage. It was a moment he’d repeated many times before. By now, the former linotype operator and State Senator was a seasoned politico, comfortable at the helm. Just days before, Robert Lewin, a reporter from the *Chicago Daily News*, had run an expose on the Illinois State Federation of Labor president, drawing from conventions past to describe both the man and the scene that was about to play out:

Reub, a five-foot eight, three quarter inch, one hundred and ninety five pound man with rimless spectacles and iron gray hair that falls near his right eye like a Veronica Lake hairdo is a power in state politics...Reuben George Soderstrom might very well be called “The Voice” of the Illinois State Federation of Labor; full, rolling and resonant...

[That voice] will fan out over the twelve hundred delegates without benefit of a microphone and without loss of a syllable. He never has been known to grope for a word or ponder. He will distribute copies of his presidential address to newspapermen before he speaks. Then through remarkable mental magic and without looking... he will spiel off some five thousand words in half an hour. Except for an error in a word here and there, he will recite the text perfectly, right down to the pause for the hyphen that separates Senator Taft from Representative Hartley when he condemns the new labor law. “It’s just a faculty I have,” Soderstrom explains modestly. “I

used to be a linotype operator.”<sup>1050</sup>

When the moment arrived Soderstrom didn't hesitate. He stormed the stage, ready to steady his troops and take the offensive. To give them fight and hope; to point the way forward; to remind those inside the hall and beyond why he was universally known as the man who “will fight to the last picket against anyone who tries to take away labor's right to strike.”<sup>1051</sup>

### ***Blames Stagnant Wages, Anti-Labor Legislators***

To understand how the situation had grown so bad so quickly for labor by the fall of 1947, one need only to look at the events of the past winter. By the end of 1946, the American cost of living had grown unbearable. The cost of food had become a particular concern. The Bureau of Labor Statistics of the US Department of Labor (DOL) reported at the beginning of 1947 that food costs were 34 percent higher than the previous year.<sup>1052</sup> The American Institute of Public Opinion, precursor to the Gallup Organization, had found a family's weekly expenses for food had doubled since 1942.<sup>1053</sup> According to Thomas O'Malley, regional director of the Wage and Hour and Public Contracts Division of the US Department of Labor, “The purchasing power of millions of our people is becoming less and less every day.”<sup>1054</sup>

Wage stagnation, O'Malley said, was to blame. He noted that since Pearl Harbor, farm income had grown by a factor of four, corporate profits had tripled, but wages had barely doubled.<sup>1055</sup> Wage earners had fallen far behind. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that since VJ Day in 1945 the cost of living had increased 24 percent while weekly wages had risen only 18 percent.<sup>1056</sup> Worse still, many workers weren't even receiving the wages they were entitled to by law. The Wage and Hour Division later reported that a full 45 percent of Illinois plants in 1947 had violated the law by either denying overtime pay or offering less than minimum wage, costing workers over \$874,983.<sup>1057</sup> Nationally, more than half of all manufacturing facilities were in violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act for payment of minimum wage, payment of overtime rate and use of child labor with 200,000 employees owed \$9 million.<sup>1058</sup>

Facing desperation, workers across the country went on strike in 1946 in search of wage levels which could provide a dignified life. The strikes had disrupted manufacturing, mining, and transportation. The wave of strikes had become so destabilizing that President Truman ordered the government to take control of both the railroads and the coal mines in 1946. Though both would return to private sector control in 1947, the image of labor as the problem had begun to solidify in the American mind. An onslaught of what American Federation of Labor (AFL) Secretary-Treasurer George Meany called “a triumph of misleading propaganda” turned the country against organized labor.<sup>1059</sup>

By November of 1946 that campaign had resulted in an electoral revolt against unions. “The postwar anti-labor movement had its foundations in the widespread and large-scale strikes of 1945-1946 and the wage drives of 1946-1947,” writes labor historian Joseph Rayback, “Which irritated a public far too busy converting itself to peacetime living to bother with the relevancy of issues raised by unions – which assumed, as the press constantly reiterated, that most of its economic problems were caused by labor.”<sup>1060</sup> The general election of November 1946 witnessed a wave of candidates win federal office by promising to return prosperity to the people. Those legislators instead launched an attack on organized labor on the premise that unions were to blame for all the nation's ills.

The irony, of course, was that the state of the nation was largely Congress's own doing—a fact not lost on Soderstrom. In a blistering attack on the U.S. legislature, Reuben highlighted congressional culpability:

Governmental agencies, controlled by Congress itself, forced the present inflation into existence. Congress,

directed by greedy employers, made a shameful record in this particular field. High prices for consumer goods and insanely high taxes in 1942, 1943, 1944, and 1945 caused unrest throughout the labor world resulting in inescapable and justifiable strikes in 1946.

Many legislators had made the disingenuous claim that labor had grown rich off wartime raises, profiting off the sacrifice of the nation. Reuben roundly rejected this charge, arguing that taxes had erased wartime gains made by the working class:

How about war-time wage increases? Well, what about them?...Even the organized wage-earners, who sometimes secured the full fifteen percent war-time raise, were still way behind in trying to keep pace with the twenty percent income tax deduction which Congress gleefully slapped onto their pay envelopes. And to make a bad situation worse, the cost of living in Illinois has soared to over thirty percent above the pre-Pearl Harbor level.

This increased cost of living was not spontaneous or inevitable; it was the direct consequence of the government's decision to abruptly end price controls. As Reuben wrote:

Congress is not in a good moral position...Congress allowed the prices of living necessities to skyrocket. It was done with a cheer that astonished the nation. Prices should have been rolled back to prewar levels. And the income tax increases! Are they borne exclusively by those best able to pay? Federal income taxes should be removed from the backs of working people earning \$2,500 a year or less.

This was the economic plan that Soderstrom had promoted in January of 1946 in an attempt to reverse the tide of strikes that were then sweeping the nation. Congress's failure to act on his call at that time, he said, made them responsible for the strikes that followed:

Had this been done for the little fellow there would have been no need for strikes in 1946 and in all likelihood there would have been no strikes. Government created these two things—high taxes and high prices. These two things, more than anything else, reduced the take-home pay of wage earners. Naturally, strikes resulted. After governmental creation of unbearable price and tax inflation, driving working people to desperation, strikes and walkouts were inevitable.

Sadly, despite their irresponsibility, anti-labor legislators stood to benefit from the havoc they had caused:

This unscrupulous conduct on the part of members of Congress has encouraged natural enemies of labor in their commercial organizations, trusts, and in their combinations to unite to help tricky federal lawmakers crush organized labor.<sup>1061</sup>

Reuben had no idea how prophetic his words would prove to be.

## SODERSTROM REVERSES THE ANTI-LABOR TIDE IN ILLINOIS

### *Urges Unions not to Strike*

The political backlash against labor wasn't limited to national elections. In Rayback's words, "For labor the full tragedy of the election of 1946 became evident in the following year when state legislatures enacted the largest number of anti-union laws since the Haymarket Riot."<sup>1062</sup> Illinois seemed poised to join that trend. Its legislature was the most hostile since before the Great Depression. Republicans controlled well over half of the House and nearly 75% of the seats in the Senate.<sup>1063</sup> Without question, the 65th General Assembly of Illinois



was poised to be the most anti-labor legislative body Soderstrom had faced in nearly a generation.

Strikes, meanwhile, still continued to rock the nation, fueling resentment. In April a strike of the country's telephone operators—mostly female workers who in the day before dial tones connected every number requested—crippled Chicago communications. For almost a month, the “voice with a smile was gone for a while.”<sup>1064</sup> Republican legislators used popular anger over the strike to introduce bills that would outlaw strikes altogether for public utility workers.<sup>1065</sup> A host of new anti-labor legislation soon followed, including bills that would turn picket line brawling into a penitentiary offense, outlaw secondary boycotts, make labor contracts unbreakable, and prohibit anyone from picketing in sympathy with striking workers.

Even though things looked bleak, Soderstrom refused to give up. He and Olander called for discipline. Recognizing the negative impact of the strikes on popular opinion, they directly appealed to labor in Illinois to largely refrain from striking in consideration both for the public good and organized labor's long-term interests. In a signed message to all workers, Victor wrote:

It is time to hoist danger signals. The trade unionists of the country are being subjected to a steadily rising tide of public criticism...It is nothing short of utter folly to attempt to ignore the threats fast becoming more and more insistent. The plain truth of the matter is that, in the confusion of chaotic postwar conditions, with none knowing what the morrow may bring, we have concerned ourselves more about the conditions of the day, with insufficient regard for future consequences. This may be said, that, except as to certain unfortunate jurisdictional quarrels between unions, practically every strike which has taken place in recent years—even during the war—when measured solely from the viewpoint of the needs of the workers involved was justifiable.

Reuben, meanwhile, prepared a strategy to weather the coming storm. In the last legislative session Reub had been greatly vexed by the committee process, in which pro-labor legislation that would likely have won a vote of the full legislature was allowed to languish. The Industry and Labor Committees, in particular, had been especially frustrating in this respect. Now, Reuben planned to turn the tables, using the same tactics to defeat anti-labor bills.

### *Gains Support from Governor Green*

As Reuben and Victor prepared for the fight, they received support from a quite unexpected corner—the Governor's mansion. Governor Dwight Green had long been a thorn in Soderstrom's side. In the first months following his election, he'd angered Reuben by nominating Francis Murphy, a coal merchant with no labor credentials or experience, in charge of the Department of labor. Murphy's wartime “relaxations” of labor protections and Green's default on a private promise to sack him if Soderstrom eased his attack on the Labor Secretary further soured their relationship. Reuben had made headlines across the state in 1942 with his denunciation of the Governor at the ISFL convention, proclaiming “Governor Green has double crossed labor and there is nothing for labor to do but return the compliment.”<sup>1066</sup> Green's denunciation of Roosevelt and his assertion that “the New Deal has used labor, used the working man and women of its ranks for votes...if labor is to live and prosper, then the New Deal must perish” earned him Reub's further fury.<sup>1067</sup> In the last gubernatorial election, Soderstrom's ISFL endorsed Green's opponent, nearly costing him the election.<sup>1068</sup>

Still, despite their often rocky relationship, President Soderstrom and Governor Green had managed to work together in areas where they could find agreement. Reuben had served alongside the Governor in several wartime committees, working with him to help the citizens of Illinois through the war. Green had also always acknowledged Reub's position as a (if not the) voice of labor, including him in all state labor discussions and sending him as Illinois's emissary to the Department of Labor's annual Labor Conference in Washington.

Now, as talk of forbidding strikes grew louder in the halls of the Assembly, the Governor took a firm stand in defense of labor, and in a big way. He declared himself opposed to anti-labor legislative efforts, particularly those aimed at limiting the right to strike. At the Lincoln Day dinner on February 6 in Washington, DC, Green unambiguously declared:

Let us guard against the gains which American labor has made through the trade union movement...High wages and the American standard of living provides the greatest market...largely by the persistent effort of the leaders of American labor...Perhaps we need to remember that Abraham Lincoln said at Hartford, Connecticut, on March 5, 1860 'I thank God that we have a system of labor where there can be a strike.' Strikes are always an expensive and wasteful way to settle labor disputes, but the right to refuse to work is still the cornerstone of the worker's freedom.<sup>1069</sup>

While the shift may seem sudden at first glance, it makes more sense in light of the Governor's surrounding circumstances and rising ambitions. First, Green had always considered himself a friend of labor, and had touted his labor record on several occasions, going so far as to claim "during my administration more acts beneficial to labor were enacted into law than during any previous state administration"—albeit a claim he made in his veto message of a pro-labor bill.<sup>1070</sup> Meanwhile, the labor organization he initially allied with, the Illinois CIO, had fallen into comparative chaos. In 1942, Lewis withdrew his United Miners from the CIO, triggering the resignation of Illinois CIO chief Ray Edmundson.<sup>1071</sup> His replacement, Samuel Levin, had reversed his predecessor's positions on a host of issues, including the organization's support of Green's Labor Director, Francis Murphy.<sup>1072</sup> Governor Green was also considering a run as the GOP candidate for President. While considered a dark horse candidate, a positive relationship with organized labor would be crucial for the manufacturing-state Governor if he wanted to differentiate himself from the rest of the GOP pack.

Perhaps most important, however, was the Centralia mine disaster of 1947. The explosion of the No. 5 coal mine on March 25 killed 111 people in what was easily the worst mining tragedy in Illinois since Cherry Mine. Governor Green tried to control the political fallout, requesting a fact-finding board to investigate and asking for the resignation of Illinois Mines and Minerals Director Robert Medill. Most miners, however, found his efforts sorely lacking. When the Governor announced his intention to visit Centralia, UMWA Recording Secretary publicly replied "Well, Governor, there are not many of us left not but we that are wish to take this opportunity to tell you in our language it is too late. Today their broken and seared bodies lie in the morgue. No, Governor, it is too late."<sup>1073</sup> The tragedy left the Governor in need of allies within labor.

As with Lewis the year before, Reuben was as quick to forgive as he was to anger. He put aside his differences with the Governor and publicly embraced him in return for his help in defeating the Republican-led General Assembly's anti-labor agenda. He gave Green full-throated support, calling him "an outstanding governmental leader who has not been caught in the current of hatred running against labor."<sup>1074</sup> Reuben went so far as to endorse the Governor—who had been his implacable foe in the last election—as labor's preferred GOP candidate for President, telling labor crowds later that year that "Green is the only likely candidate with a good labor record. Labor in Illinois has made more progress under Dwight H. Green than labor has made in any other state under any other governor at any other time."<sup>1075</sup> While politically smart, the head-snapping switch would carry consequences for the labor leader in the years to come.

### *Defeats Anti-Labor Legislation in Illinois*

With his legislative skill and the Governor in his corner, Reuben threw himself headlong into the legislative fray. He successfully thwarted his opponents at every turn. As newspapers across the state reported:

Labor “reform” legislation hasn’t gotten to first base so far during this session of the general assembly... The labor lobby—coached by Reuben Soderstrom, president of the Illinois Federation of Labor—has been successful in defeating three bills before they reached the debate stage....An even dozen ‘anti-labor’ bills have been introduced so far. Three of them were returned to the floor with committee recommendations that they do not pass. Another three were recommended for passage in the House of Representatives, but were referred to committee for further hearing. The remainder have been languishing in committee for as long as two months.<sup>1076</sup>

Soderstrom was even able to defeat the most popular of the anti-union bills, the proposed Public Utility Strike Bill. Introduced by Rep. Paul Randolph, the bill, which would have required the Illinois Commerce Commission to intervene in bargaining between labor and management in public utilities, had at first seemed all but certain. He used anger over the recent telephone strike, claiming his bill would settle such disputes “without stopping the essential services these companies and these workers provide.”<sup>1077</sup> Reub pushed back hard. According to news accounts:

Legislation to provide compulsory arbitration of public utility labor disputes has suffered a decisive setback in the Illinois general assembly...Reuben G. Soderstrom, president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, contended at a hearing that the proposal was unconstitutional. Soderstrom also opposed it on the ground that it would “disturb the well-established” bargaining procedure of direct negotiation, a system he said had worked successfully for over 50 years.<sup>1078</sup>

One after another Illinois anti-labor proposals went down in defeat. Bills that would forbid utility workers from striking, make picket line brawling a penitentiary offense, outlaw secondary boycotts, make labor contracts unbreakable, and prohibit anyone from picketing in sympathy with striking workers—none of them saw the light of day, thanks to Soderstrom’s efforts. His successes were all the more spectacular when compared to what was occurring in the rest of the country. In 30 of the nation’s 48 states, anti-union politicians gutted union protections and implemented new crushing prohibitions, including 21 new laws mandating strike notices and cooling off periods, 12 state bans on secondary boycotts, and 11 state restrictions on picketing. 16 states outlawed security agreements or closed shops altogether. This trend hit the Midwest especially hard; Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania all fell before the wave of anti-union legislation.<sup>1079</sup>

Illinois alone remained untouched. As Governor Green himself proudly proclaimed to a standing ovation in a speech at the ISFL convention in September of that year, “Illinois is practically the only big industrial state with no so-called “anti-labor” laws, and has been unusually free of major strikes.”<sup>1080</sup> State Representative Robert Allison elaborated:

Illinois... one of the great industrial states... did not enact any anti-labor legislation. The credit for that largely goes to your officers and labor representatives who so ably backed us on the floor of the legislative halls... I want to say to you further that some of the legislation... is not aimed so much at labor many times so much as it is at your leaders. In Illinois you should be proud of your men... in the forefront of Labor’s ranks. We have just as good brains there as we have anywhere else.<sup>1081</sup>

Reuben himself was jubilant with the results, telling the delegates:

The labor movement of Illinois came through in fine shape and I think it was because the various branches of Illinois’s unionists were working together... in the legislative field and that is what I think is needed on the federal level... the CIO, the Railroad Brotherhoods and the Illinois State Federation of Labor stood shoulder to shoulder in every crisis during the last legislative session.<sup>1082</sup>

As Reuben helped turn the tide in Illinois, however, a national storm was brewing; a tsunami that would too soon overshadow all he had accomplished.

## THE TAFT-HARTLEY ACT

### *A Devastating Override of Truman's Veto*

The US Congress delivered a titanic setback to labor on June 23, 1947, when Congress passed the Labor Management Relations Act, commonly referred to as Taft-Hartley, over President Truman's veto. Officially, the legislation was an amendment meant to "bring balance" to the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which focused primarily on establishing union rights. In reality, the Act was a vicious piece of legislation aimed at gutting union power. As President Truman had explained in his opposition to Taft-Hartley:

The bill is deliberately designed to weaken labor unions. When the sponsors of the bill claim that by weakening unions, they are giving rights back to individual workingmen, they ignore the basic reason why unions are important to our democracy. Unions exist so that laboring men can bargain with their employer on a basis of equality. Because of unions, the living standards of our working people have increased steadily until they are today highest in the world.<sup>1083</sup>

Reuben was among many of those in the labor community who were outraged at what they viewed as a corruption of governmental power for the benefit of big business. As he wrote in reaction to the act's passage:

The Taft-Hartley law compels the government to take up cudgels for the employer...It compels the government to use the courts to enjoin working people from doing the things they had a legal, lawful right to do under Wagner Labor Relations Act and the Norris LaGuardia Act. Big business has taken over. The federal Congress is controlled by union-hating industrialists. They have a dangerous program of reaction and repression. No matter how the government and business world talk about democracy abroad, they and their Congressional representatives are reactionaries, who advocate and establish repression of industrial freedom at home. The enactment of the Taft-Hartley law has removed all reasonable doubt to the contrary.<sup>1084</sup>

What angered those in labor most of all was the fact that the bill was written not by legislators but by lobbyists from the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), the parent organization of Soderstrom's old nemesis, the Illinois Manufacturers' Association (IMA). More radical than the conservative U.S. Chamber of Commerce or the Committee for Economic Development, the NAM had long viewed the era of the New Deal as a time of exile. With a Republican Congress in charge, the NAM was determined to waste no time putting their agenda in place, and they had everything they wanted with Taft-Hartley. As Soderstrom detailed in a speech later that year:

The real reason for the union-busting, curb-the-unions law was the National Association of Manufacturers' hatred of unionism. The National Association of Manufacturers have never denied that they wrote the Taft-Hartley bill...It cannot be denied that labor's friend, the New Dealers, are out and the National Association of Manufacturers are back in nor can anyone deny the cleverness of the National Association of Manufacturers and their friends in Congress. Instead of passing separate laws one all-purpose act was enacted. The advantage of this omnibus type of legislation is clear. When an attack was made upon the union-busting sections, the National Association of Manufacturers could point to other parts of the law dealing with some well-advertised abuses in the labor movement and emphasize their importance. When the bill was attacked because it dealt too lightly with well-advertised abuses, the NAM could point to the union-busting sections and emphasize their importance. Indeed. The clever use made of the omnibus fooled all of the people and that no one can deny.<sup>1085</sup>

While the omnibus bill attacked labor on multiple fronts, some sections were especially repulsive to labor. The most damaging provisions attacked what the AFL and ISFL both considered sacred and protected by the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution: prohibition of involuntary servitude, or slavery. If the government labeled an industry critical to public welfare or the public interest, the new anti-labor legislation would force workers to remain on the job. As Reuben wrote:

The labor movement has many virtues. It has always had one outstanding virtue. It has never lied to itself. It has courageously told its membership that the right to quit work, either singularly or collectively, for any reason or for no reason at all, has been established, legally established. Anything less than that is slavery, and it runs contrary to the Thirteenth Amendment, which prohibits involuntary servitude. While strikes are measures of last resort and always reluctantly used, there can be no freedom, no free enterprise for wage earners without trade unions with strike power functioning in industry. Unions in this respect must be unhampered and free. Does anybody seriously believe that profit-hungry employers would voluntarily increase wages, and the American standard of living, if there were no unions, no compulsion, if the strike was outlawed? Who could be naïve enough to believe that?<sup>1086</sup>

Not only was this restriction likely unconstitutional, it was also unnecessary. According to official estimates, the number of workers on strike at the start of 1947 was down by 54% relative to the start of 1946.<sup>1087</sup> It was, quite simply, a fix in search of a problem.

Perhaps most powerfully, Taft-Hartley also made secondary boycotts illegal. Union members at a business of any kind, manufacturing, transportation, or retail, could no longer support their union brothers and sisters engaged in a labor dispute by refusing to work with materials or products produced by strike breakers. President Soderstrom responded in the federation's weekly newsletter:

Through the act's illegal ban on secondary boycotts, it can help the industrial overlords by forcing union workers to scab on strikers. This isn't done by any coaxing, wheedling or convincing court argument... it's done by the Manufacturers' Association Taft-Hartley law which openly compels government attorneys to take over the unconstitutional job of securing injunctions and thus carries out unfair industrial discipline for scheming autocratic employers.<sup>1088</sup>

The anti-labor law also allowed the use of anti-trust laws against unions. Again, Reub railed against such associations. "Labor is not a trust," he wrote. "A trust is a monopoly or a combination which rakes in the revenue from the many for the benefit of the few. A labor organization does just the opposite, it twists the revenue from the few and spreads it over the many."<sup>1089</sup>

Most devastatingly, the Taft-Hartley Act outlawed the "closed shop," shops which hired only union workers, and severely restricted "union shops," in which workers joined a union after their hire. In so doing the Act accomplished by legislative fiat what the NAM had failed to do through "open shop" campaigns such as the "American Plan," which had decimated the economies of manufacturing cities like Reub's Streator in the 1920s. Reuben feared that the next step would be to eliminate union shops altogether—a move that would gut unions through owner intimidation and free riders. This had to be opposed at all costs, Soderstrom asserted, writing:

The stage for an open shop drive has been set. The question is, are we ready? Are we convinced that the labor union is the only agency which will guarantee our being treated as human beings and not as a commodity? Are we convinced that the type of homes we live in depend upon the type of unions we have? Are we convinced that the educational opportunities of our children depend upon the wages produced by unions? Are we

convinced that the hours we spend at home with the wife and children depend upon the hours fixed by our local unions? Are we convinced that the only reason an attack has been staged upon our unions is because it has been the bulwark between workers and union-hating, open shop employers? Are we convinced that the labor unions of today are worth the sacrifice and price paid by union men who preceded us?

If we are, then let us be ready to demand fair treatment. Let us be ready to demand recognition of our rights as individuals. Let us be ready to preserve or personal dignity as free men who have out-fought and out-produced and out-lasted these enemies of freedom. And last, but not least, let's be ready to answer the call of the American Federation of Labor to defeat every Illinois Congressman who voted for the Taft-Hartley bill!<sup>1090</sup>

### ***Red-Baiting and the Short Temper of Lewis***

While all these parts of the Taft-Hartley Act were dangerous, perhaps none was more humiliating than the section requiring all officers of local unions and central bodies to sign an affidavit proclaiming they were not communists. In an act that foreshadowed the communist witch-hunts to come, the affidavit requirement made the implicit assumption that labor leaders were communists unless and until they affirmed otherwise—that they were, essentially, guilty until proven innocent. While all of the AFL's leadership opposed communism—the organization considered it a fundamental threat to the peace and freedom of laborers worldwide—they had serious reservations about giving in to such red-baiting. During a hurried meeting at the Drake Hotel in Chicago, the AFL Executive Council officers chose to not sign the affidavit arguing they did not represent a specific local, but rather the entire federation. General Counsel Robert Denham, however, ruled that the officers—specifically AFL President Green, his Secretary, and all the AFL Vice Presidents—would have to file the affidavit as officers of the federal unions.

In response, the AFL leadership came up with a compromise. At the annual AFL convention President Green and the Executive Council decided to alter the title of Vice President, making only the President and Secretary official officers, to avoid forcing the 13 Vice Presidents to sign the anti-communist affidavit. The deal was satisfactory to all except, predictably, John L. Lewis, who refused to “grovel.” He instead wanted the AFL to refuse to comply; as Reuben recounted years later in an interview:

The temperament of John L. Lewis was such at times that he was willing to take on a scrap with almost anybody; he's willing to fight the employer or anybody else, and even to fight his associates in the labor world...John L. Lewis was opposed to the Taft-Hartley law, and had good reasons for it. He wanted his associates on the Executive Council to disregard the law on the theory that if all the unions disregarded the law which happens to be a permissive law, then the law would naturally become obsolete and unworkable. He got to quarreling with the members of the Executive Council over that issue.<sup>1091</sup>

That quarrel grew heated, exciting the passions of those present. Reuben, who reported on the conference that year for the ISFL, described the convention scene at the time. “He lost in a spectacular fight in which he went down slugging to the very end,” he wrote. “The dramatic floor fight, which had been seething underneath since the convention opened, will be remembered as one battle in which John L. Lewis received tremendous applause, but darned few votes.”<sup>1092</sup>

In the end, Lewis was outvoted. That December, the disgruntled UMW chief he sent a note to President Green reading simply “We disaffiliate.”<sup>1093</sup> Just one year after being welcomed back into the arms of the AFL, Lewis and the UMW was out on its own, again.

### ***Reuben Targets Taft-Hartley Politicians***

It is nearly impossible to overstate the impact the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act had on the American labor movement. The Act greatly intensified the political focus of the organization's activities, setting it on the path that would transform it into an electoral machine. "The act produced a change of degree in the labor movement," Rayback writes, "After the first shock had worn off, organized labor turned to politics with a vengeance. 'Repeal of the Taft-Hartley Slave labor Act' became a watchword which brought about the revival or the creation of labor political agencies."<sup>1094</sup> In the wake of Taft-Hartley's approval, the AFL and its affiliated state federations began to abandon their traditional non-partisan political policy. The Democrats likewise took full advantage of the situation, aligning themselves even closer with the rights of labor. The comments of Democratic U.S. Senator Claude Pepper, published in the pages of the *ISFL Weekly*, was a prime example of Democratic sentiment: "The selfish and greedy few, not satisfied with the biggest profits corporate enterprise has ever made... speaking through the Republican party... the power which forced this inequitable Taft-Hartley Act upon the nation and put its clutch around the throat of every American working man and working woman."<sup>1095</sup>

Reuben, at the spear's tip of this movement, didn't wait for the nation to react. At the 1947 ISFL Conference, he opened the affair with a heated attack on Taft-Hartley and its masters, linking them to the last mortal threat America had faced and calling for unity in the face of such danger:

In this grave crucial time in the world's history it becomes the duty of labor to look ahead rather than to rehash the past. Reaction is definitely on the march. Reaction can bring Fascism to America just as it did to Germany, Italy and Japan. Fascism's first blows are always aimed at workers...

Why should we beg labor's enemies to be reasonable? We have the strength to smash the forces of hatred and reaction if we have the sense to unite... Labor unity is the crying need of the hour, not only to save our unions, but to defend our liberties. Let us bypass the sad fate of Germany and her former allies. Let there be labor unity between the CIO, Railroad Brotherhoods and the American Federation of Labor and in this way stop the rising tide of Fascism in America.<sup>1096</sup>

Soderstrom was prepared to follow his words with action. As reporters relaying Reuben's message across the state described:

In a ringing attack, Soderstrom told 1,300 delegates to the weeklong convention that the best way for labor to command respect is by 'enlightened action and united strength.' He said time for action is 'growing short.' Setting a new precedent for the federation, the bushy-haired labor leader listed Illinois's 'anti-labor congressmen' and called for their defeat. The federation has never before named specific candidates or officials to be defeated or elected.<sup>1097</sup>

One by one Reuben read their names aloud to the crowd—cowardly politicians that the ISFL would now officially commit its upmost effort to removing. Soon after the convention, Reuben formed a Labor Committee specifically tasked with bringing down Taft-Hartley backers. The 29-member "Labor Congressional Committee" targeted 19 Illinois congressmen that had voted in favor of Taft-Hartley. They would spend the next year grooming alternative candidates and supporting politicians who had stood up and opposed the act.<sup>1098</sup> Soderstrom swore electoral vengeance, writing:

Labor isn't showing its teeth just to be cussed. It's because the Taft-Hartley Act makes participation in politics a necessity. There is a notion in the labor movement that this is a free country and in the primary and fall election if 1948 the membership of the Illinois State Federation of Labor is going to enjoy proving it to the discomfort of those who overrode the President's veto...

There are approximately 16,000 precinct committeemen in Illinois, 8,000 of them are Democrats and 8,000 are Republicans. In addition to that there are 204 county chairmen in the two parties. Many of these political organization people are responsive to the labor groups in their precincts or counties. Full information about the labor voting records of anti-union members of Congress should be sent to the precinct committeemen and county chairmen of both major parties.

Those who voted for the Taft-Hartley bill are a burden to their political party and election workers are likely to drop them for candidates that will not draw the fire of one million three hundred and fifty-thousand union men and women who are going to the Illinois polls in the election of 1948.<sup>1099</sup>

As the year came to an end, Reuben faced the future with a new, grim determination. Despite his success in turning back anti-labor legislation in Illinois, he faced a hostile national scene with politicians at the beck and call of industrial interests. If labor was to succeed, it would need to find a new way forward, and Reuben was ready to take center stage against any and all opposition. 1948 was going to be a fight.



# CHAPTER 37

## 1948

### LABOR REELS FROM TAFT-HARTLEY

*“In point of membership the Illinois State Federation of Labor is today three times larger as it was in 1930. There are one million three hundred fifty thousand people in the State of Illinois who carry union cards. We are tired of being stepped upon... We have a date in 1948, a rendezvous with fate. As Kipling might say, ‘A rendezvous with a stinkeroo!’”*

-Reuben Soderstrom  
1948 ISFL Convention

#### LABOR INCREASES POLITICAL PRESSURE

##### *Reuben Rails against Taft-Hartley as AFL Grows Political*

It was a dark time for labor. The passage of the Taft-Hartley Act stuck a dagger into the heart of unions. In one fell swoop, laborers lost the right to negotiate for a closed shop or to strike in sympathy with their fellow workers. Unions were denied the right to contribute to the political candidates of their choice, restricting their ability to elect officials who could change the law. Worst of all, workers could now be barred from striking altogether, bound to their jobs by government decree, forced to work against their will. These restrictions, each a gross violation in their own right, mixed to form a toxic brew that threatened the vitality of union life.

That was no accident. Although it was billed as an attempt to “restore balance” to labor law and to allow workers freedom of choice, many recognized Taft-Hartley as nothing less than a deliberate attempt to destroy unions by industrialists with an axe to grind. As Reuben Soderstrom said in an interview that year, “The real reason for the union-busting section of the omnibus catch-all Taft-Hartley Act was the National Association of Manufacturers’ deep hatred of labor.”<sup>1100</sup> Such hatred, he claimed, demonstrated contempt of democracy and of institutions, like unions, that allowed the majority to fight against organized business—“the employers, in their trusts, and in their combinations, and in their international cartels, and international combines.”<sup>1101</sup> To Soderstrom and his allies, the fight against this ruinous act was nothing less than another war for American freedom; as he told crowds in speech after speech throughout Illinois, “The Taft-Hartley law is vicious because dictatorship elements run through it.”<sup>1102</sup>

In response to Taft-Hartley, unions rallied for political change as never before. Organized labor had long been a force in politics; the AFL and CIO had over the past twenty years fought their way to a seat at the table in Washington, and they were not afraid to use that authority to pass policies favorable to their constituents. Many state organizations had likewise become profoundly influential, working to bring federal protections to intrastate industries. Reuben was both a product and a champion of this movement. Recruited by Illinois State Federation of Labor President John E. Williams to be “labor’s legislator,” Soderstrom first came to prominence by passing an unprecedented number of labor protections into law, including the first Injunction Limitation Act in 1925. This led to his election to succeed Williams as President and furthered the ISFL’s focus on pro-worker legislation. For thirty years he had worked the halls and lobbies of Springfield to secure pensions, safe workplaces, minimum wages, overtime pay and more. His efforts had earned him statewide and

national attention, and throughout the 1940s he was sent to Washington and across the country as a labor policy expert. He was the man unions turned to when they sought advice on how to pass legislation.

Still, labor's shift after Taft-Hartley was about politics as much as policy. While concerned with passing the right legislation, the AFL became even more interested in electing the right legislators. True, unions had long been a force in electoral politics, and Reuben was no exception; he had staunchly supported or attacked political figures based on their labor record for decades, and had begun 'get out the vote' labor campaigns as early as 1943. However, he always treated those endorsements and activities as a means to an end, and consequently resisted permanent political alliances, especially along party lines. Soderstrom was an outspoken supporter of FDR and the New Deal, but he also endorsed Republican candidates when he found them to be pro-labor. He personally served as a Republican during his tenure as an Illinois Representative, and frequently relied on Republican votes to pass legislation. Now, the American labor movement seemed on the precipice of a revolution, with politics assuming a much greater—possibly even central—role in the life of organized workers. Republican efforts to silence unions, particularly the Taft-Hartley prohibitions on political contributions, only served to accelerate labor's change from a nonpartisan body into a firmly ensconced part of the Democratic coalition. In the words of historian Joseph Rayback:

The act produced a change of degree in the labor movement. After the first shock had worn off, organized labor turned to politics with a vengeance. "Repeal of the Taft-Hartley Slave Labor Act" became a watchword which brought about the revival or the creation of labor political agencies...the A.F.L., which had long practiced the policy of rewarding friends and punishing enemies and which now found its old efforts prohibited, created its first political arm—Labor's League for Political Education—under the chairmanship of George Meany.<sup>1103</sup>

The emergence of a permanent, separate political institution for unions was the single most important event for labor in 1948; in many ways, it was biggest change to union organization in the postwar era. As always, Reuben would be in the center of the storm, working with local and national figures to keep Illinois at the forefront of labor while attempting to shape the changes sweeping the nation. It would be no easy task.

### *AFL Creates Political League, Appoints Soderstrom Ally as Director*

The biggest task Reuben faced as the political season of 1948 began was to overcome the election law morass that Taft-Hartley had created. According to the Act, labor organizations were prohibited from using any funds for the promotion of candidates in national elections. As early as December of 1947, the AFL Executive Council had recommended the creation of a Labor League for Political Education (LLPE) as a way around this restriction. The proposal quickly led to charges that the AFL was violating the law. In response, labor legal minds like Victor Olander, Illinois Federation Secretary and Reuben's most trusted adviser, asserted that:

The League was organized in conformity with the law...The League is under the control and direction of trade union members, but it is not subject to direct control and direction by action of the trade unions acting as such, except through expressions of approval or disapproval. The League is financed by voluntary contributions on the part of its individual members and other supporters. Trade union funds are not used directly nor indirectly in the League's activities.<sup>1104</sup>

This defense was somewhat dubious. The League's Chairman was William Green, President of the AFL, its Secretary-Treasurer was George Meany, who was also Secretary-Treasurer of the AFL, and the League's National Committee was comprised of the AFL Executive Council and the presidents of all affiliated unions. However, while there was considerable overlap in leadership, the financial separation was more complete; the league relied solely on voluntary contributions. More fundamentally, Victor, Reuben, and others viewed the ban as a violation of their rights, and were consequently more concerned with the letter (rather than the spirit)

of the law, which they intended to repeal. Despite this, they all envisioned the new League as a permanent institution rather than a temporary workaround—a new body which would breathe new life into labor’s political fight. As Victor continued:

The League was not organized to circumvent the Taft-Hartley Act. The intent and purpose is to continue the League as a permanent organization even though the Act may be repealed...The promoters of the Taft-Hartley Act, instead of succeeding in their efforts to frighten the trade unions by ugly threats of restrictions by law, have aroused union members to a greater sense of their responsibility as citizens and voters. The net result, in time, will be exactly opposite to that expected by the Taft-Hartley conspirators. They have exposed themselves to the power of the American voter.<sup>1105</sup>

It was a grand boast, but unfortunately at the start of 1948 the LLPE was little more than a nice idea. The AFL spent months seeking a suitable director, preferring a former politician for the task. League Secretary-Treasurer Meany approached former Senators James Mead, Bob La Follette Jr., Matthew Neely, and Burton Wheeler, all of whom turned down the post for various reasons. As the League struggled in its search, it was an old political ally of Reuben’s, Joseph Keenan, who became the de facto director.<sup>1106</sup> Joe, like Reuben, was a former child laborer who became active in the Illinois labor movement at about the time that Soderstrom made his first run for office. In 1937, when Keenan was elected Secretary of the Chicago Federation of Labor, Reuben was one of the key speakers at his welcome dinner, personally congratulating him on his appointment.<sup>1107</sup> Now, as the assistant to the Executive Officers of the League, Keenan was in a prime position to help Reuben bring national funds to Illinois, which he did to great effect. Soderstrom’s preferred candidates received more money from the LLPE in 1948 than any other state.<sup>1108</sup> Before winter’s end, Keenan’s position as permanent director was virtually assured; as Meany wrote to state federation officials that February, “As you are no doubt aware the preliminary work of establishing a permanent headquarters and staff for Labor’s League for Political Education has been going on for some time. We are happy to inform you that this work is now practically complete and the League is now in a position to start active operation.”<sup>1109</sup>

Meany’s assessment may have been overly optimistic. As Keenan later recounted, “We just started from scratch, had no program, we just—we were not organized.”<sup>1110</sup> That March, Meany invited Soderstrom and the other state presidents to Washington D.C. to figure out exactly how this new national organization would funnel funds to the races that needed it most. At a conference in the Rose Room of the Washington Hotel, Reuben and the rest attempted to chart a path forward.<sup>1111</sup> A mission began to emerge; the League would inform union membership and the public at large about issues and candidates, compiling politicians’ records through a Department of Political Direction. A Department of Public Relations would utilize every form of media to spread their message, from speeches to radio spots to political cartoons. The Department of Finance would hold fundraising drives, with half the amount raised spent locally and the other half sent to the national office for targeted races. Most important of all was the Department of Organization, which would establish registration drives and coordinate action on national, state, and local levels.<sup>1112</sup>

### *Reuben’s State Labor League Wages Primary Fight*

Despite detailed planning, it required an extensive amount of time and effort to properly construct such a complex organization. On March 17, after returning from the LLPE conference, Soderstrom and Olander immediately established their own Illinois Labor League in anticipation of the national effort.<sup>1113</sup> But without national coordination, there was little that Reub’s Illinois League could do outside of endorsing candidates. It was months before the League was able to lay claim to a true national network; the LLPE took until the summer of that year to fully establish state and district offices.<sup>1114</sup> Many local unions, informed in December of 1947 that “the League was coming,” grew restless when spring came and passed without attempts at coordination. As one frustrated Chairman from Rockford, Illinois wrote to Reuben that May:

We in Rockford have been aware for some time that the National Political Education League, and State League, was in the process of being formulated and set up. Since January, we have acted on our own here, and attempted to do something along that line. Now, our members are asking me as Chairman, where we fit. So, I am asking you at this time to inform me as to what, if anything, I can do to coordinate our activities with the overall activities of the Political League...I would appreciate an early reply with a frank explanation from you or your office as to what the picture should be.<sup>1115</sup>

Soderstrom clearly shared his members' frustration. While the LLPE took its time and focused on the general election cycle, important primary races were well underway, and Reuben sounded the alarm that unions were leaving potentially successful pro-labor candidates to wither on the vine. On January 12, 1948, Reuben sent a thorough political assessment to AFL President Green, detailing exactly which seats he felt were or could be in play. In contrast to his upbeat and ambitious public speeches, Reub's private communication to Green displays an analysis that was clear-eyed, calculated and direct:

Seven Illinois Congressmen voted against the Taft-Hartley bill. It looks as if all of them will be returned to Congress. Illinois has twenty-six members of Congress. Nineteen of them voted for the Taft-Hartley law and are regarded as enemies of labor. Chicago Republican Congressmen with bad labor voting records can be defeated in the fall election by and with Democratic opposition—but downstate Illinois is pretty solidly Republican, and if downstate Republicans are to be defeated at all, it must be done in the April Primary.<sup>1116</sup>

Reuben then detailed the situation in every downstate district. Four anti-labor candidates, he predicted, would be eliminated through redistricting and retirement. Of the seven remaining downstate Republicans, four were relatively safe. There were three candidates, however, that Reuben felt could conceivably be beaten in the Republican primary—Congressmen Noah Mason, Chauncey Reed, and Rolla McMillen. Soderstrom advocated for early and direct investment in the candidates' political campaigns, writing:

I think the A.F. of L. can be successful against Reed, Mason, and McMillen. If financial help is to be given their opponents—Miller, Trowbridge and Springer—it ought to be forthcoming quickly. A dollar spent now, in my judgment, is worth more than three dollars sixty days from now. These are April primary fights and since the candidate is about the only person who knows where the weak spots are in his district, I would like to suggest that A.F. of L. attorneys, or someone who knows the political game, place financial contributions directly with the candidates after a proper investigation has been made.<sup>1117</sup>

The problem with Reub's request, of course, was Taft-Hartley. Direct political contributions of the kind Reub was requesting were now illegal, and the LLPE was in no state to start donating to candidates. Reuben did all he could to support Miller, Trowbridge, and Springer, stumping for them at every opportunity. He officially supported all the candidates as Chairman of the Illinois LLPE. As Chairman of the Joint Labor Legislative Board of Illinois—a political body which included the Illinois State Federation, Chicago Federation, Women's Trade Union League, Railroad Brotherhoods, and civil service groups—he further secured broad endorsements for all his candidates.

Soderstrom also continually posted the Joint Labor Legislative Board Recommendations in the *ISFL Weekly Newsletter*, rallying union members to vote for his preferred candidates in the primary. The move was a risky one. In February, the Department of Justice instituted prosecutions of CIO President Phillip Murray for publishing a political endorsement.<sup>1118</sup> Some, including ISFL attorney Dan Carmell, feared similar prosecution could befall the ISFL if they likewise took a political stand in their publications.<sup>1119</sup> Unafraid, Soderstrom published a highlighted article in the very next issue of the *ISFL Weekly Newsletter* labeling the candidates who voted for Taft-Hartley as “against labor.”<sup>1120</sup> He published the list again and again, week after

week, telling the union faithful to “REMEMBER the names of the Illinois members of Congress who disregarded the pleas of organized labor and voted to place the Taft-Hartley Act on the statute books!”<sup>1121</sup> On March 15, Federal District Judge Ben Moore dismissed the Justice Department indictment against Murray, declaring that the Taft-Hartley ban on political spending “is an unconstitutional abridgment of the freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of assembly.”<sup>1122</sup> Jubilant, Reuben ran the story as the headline of the next *ISFL Weekly Newsletter*, reprinting the court’s opinion in full alongside the Joint Labor Legislative Board’s recommended candidates.<sup>1123</sup>

Despite these courtroom victories and endorsements, Reuben’s candidates faced a significant uphill battle. They were all upstart, pro-labor candidates challenging incumbents in primary campaigns in heavily Republican districts. Complicating matters even further was the difficulty in uniting the political opposition behind a single candidate. The clearest example of this was the primary fight in Reuben’s home, the Fifteenth US Congressional District. Reuben’s choice, Cyrus Trowbridge, faced opposition from not only the incumbent Mason but from a third candidate, Henry Buckhardt, whom the CIO and the UMWA (which, after briefly rejoining the AFL, had again disaffiliated earlier that year) as “labor’s choice.” C.F. Mascal, Secretary of Streater’s Building and Construction Trades Council, wrote to Reuben in early February looking for instruction on what to do, telling Reuben:

It seems the A.F.L. man is Trowbridge but [UMWA] District 50 is talking up the other man. As you know District 50 has a lot of members in LaSalle Co, and it seems that some kind of a meeting should be called in our county to try and work out something, for both organizations to try and get back on the same man. The Streater Building and Trades Council has but one purpose, and that is the defeat of Congressman Mason, but as things now stand this cannot be done with two men in the race, and we not knowing which is the strongest.<sup>1124</sup>

Reuben pushed back hard in support of Trowbridge, telling Mascal:

Cyrus Trowbridge is definitely pledged to vote to repeal the Taft-Hartley law. I have no similar pledge from any other candidate for Congress in the 15th Congressional District...All of the information we have about Mr. Buckhardt and Congressman Mason runs against them so far as a recommendation is concerned. There are those who believe that Mr. Buckhardt is merely a ‘stooge’ for Congressman Mason, that he was planted in the campaign for the purpose of splitting Mason’s opposition.<sup>1125</sup>

After weeks of negotiation, it became evident to Reuben that, despite his support and the Joint Labor Legislative Board’s endorsement, the CIO would not budge on Buckhardt. With the election on the line, Reuben couldn’t allow his personal preference for Trowbridge to cloud his judgment, nor did he want to give the man false hope. When the editor for the labor publication in Will County informed Reuben he intended to endorse Buckhardt, Soderstrom saw the writing on the wall. On March 17, he took on the responsibility of breaking the news to Trowbridge personally, bluntly telling him:

The candidate for Congress in the 15th District who can poll 10,000 votes in LaSalle County, 500 votes in Boone, 1,5000 in DeKalb, 500 in Kendall, 2,500 in Grudy, 5,000 in Will, could—in a three-cornered race—be nominated...In all likelihood no more than 45,000 votes will be cast on the Republican side in the 15th Congressional District. I talked with Editor Miller over the phone this morning and he doesn’t seem to think you can get 5,000 votes in Will County. He would like to have you cease campaigning and unite all labor on Candidate Buckhardt. Mr. Miller argues rather logically that the A.F. of L. vote is vetoed by the CIO vote, making the situation ridiculous. Maybe he is right. However, the decision to cease campaigning rests with you. He agreed to button his lip until I had seen Joe Keenan next Saturday morning.<sup>1126</sup>

Despite the impossibility of the situation, Trowbridge refused to concede. Publicly, Reuben continued to support him, but began to qualify his support, telling reporters “If we can’t do it in April, we will turn Democrats in November.”<sup>1127</sup> As the primaries approached, the local papers cast the vote as a referendum on labor strength. As the polls tightened in key races, the *Freeport Journal-Standard* breathlessly reported:

One of the hottest campaigns being waged is in the 22nd district where a county judge is trying to unseat Republican incumbent Rolla C. McMillen of Decatur. Champaign County Judge William Springer has the backing of the Illinois League for Political Education, an off-shoot of the Illinois Federation of Labor. Reuben Soderstrom, president of the IFL, has predicted McMillen’s defeat. Other incumbent Republicans marked for defeat by Soderstrom are Rep. Robert Twyman, Chicago, 9th district, and Rep. Robert Chiperfield of Canton in the 19th district. Both have labor endorsed opponents. The three contests might provide a tip-off on how successful labor will be in its attempt to send a friendly Illinois delegation to congress in November.<sup>1128</sup>

The results were not encouraging. As the votes were tallied the following week, it became clear that none of Soderstrom’s picks succeeded in their primaries. Incumbent McMillen narrowly defeated Judge Springer in the Twenty-Second, beating him by a mere 4,309 votes (55% to 43%).<sup>1129</sup> Mason clobbered Trowbridge and Buckhardt, garnering more than 57% of all votes cast (as Reuben predicted, less than 45,000 votes were cast).<sup>1130</sup> Reed and Twyman won their primaries as well. It soon became clear that if Reuben were to defeat the friends of Taft-Hartley, he had to step up his game.

## REUBEN RESISTS PARTISANSHIP, ENCOURAGES DEBATE

### *Supports Governor Green, Nonpartisanship*

As disappointing as the Republican primary fight had been, it was soon overshadowed by the struggle over whom Illinois labor should back for Governor. Reuben had long been opposed to the current Governor, Dwight Green. In the 1944 election, he had fought the Republican incumbent tooth and nail, dedicating his convention speech that year to an attack on him. As the *Alton Evening Telegraph* reported at the time:

Reuben G. Soderstrom, president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, opened the federation’s 62nd annual convention today with a denunciation of Gov. Dwight H Green as “easily the worst governor Illinois has ever had so far as the aged and unemployed are concerned.” Declaring he would vote Nov. 7 for the Republican governor’s Democratic rival, Thomas J. Courtney, Soderstrom termed Green’s administration with respect to the aged and unemployed “a nightmare, a bad dream, a snare and a delusion.”<sup>1131</sup>

But Reuben’s opinion of the man he once accused of having “crippled the women’s eight hour law and one day rest in seven law” had shifted remarkably in the last four years.<sup>1132</sup> The groundwork for reconciliation was first laid in July of 1944, when the Governor replaced coal merchant Francis Murphy, whom Reuben had bitterly opposed, with union man Robert Gordon as Director of Labor. In the 1945 General Assembly, Gordon stood alongside the ISFL and the Chicago Women’s Trade Union League as they pushed through legislation protecting women and minors. Still, the 1945 legislative session ended with the Governor vetoing important labor legislation on environmental protection and the recognition of unions for state and local government employees. This time, however, Reuben did not attack the Governor personally, carefully limiting his condemnation to the veto itself.

It wasn’t until the legislative session of 1947 that Reuben and Green truly began to reconcile. In many ways it was a union of political necessity. Soderstrom, facing a hostile General Assembly and mounting national momentum against labor, needed the Republican Governor to come out against the anti-union legislation his party was pushing in order to stop the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association’s march in Illinois. Green,

meanwhile, was facing strong political headwinds; a “parade of scandals” had tarnished his once-sterling reputation, including an evolving revelation concerning off-record payrolls.<sup>1133</sup> At the same time, the embattled Governor was eyeing a possible presidential run as a dark horse candidate, and needed labor support to solidify his image as an executive able to work across party and ideological lines. Despite their prior animosity, Soderstrom and Green needed each other.

Putting the past aside, both men made good on their promises—the Governor to halt anti-labor legislation, and the ISFL President to prevent major work stoppages—to the benefit of all. Illinois became known across the nation as “practically the only big industrial state with no so-called ‘anti-labor’ laws,” while Reuben ensured the state remained free of major strikes.<sup>1134</sup> The Governor came out in support of the right to strike, declaring “the right to refuse to work is still the cornerstone of the worker’s freedom.”<sup>1135</sup> Reuben likewise told the labor faithful of the 1947 Convention that “Labor in Illinois has made more progress under Dwight H. Green than labor has made in any other state under any other governor at any other time.”<sup>1136</sup>

Others in labor, however, were uneasy with the sudden shift. Many were particularly incensed at a series of articles by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* revealing a “culture of corruption” in the Green Administration which may have been responsible for the deaths of over 100 miners.<sup>1137</sup> As the general election season approached, Reuben’s public statements in support of Green began to encounter fierce resistance. One letter to Reuben from P.A. Lautz, Secretary of the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks Lodge 1524, provides an example of the anger some directed at the ISFL President. Citing news articles reporting Reub’s endorsement of Green, Lautz wrote:

If this is true, why I am surprised by your attitude. In 1944 you were against Gov. Green and now you highly endorse him. Why the turn about face? It seems to me that you ought to take stock of yourself before endorsing the Gov. at this time. Sure the Gov.’s record had been everything but clean. I think his chances of being elected are mighty slim. How come you are on his side?<sup>1138</sup>

Union rank and file weren’t the only ones asking the question. Millburn Akers of the *Chicago Sun Times* also got into the act. Recounting Reuben’s vehement earlier opposition to Green, the reporter wryly noted:

Since then, Brother Reuben has seen a great light, or something... It’s a strange case, this conversion of Brother Reuben. While he has been finding reasons to reverse his judgment of four years ago, others, who did not altogether agree with him then, have now reached his 1944 conclusions...In fact, Brother Reuben, who once branded Green as the state’s “worst Governor,” appears to be the only recruit he’s picked up lately.<sup>1139</sup>

Reuben responded publicly that his support of Green was not new. He was simply following the AFL tradition, begun by founder Samuel Gompers, of supporting the incumbent by default if their current record was “good from the labor viewpoint,” and Reuben believed Green’s crucial support in labor’s darkest hour satisfied such a requirement. As he told the press, “We’re for the man who is in (office) if his labor record is okay. Gov. Green is all right. There has been no anti-labor legislation in this state.”<sup>1140</sup> Privately, Reuben suspected that much of the anger over his backing of the governor was tied to party politics. He was increasingly concerned that labor was losing its nonpartisan focus, and was in jeopardy of becoming captured by the Democratic Party. As he wrote to Lautz:

Organized labor has a tried and true policy initiated by the late Samuel Gompers which intelligent labor tried to carry out, viz: to elect our friends and defeat our enemies regardless of party. There are some working people who still support the party regardless of what the candidate does or stands for. I do hope this number has become small in the movement of labor because this practice tends to make both major political parties unfriendly to us. They seem to believe, and with some justification, that working people will vote for the party

that makes the best declaration no matter what the candidates might do.<sup>1141</sup>

Unfortunately, partisan concerns continued to overpower labor's interests in the governor's race. When Reuben proposed an official endorsement of Green to the Joint Labor Legislative Board that summer, he encountered fierce resistance from those who feared that an endorsement of the Republican governor might hurt the chances of Democratic senatorial candidate Paul Douglas in his race against the anti-labor Wayland Brooks. As Soderstrom wrote in a letter to Green after their August meeting:

I feel a little chagrined about the Joint Labor Legislative Board's failure to openly endorse your candidacy...At this meeting, your evident strength and popularity became an argument against adding your name to those recommended. Great pressure was placed on all state labor legislative representatives to help Paul Douglas, and some of the railroad men argued that while Governor Green has a fine labor record, an endorsement of Green would hurt Paul Douglas...However, I want you to know that all but one of the Illinois State Federation of Labor representatives on the Joint Board were then and are now supporting your candidacy for re-election to the office of Governor.<sup>1142</sup>

### ***National Campaigns, Partisanship, and the Communist Threat Posed By "Industrialist Dictators"***

The Senate race wasn't the only high-profile contest of dire concern to labor. Harry Truman, the "accidental president," was facing his first Presidential election, and all signs pointed to a defeat for the Commander in Chief. Although his relationship with union leaders was sometimes cantankerous, Truman stood up for labor when they needed him most, vetoing the Taft-Hartley Act before he was overruled by the Republican Congress. It was that Republican body, not the opposing candidate Thomas Dewey, against whom Truman contrasted himself as the election approached. In an open letter to labor, he reminded workers:

The party that pressed the Taft-Hartley act upon working people over my veto and is responsible for the high cost of living is asking labor to vote for its candidates in November. Having inaugurated in the Republican-controlled 80th congress a blueprint for tearing down 16 years of progress under the Democratic party, the Republicans are now asking labor's support for their anti-labor policies. The 80th congress was guided by Republican policies and was completely under the thumb of the Republican Party. The Republican candidates cannot disavow the party leadership which dictated these policies. Neither are these policies repudiated in the Republican platform to which the candidates are committed.<sup>1143</sup>

Dewey, in contrast, never mentioned the Taft-Hartley Act in his addresses to labor. Instead, he made sometimes thinly-veiled accusations that unions supporting his opponent were betraying not only their membership, but the nation as well. "We must zealously guard against...efforts to make the American labor movement a political company union," he warned, adding, "Knowing the A.F. of L. as I do, I would expect to find in it very few men who would sell out the interests of their members and their country for political preferment."<sup>1144</sup> Dewey's not-so-subtle attack on the patriotism of union officials was a clear nod to the Republican belief that labor leadership was infested with communist sympathizers. This corrupt cabal, so the theory went, hated Taft-Hartley because it weakened their control and crippled the influence of communism. Those who subscribed to this theory believed the rank and file of labor would support the Republicans in the coming election because they were fundamentally at odds with their leadership, and saw Taft-Hartley as an escape from union oppression. Reuben pushed back hard on the accusation, dedicating his Labor Day Message to counter such arguments:

The American labor movement is unalterably opposed to Communism and all other alien doctrines which interfere with the freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and freedom of worship, and the other guarantees



given all citizens in the Constitution of the United States, which make up our way of life. It would be a dark day, indeed, if labor had to look forward to oppressive domination from Moscow.<sup>1145</sup>

In the end, the partisan nature of the coming election on both sides—with Truman rhetorically running against the Republican Party and Dewey obliquely equating voting Democratic to supporting communism—made a nonpartisan labor endorsement seem nearly impossible. Soderstrom, however, remained optimistic that the democratic principles of the AFL would ensure unions secured endorsements for the candidates that furthered labor policy, not political party, interests.

### *Resolves Convention Crisis, Settles Election Endorsements*

Reuben's dedication democracy would soon be put to the test. As the 1948 Illinois Federation Convention approached, it became clear that the sixty-sixth gathering of the ISFL would be one for the record books. As the *Freeport Journal-Standard* reported:

Approximately 1,500 delegates have already been elected to attend. About one-fourth of them bring their wives, which will increase the attendance to a point where the seating capacity of the convention hall will be taxed. The galleries are open to the public. All sessions are open to those interested.<sup>1146</sup>

The group promised to be as loud as it was large. The passage of Taft-Hartley and the months of campaigning against it had whipped the delegates, gathering a month before the coming election, into a near frenzy. Attendees were fired up and ready to go, eager to make their voices heard at the ballot box. Reuben opened the convention with a fiery political address that shook off the dust of the primary and rallied his troops for November 2:

In the fall elections there is a chance to accomplish some of the things we failed to accomplish in the primary. There is a chance to defeat (Robert) Twyman, there is a chance to defeat Congressmen Busbey and Vail, and a splendid opportunity to fill the place made vacant by the death of Congressman Owens with a friendly congressman...When the fall election is over, and this is a conservative prophecy, labor will have at least 14 congressmen out of 26 from Illinois who will be willing to repeal the Taft-Hartley law. This is making real progress because in the last session of Congress we only had seven men who were friendly to us.<sup>1147</sup>

But of all the Illinois offices at stake, Reub roared, one stood out above all the rest:

But the big opportunity offered to labor in the fall election is the opportunity to secure a friendly United States Senator. Senator C. Wayland Brooks voted for the Taft-Hartley law. He is unfriendly to labor and ought to be defeated. Professor Paul Douglas, of the University of Chicago, is friendly to labor and ought to be elected, and there is the opportunity to do just that, based on the election returns of the April primary...Senator Brooks did not receive a majority of the votes cast in the primary by the voters in the two major political parties and he should not be permitted to receive a majority of the votes cast in the fall election! United States Senators from Illinois have tremendous voting power...one United States Senator from Illinois has the voting power of 13 Congressmen. Under such circumstances we should work day and night and move heaven and earth to elect Paul Douglas.<sup>1148</sup>

Reub's unequivocal support of his good friend Douglas quickly emerged as the highlight of his speech. The next day, the papers reporting on the convention led with headlines such as "Illinois Labor Federation Head Endorses Douglas" and "IFL President Backs Douglas."<sup>1149</sup> Reub's choice to highlight the Senate race, however, wasn't just meant to underscore the Illinois Federation's commitment to the race to the general public. It also served to separate the race for governor from the more partisan congressional elections. While

dedicating almost his entire opening address to the US House and Senate races, Reuben didn't mention the gubernatorial fight once in his speech.

Despite these efforts and assurances, Reuben still faced strong opposition from the ISFL delegates. The Executive Board had already officially endorsed candidates for the Senate and each of the 26 US Congressional districts, all of them measured by their support or rejection of Taft-Hartley. Many delegates, however, wanted the party to go further. Already, some had questioned why the ISFL had endorsed four Republicans when there were perfectly acceptable candidates on the Democratic ticket. One of those Democratic hopefuls, Marvin Peters, had appealed to Reuben personally, writing:

In a recent press release the Chicago newspapers reported that the Illinois Federation of Labor had endorsed Richard W. Hoffman, the Republican candidate for Congress from the 10th Illinois District. I am the Democratic candidate. I have no information as to Mr. Hoffman's relation or relations to organized labor. I do know, however, that I consider myself to be a friend of labor, interested in the labor movement and in favor of the repeal of the Taft-Hartley Labor Act. My father, Ernest J. Peters, is a retired member of Local 9 of the Electrical Workers and my brother, Lester J. Peters, is a member of the DuPage Council, Painters and Decorators. Both locals, as you know, are affiliated with the American Federation of Labor...I believe that I am entitled to the endorsement of the Illinois Federation of Labor and would greatly appreciate a reconsideration of the endorsement of a candidate for Congress from the 10th Illinois District.<sup>1150</sup>

The ever-pragmatic Reuben, however, was brutally blunt with the aspiring representative who believed he was "entitled" to labor's vote as to why he would not receive ISFL support. His response also gave a useful window into Reuben's philosophy of nonpartisanship and the importance of primary elections:

Dear Mr. Peters:

The 10th Congressional District is heavily Republican and labor supported Richard W. Hoffman in the April primary in order to make sure we would have a friendly candidate on the Republican side. On April 13th there were twice as many Republicans voted in the 10th Congressional District as there were Democratic votes cast. There are large groups of progressive people in both major parties and working people should not hesitate to cross party lines to vote for their friends. Where a Republican has as good a chance to win as he has in the 10th district labor tried to make sure the right kind of Republican would be nominated in the April Primary. In that we succeeded.<sup>1151</sup>

Reuben's logic also likely applied to the ISFL's support of Republican candidates in the 4th and 21st district, which had new Republican candidates who promised to repeal Taft-Hartley. Soderstrom's support of CW Bishop in the 25th District was likewise based on his vote against Taft-Hartley in the 80th Congress.<sup>1152</sup> Resisting all efforts and opposition, Reuben remained firm in his conviction that action, not affiliation, should be the sole measure for labor support.

Still, labor delegates pushed back at the convention. As the week progressed they began to clamor for endorsements of Democrats Harry Truman for President and Adlai Stevenson for Governor. Delegates easily passed a resolution of approval for Stevenson, much to Soderstrom's dismay.<sup>1153</sup> To Reuben, the timing of the presidential endorsement was almost as problematic as the choice of candidate for the governorship. He and his board fully intended to endorse Truman, but he believed doing so before the national AFL convention threatened to both undermine the perception of a unified labor lobby nationally and could make unions appear overly political locally. As Olander told the delegates in favor of the resolutions, "You have bench-warranted yourself into an out-and-out political organization...I don't think you are counting the cost of changing from a labor organization to a political organization."<sup>1154</sup>

Despite his own opposition to the resolutions, however, Soderstrom did not use his powers as president to in any way limit debate. Instead, he allowed all members to speak their mind, relying on persuasion and strength of argument rather than force of authority. He pleaded with members to think critically about the gubernatorial endorsement, recalling the precedent of endorsing friendly incumbents by quoting Gompers's admonition that "We must elect our friends and defeat our enemies."<sup>1155</sup> He asked for patience on the Truman resolution, promising members that the executive board, 93% of which was on the record in support of Truman, would make a formal expression of support for the president as soon as the national AFL had done so.<sup>1156</sup>

In the end, Reuben met with mixed results. He lost the argument on the Truman endorsement, an outcome that made front-page headlines across the state. "IFL Overrules Chiefs," the Associated Press breathlessly exclaimed, writing:

Declining to wait for some expression from the American Federation of Labor, the Illinois State Federation of Labor Friday endorsed President Truman for re-election. Reuben G. Soderstrom, federation president, asked the delegates not to endorse political candidates at this time 'because the American Federation of Labor has not yet taken sides'...However, after two hours of debate on the question of endorsement the delegates knocked down by a 346 to 265 vote a recommendation of the resolutions committee to refer the endorsement to the executive board.<sup>1157</sup>

Less noted, but even more important, was the delegates' decision to hold off on an endorsement for governor. As the AP mentioned further in their story, "The IFL also endorsed Paul H. Douglas, Democratic candidate for US senator, but referred to its executive board a resolution that would have endorsed Adlai E. Stevenson, Democratic candidate for Governor."<sup>1158</sup> Persuaded by Soderstrom, the delegates ended the convention without formally weighing in on the gubernatorial race. A few weeks later, Reuben called a special meeting of the Executive Board of the ISFL and endorsed Green, telling reporters:

Green has earned the support of the federation and AFL members in the state by his record of having 93 pro-labor bills enacted into law and 67 anti-labor bills defeated in the legislature in his eight years as Illinois governor...(Green is) an outstanding friend of labor who has been on our side in every legislative crisis in the last eight years.<sup>1159</sup>

While Truman's endorsement grabbed more headlines, the Green endorsement mattered far more to Reuben. It was deeply important to him that labor in Illinois remain nonpartisan. If elected officials believed their party affiliation either barred them from or entitled them to labor's votes, they would feel no need ever to act on labor's behalf. The Green endorsement, given in the midst of such a partisan election, preserved Gompers's call to "elect our friends" no matter what party they hailed from.

The incident also demonstrated Soderstrom's dedication to the democratic principles to which he had adhered, allowing full discussion and even passage of resolutions he opposed. This style of leadership stood in stark contrast to other more publicity-seeking labor figures like John L. Lewis, whose dictatorial control of the UMWA was legendary. Lewis's commitment to "organizational discipline" may have gathered him power and press in the short run, but it also proved his undoing. When faced with opposition, Lewis took an absolutist approach, purging dissenters when possible and splitting with his spoils when he couldn't. Consequently, by 1948 Lewis had both lost control of the CIO and his post within the AFL, isolating his UMWA in the process.

Reuben, meanwhile, continued to oversee an unprecedented growth of membership within his ISFL by

ensuring all voices were heard. The ISFL convention fight of 1948 was perhaps the clearest example of this approach; as the *ISFL Weekly Newsletter* noted, “the Convention was a lively affair from start to finish...all present were ‘kept on their toes.’ The interest never flagged. It continued until {the?} gavel dropped on the last word at one o’clock of the sixth day.”<sup>1160</sup> True to his word, Reuben never used that gavel to silence discussion. In the words Anton Johannsen, Circulation and Business Manager of *The Federation News*, “In opening the convention you pledged the delegates that the gavel would be used to the end that everyone who had any message or suggestion would be afforded equal opportunity, which was carried out by you to the letter. I have heard a great many comments from delegates, all of which were very complimentary to the manner in which you handled the convention from the chair.”<sup>1161</sup>

## PRESIDENT TRUMAN ON DEMOCRATIC LANDSLIDE: “LABOR DID IT”

Throughout all the trials and tensions of 1948, Reuben had managed to keep the ISFL united, bipartisan, and strong. He helped birth a whole new organization, the Illinois Labor League, making it the most well-funded LLPE in the country. He secured the endorsements of his candidates of choice despite deep opposition. Still, he had faced his fair share of defeats as well, from the (in his view) premature endorsement of President Truman to the disheartening primary election results. Unfortunately, despite all his and organized labor’s efforts to the contrary, polling predicted a repeat of the primary experience, primarily in the presidential race. “Gov. Dewey and (Vice Presidential candidate) Gov. Warren are assured of election,” wrote Archibald M. Crossley, Director of the Crossley Poll, on the eve of the election. “Their electoral vote is likely to be well over the 266 needed for election. The Truman-Barkley ticket, on the other hand, with every possible consideration, is unlikely to have more than 219.”<sup>1162</sup>

To make matters worse, Reuben’s pick for Governor was failing to distinguish himself from his Republican peers. He still viewed labor as crucial to his success—he had his own “Green for Governor Labor League” and touted his labor record at nearly every appearance, claiming “the workers of Illinois have found they always get a fair and square deal at Springfield.”<sup>1163</sup> Still, his message was overshadowed by the other members of his ticket, particularly Senator Brooks. In the final weeks of the race, Green sat silently while Brooks called Taft-Hartley “a bill of rights,” bragging, “the New deal is on the rocks, its crew has deserted and its captain, an incompetent, confused and frustrated man, is sinking to political oblivion. A new day will dawn for America on Tuesday when millions of Americans will turn to the Republican Party for hope, confidence and unity.”<sup>1164</sup> Stevenson taunted Green to respond, calling on him to “come out of your corner,” and complaining Green “has been strangely silent on the issues of this campaign.”<sup>1165</sup>

Still, as the final days approached, both Green and Brooks seemed even more assured of winning than Dewey. Nearly every poll showed them winning by a comfortable margin. It increasingly became clear that a Republican sweep of the state would be a major blow to unions, despite Green’s assurances to the contrary. Days before ballots were to be cast, Brooks claimed in a written statement his race “has national significance because it is a testing ground of sentiment on the Taft-Hartley bill.”<sup>1166</sup>

He couldn’t have been more right. On November 2, 1948, the American people shocked the pollsters and press by handing a strong win to Democrats across the country. Truman succeeded handily, carrying 28 states to Dewey’s 16 (Strom Thurmond, running on the segregationist Dixiecrat ticket, carried the remaining four). That list included Reuben’s Illinois, where Truman won by a little over 57,000 votes. Truman was in little doubt as to who made his win possible. According to historian David McCullough, “In the noise and excitement of the Presidential Suite after Dewey conceded, Truman reportedly said, ‘Labor did it.’”<sup>1167</sup>

Illinois Democrats also took the governorship and twelve House seats. Most importantly, Douglas defeated Brooks by an astonishing 417,386 votes.<sup>1168</sup> It was a resounding win for labor, and Reuben was ecstatic. Even

Republican stalwarts like Fred Busbey, the outspoken conservative congressman who denounced Douglas as “a friend of the Commies,” went down to unexpected defeat.<sup>1169</sup> True, Green had lost, but Stevenson was a friend of labor as well, and Reuben’s most important prerogative—to maintain the nonpartisan nature of federation endorsements—had already been satisfied. Moreover, many could point to Green’s close association with Brooks, especially in the closing days of the election, as the reason for losing crucial union votes. Soderstrom called the results “the political awakening of labor,” saying:

The defeat of United States Senator C. Wayland Brooks and of Congressman Fred E. Busbey was an event of transcendent importance to the workers of Illinois. Senator ‘Curly’ Brooks and Congressman Busbey had paraded themselves before the people of the state as the chief exponents of the infamous restrictive anti-labor law known as the Taft-Hartley Act. They sought re-election on the hypocritical and utterly false plea that the Act was favored by the workers themselves as a means of curbing the activities of the men they elect from time to time to represent their respective unions...With Brooks went Busbey and other Taft-Hartley advocates. Together they dragged down most of their own State party and changed Illinois from a Republican to a Democratic state. It was the Taft-Hartley payoff in Illinois.<sup>1170</sup>

Back in Springfield, Reuben celebrated the unqualified victory with his oldest, dearest friend, Victor Olander. Basking in the success they had helped bring, they looked to the future with a hope and optimism they hadn’t experienced in years. Over the past two decades they had jumped from crisis to crisis, facing depression, war, and more—but they had always faced it together. Now, for the first time, they could envision a path forward unburdened by the imminent threat of catastrophe and collapse. It was a brave new world, and they were ready to enter it side by side.

Sadly, neither had any idea of the loss that awaited them.

# CHAPTER 38

## 1949

### SODERSTROM OVERCOMES PERSONAL, POLITICAL LOSS

*“The American worker and his unions have added to the strength and welfare of the nation. For more than a century our standard of living has been constantly mounting. Today the ordinary wage earner’s hourly wage will purchase four times as much as his great-grandfather’s hourly wage would purchase in the year 1849... and the wage earner receives that today for a work-week which has been reduced by one-third.”*

-Reuben Soderstrom  
1949 ISFL Convention

#### REUBEN “KNOCKED FROM PILLAR TO POST”

##### *Victor Olander Dies*

On Tuesday, February 8, 1949, Willard Banks wrote to Reuben, “It was nice to see you, even for a moment yesterday. I did not try for more as I knew how busy you were.”<sup>1171</sup> Banks’s observation was an understatement to say the least. Reuben’s closest friend and compatriot, Victor Olander, had died unexpectedly after a short illness that Saturday afternoon, leaving Soderstrom without the man who had been, in his words, “my closest chum and associate for 27 consecutive years.”<sup>1172</sup> Two days later Reub buried his best friend, visibly shaking with emotion as he described the man he’d come to both respect and love:

The lives of many men, women and children were made happier because he lived...A scintillating debater, able, logical and convincing, he could unfold his views in a manner at once engaging, kindly, and sincere. Although extremely human in everything he discussed and did in the field of eloquence, it can be truthfully said of him that he was always considerate, always a friend of every person who needed a friend...

And now, as the curtain falls, and Victor A. Olander’s name is flashed on the skyline of eternity, we in the labor movement salute him as a sincere friend and comrade, a great leader of men, a trustworthy son of labor in Illinois, the personification of all things distinctly American. It should be said of him that he was indeed a good and faithful servant of the movement of the workers, as well as a servant of the Great Ruler above. May he rest in eternal peace!<sup>1173</sup>

Victor’s brilliant mind and unwavering commitment to wage earners were without equal; Reuben later described him as a man “who outshines most of us (labor leaders), he was the greatest amongst us when he was alive, and active.”<sup>1174</sup> However, with that intelligence and conviction came a moral certainty and refusal to compromise that could come across as stubborn and off-putting. His impolitic nature had become especially problematic in recent years, leading him to assume positions and pick fights that had left him, and at times the ISFL, politically isolated. Through it all, though, Reuben remained by his side.

While they always made decisions in lockstep, by 1949 the duty largely fell to Soderstrom to make their stands politically viable. Over the past decade, Reuben had spent an increasing amount of time mending relationships and soothing egos that Victor had upset. This wasn't lost on Banks, who as Director of Publicity for the Hamilton Advertising Agency knew a thing or two about damage control. As his letter to Reub, written the day after Victor's funeral, continued:

I could not help but be thinking what a source of satisfaction it must be to you that you had been given the patience and understanding to get through some of the past trying years as smoothly as you did. A genius is never easy to live with. I could not help but know how often you were called upon to repair fences that a bit more tact might have made unnecessary. In the doing you added many more years of usefulness to a brilliant career than I believe would have been possible otherwise.

Best wishes for your success in the coming years. It doesn't look like they are going to be easy, either.<sup>1175</sup>

Soon Banks would be proved right.

### *Governor Stevenson Selects CIO Chief, Sidelines ISFL*

One of the first difficult issues Reuben had to tackle in 1949 was the new regime in Springfield. On the surface, the situation appeared heavily favorable to labor. The sixty-sixth General Assembly was markedly more pro-labor; Democrats picked up five seats in the Senate and another 16 in the House, giving them control of the latter, and Adlai Stevenson brought the governorship into Democratic hands for the first time in eight years.<sup>1176</sup> Illinois Democrats made national gains as well, winning 12 of Illinois's 26 seats. Both US Senators were Democratic, with Reuben's good friend, freshman Paul Douglas defeating the famously anti-labor Wayland Brooks. Veteran Illinois statesman Scott Lucas became majority leader in the US Senate.

However, these results carried distinct problems for Soderstrom. First, some of those Democratic representatives won their seats from Republicans who had received ISFL endorsements, making them ambivalent to Reuben at best.<sup>1177</sup> Reub also actively campaigned for Republican CW Bishop, playing a possibly decisive factor in the Republican's 3% win over his Democratic challenger. While Reub's support of these representatives was principled—Bishop, for example, had been one of the few Republicans to vote against Taft-Hartley—it earned him few friends in the Democratic Party.

More troublesome was Reub's backing of then-Governor Green in his race against Adlai Stevenson. While a vexing choice for several reasons, from a political standpoint Reub's decision to back the losing candidate cost him considerable clout in the governor's office. He and his ISFL were now on the outside, while the CIO (which had endorsed Stevenson) became the favored labor faction in Springfield. On the day before Christmas, 1948, Governor Stevenson told Soderstrom that he intended to appoint Frank Annunzio, Director of the CIO's Political Action Committee, to replace Gordon as head of the Illinois State Department of Labor.<sup>1178</sup> While he wasn't pleased, Reub didn't take particular offense; the decision was, as he described it, "Plainly a matter of party politics."<sup>1179</sup> What happened next, however, set the ISFL on fire.

Shortly after the new General Assembly opened on January 5, an ailing Victor Olander received a call from Fern Rauch, a vice-president of the ISFL, who shared that the governor had called him to Chicago. Vic advised Fern to meet with Stevenson, but urged him not to commit to anything until the full ISFL Executive Board could meet. Despite Fern's assurances, the next thing Soderstrom and Olander heard on the matter was the press reporting that Rauch had been named Assistant Deputy Director. Soderstrom was furious that one of his men would accept a post without clearing it with him first. The assistant post was meaningless; in Reuben's words, "The 'assistant' has no particular duties to perform, and in the past has never been heard

from, once appointed. It is a title which has never appeared on a single communication received at the offices of the Illinois State Federation of Labor since the birth of the Department over thirty years ago.”<sup>1180</sup> Rauch’s acceptance gave cover to Stevenson’s choice of a CIO man, all without winning any meaningful concessions for the ISFL.

What angered Reuben more than the bad politics of Fern’s acceptance was his silence. Upon hearing the news, Vic and Reub immediately tried to call Fern. While he refused to talk to Olander, Fern did take Reub’s call to confirm that he took the appointment. That was the last either man heard from Rauch, at least privately. When they wrote to him about the constitutional issues caused by his acceptance—the ISFL charter barred officials from holding salaried appointed positions—Rauch did not write back, instead choosing to announce to the press that he would resign his ISFL vice-presidency. Reub shot back: “It is all just too bad, but Rauch, probably under the pressure of excitement, has apparently put his morals in reverse.”<sup>1181</sup>

The issues raised in the Rauch affair, particularly the ethical problems of ISFL officials accepting salaried appointed posts from the governor, would soon come back to haunt Illinois labor. The matter of Rauch himself, in contrast, was soon forgotten, at least for the moment. Soon after his appointment as assistant secretary, Rauch was expunged from the ISFL Executive Board and Stanley Johnson, a newcomer from Chicago, was added to the list of vice presidents.<sup>1182</sup> Shortly thereafter, the new board selected Vice President Earl J. McMahon to replace the recently deceased Victor Olander as secretary-treasurer on a “part-time” basis.<sup>1183</sup> Before long the ISFL leadership had stabilized, and reporters sniffing for controversy soon latched on to a new issue—the re-emergence of the “ConCon.”

### *Refutes the “Con Con”*

Of all the political issues to emerge in Illinois in 1949, none seemed hotter than the question of whether or not the state would hold a new Constitutional Convention, or “Con Con.” The idea was not new. In November of 1918, at the very start of Reuben’s political career, the Illinois electorate voted to hold a convention for a new state constitution. Back then, every conceivable interest, including labor, viewed the event as a chance to write their interests permanently into state law. When the gathering convened in 1920, fights over taxation and upstate vs. downstate politics turned the convention into a spectacular mess, with delegates backed by the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association introducing language that twisted the proposed progressive tax—one of the key reasons for calling the convention—into a burden that fell disproportionately on the working poor.<sup>1184</sup> By the time the new constitution was introduced to voters for approval in 1922, it was so compromised and convoluted that voters roundly rejected it. For over twenty years, no one in Illinois spoke of attempting to rewrite the constitution.

It was only at the conclusion of the Second World War that talks of a new constitution began to revive. It was a moment of worldwide change, with nations across the globe rewriting their social contracts to reflect the progressive values of the modern age. In Illinois, many of those returning from the war or shaped by it wanted to capture the moment for themselves. Beginning in 1945, many politicians and virtually all the press began pushing for a new constitutional convention. As before, the push for a new constitution centered on the issues of taxation and a re-orientation of upstate vs downstate politics, with many idealistic progressives viewing a new convention as the best way to achieve a more efficient, effective, and representative government. By 1949 those cries had reached a fevered pitch, with Governor Stevenson leading a full-court press for a referendum on whether or not a convention should be held.

Reuben came out strongly against a new Con Con. His position was at least in part the product of his collaboration with Olander who, as a strict constitutionalist, was fervently opposed to the wholesale rewriting of basic law. Victor’s death likely only intensified Reub’s desire to carry out what he viewed as his best chum’s



last wish. Soderstrom was quite open about such influence; he opened his testimony before the House Executive Committee with a comment on House Resolution 9, authorizing a referendum on the Con Con, by telling those present, “I am not a constitutional expert, but I felt that I would be disloyal to the memory of my partner, Victor A. Olander, if I failed to appear and oppose HJR No. 9. Mr. Olander, as you folks know, was a constitutional authority.”<sup>1185</sup>

While Victor may have been Reub’s inspiration, the State Federation leader grounded his argument on his own personal experience and foundational democratic principles. He’d seen first-hand how a well-meaning convention could be corrupted by powerful interests. Constitutional delegates, he feared, would be far less accountable to the public than legislators, and could wreak havoc on the freedoms and protections labor had worked so hard and so long to acquire. “It seems to me that the amendment method is the best procedure because it is considered by the members of the legislature, a responsible body of men and women, who are responsive to the will of the people.”

Instead of a new constitution, Soderstrom and the ISFL proposed a change to the amendment procedure to make individual constitutional changes easier. Called the “gateway amendment,” this new rule would liberalize the amending clause of the constitution by making it possible to offer three amendments to three articles of the constitution at one time, as opposed to the single change per election allowed under existing law.<sup>1186</sup> This position aligned Soderstrom not only with moderate opponents but with the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association, which feared a ConCon would lead to a graduated income tax.<sup>1187</sup>

It was a sensible approach. However, the wider press, especially the *Chicago Sun-Times*, in the most extreme language imaginable attacked all who opposed the idea of the Con Con as opponents of democracy. The editors of the *Bloomington Pantagraph* took direct aim at those opposing the Con Con, writing:

The Illinois Association of Manufacturers and the American Federation of Labor leaders oppose the calling of a constitutional convention apparently because they fear the wisdom of people today to write a constitution that would fit today’s needs. They seem to think that men long since dead were better qualified for the job of creating the organic law under which we operate...That is distrust in the ability of the people to govern themselves. It is a demonstrated disbelief in democracy.<sup>1188</sup>

In a *Daily Herald* article entitled “What is the Con-Con Question?” writer and Professor Robert Johnson was even more hyperbolic, claiming:

What is the Con-Con question? The Con-Con question is nothing less than a test of the existence of democracy in Illinois. If you believe in democracy, you are for the Con-Con question. If you pay more than lip-service to democracy, you will do something about the Con-Con question...To deny the people this right would amount to a denial of fundamental democracy which has been a part of the American heritage since the days of the founding of these United States.<sup>1189</sup>

Ultimately, Reuben was able to defeat the calls for a Con Con. In the longest session of the sixty-sixth General Assembly, legislators roundly rejected HJR No. 9 by a vote of 96 to 48 in April and again in May by a vote of 89 to 54.<sup>1190</sup> HB 72, the infamous “party circle” bill, was likewise defeated.<sup>1191</sup> Reuben’s Gateway Amendment, meanwhile, was adopted by the legislature by a vote of 46 to 0 in the Senate and 138 to 2 in the House.<sup>1192</sup> By the end of the year, Soderstrom was able to claim a resounding legislative success.

Still, this win had come at political cost. Soderstrom’s stand, while practical and principled, still placed him against many progressive voices, including the newly-elected governor, Adlai Stevenson. Worse still, his vocal opposition associated him in the public mind with downstate party bosses and the infamous Illinois

Manufacturers' Association, unfortunate bedfellows to say the least. Virtually the entire press had cast the campaign against the Con Con as a crusade against democracy, and in defeat they set their sights on Soderstrom as possibly the biggest obstacle to their goals.

All of this negative publicity put incredible pressure on Reuben's leadership, causing a crisis in labor. Although they started the fight publicly unified, by April Reuben estimated he could only claim to speak for "sixty per cent of the A.F.L. unions." Groups like the Labor Unions for Constitutional Convention had sprung up in opposition, while the CIO and United Mine Workers publicly declared support for the Con Con.<sup>1193</sup> Reuben had won the fight, but the sacrifices he made, combined with the events about to unfold, threatened to make it a Pyrrhic victory.

## GOVERNOR GREEN'S CORRUPTION SCANDAL

The ConCon fight was bruising, but it was nothing compared to the ensuing brouhaha over a scandal from the offices of the former Governor Green. It all began with Soderstrom's support of then-Governor Green in the 1948 election after the latter finally appointed an ISFL man to be the Illinois Director of Labor. As a result, Soderstrom had worked hard to secure the ISFL endorsement of Governor Green, convincing the largely pro-Adlai Stevenson delegates at the ISFL convention to table their planned resolution in support of Stevenson so that Reuben's Executive Board could throw support to Green. But in so doing Reub acted contrary not only to the popular desire of his constituents but also the AFL, which had given Stevenson support through its National Labor League for Political Education.<sup>1194</sup>

This was largely because the relationship between Soderstrom and Green had come a long way, starting when Green finally replaced his Department of Labor chief Francis Murphy, a coal merchant whom Soderstrom and Olander vigorously opposed, with AFL member Robert Gordon. Subsequent commitments made and kept by the governor in 1947 to oppose IMA-sponsored anti-labor legislation, in opposition to his own party, solidified Reuben's support. By the end of the 1947 legislative session, Reuben had come to believe that Green found value in being a friend of labor.

However, Soderstrom's support came at a time when the governor was less popular than ever. A series of hard-hitting investigative articles by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* had uncovered a culture of corruption within the Green administration, exposing ties between the "Green Machine" and downstate gangsters. Those discoveries proved to be the tip of the iceberg; as Roy J. Harris Jr. of *The Beacon* writes:

In 1947, Post-Dispatch reporters led by Harry Wilensky found Green operatives at the heart of a scheme in which coal companies paid off state inspectors, winning their mines a free pass despite deadly safety violations. The payoffs had a disastrous result in Centralia that year, when an explosion killed 111 miners—and started the Post-Dispatch on an investigation that eventually ended the state's hiring of mine inspectors by patronage, outlawed political contributions by coal companies, and led to prosecution of some lower-level officials who had been paid off.<sup>1195</sup>

Green's corruption led nearly every other labor group to support Adlai Stevenson. Despite this, Reuben continued his support of the governor. The move was not necessarily surprising to those who knew him; it was typical of Soderstrom to remain beside his allies even when it was politically unpopular. Time and again, he stood loyally by the men and women he called friends, no matter how difficult or unpopular such stands may have been. It was what motivated him to support Victor Olander, no matter how many fences that he had to mend. It was what compelled him to support Republican legislators like C.W. Bishop who had voted for labor, even if that support put him at odds with his own Democratic base. And it could well have been that same deep vein of loyalty that motivated Reuben to stand up for the governor who had helped hold back

the formidable tide of anti-labor legislation that had swallowed nearly every other state.

Unfortunately, further investigative reporting into the governor's affairs soon brought to light a new host of corrupt acts by the Green administration that touched almost every Illinois organization, including members of labor. In a Pulitzer-prize winning expose, *Post-Dispatch* reporter Roy J. Harris and *Chicago Daily News* journalist George Thiem uncovered a list of over 51 Illinois newspaper editors who had been given state jobs, apparently in return for favorable press coverage.<sup>1196</sup> The "Green gravy train" didn't stop there. The names of nineteen state labor heads were also found on the governor's payroll, names that hurt the ISFL publicly. Reuben himself was never named or implicated, but one of his top lieutenants was, as the *Belvidere Daily Republican* reported on the front page of its June 11, 1949 edition:

Earl J. McMahon, a top Illinois labor leader, is among 19 union men listed by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch as holding 'gravy train' jobs under former Governor Dwight H. Green. McMahon, highly paid, full-time secretary of the AFL Chicago Building and Construction Trades Council and vice-president of the Illinois Labor federation, received \$4,575 pay from the state in two years, the newspaper said yesterday.<sup>1197</sup>

Granted, there was no clear indication of wrongdoing or a quid-pro-quo; Secretary McMahon vigorously defended his actions as perfectly legitimate, telling the press, "You can say I was a liaison man between the Department of Labor and the Building Trades. My job was to facilitate the work of the Department of Labor. I don't know what title I had. Let them investigate. I'll be here anytime."<sup>1198</sup>

The bad news didn't end with McMahon; as *The Pentagraph* continued to report that Reuben's son, Carl Soderstrom, had also been on the payroll and received \$300 a month for nearly two years. At the time, Carl was not an elected official but a private citizen—a lawyer practicing in Streator—and quite possibly was retained as a consultant for the governor on labor matters in LaSalle County. Also on the governor's list was John H. Walker, president of the ISFL in the 1920s who was profiled as a "labor department field investigator at \$200 a month."<sup>1199</sup>

Compounding factors, Governor Green insisted on recording the payments in a secret ledger that was not formally monitored by his office staff. The recipients of the payments stated that they did not know Green was using a secret ledger. Moreover, the ISFL secretary, Earl McMahon, had received payments from Green while serving on the ISFL executive board, a clear violation of the Illinois Federation's constitution for which Reuben had just drummed out Fern Rauch from the ISFL. Regardless of whether any of those implicated had in fact endorsed Green in return for payments, the mere appearance of impropriety wounded the ISFL's reputation.

With the tide of the Green scandal lapping into the offices of the ISFL, Reuben moved swiftly to address it. After thorough research by the historian, it is apparent Reuben was a man learning of select violations within his own organization, which he moved quickly to terminate. For one, McMahon quickly resigned his post as ISFL Secretary. As Reuben's sister Olga later recalled:

The President...could never be bought. Once it was said to him, "Why do you stay with Labor? Business would appreciate you much more than your folks who work." They continued, "You know, we could buy at least half of your people to kill the other half." But he was never interested in any programs except those for his people—the workers...It has been said that every man has his price. Not so with Reub. Reub told me once that the underworld, the racketeers, tried to move in on the Illinois State Federation of Labor. These people called on him, but he said to them, "You can kill me, that's for sure, but as long as I'm alive and President of this Great Labor Organization, you'll never get control of Labor in the State of Illinois."<sup>1200</sup>

By the fall of 1949, Reuben was arguably at his most challenging hour. His best friend and closest collaborator Vic Olander had died, he'd spent considerable political capital on the losing candidate for governor, his executive board was in disarray, and the "Green Gravy Train" political scandal implicated people inside his own organization. There were even rumors that Fern Rauch, the man he'd expelled from ISFL in January, was planning to challenge his leadership at the coming convention.

## REUBEN REDOUBLES HIS EFFORTS

### *Acts as Advocate for the Injured, Women Workers, and the Unemployed*

As the political walls seemed to be closing in, Reuben decided to redouble his efforts and focus on his duties as ISFL president. First on his list was securing new and improved benefits for working men and women injured on the job. As the 1949 legislative season opened, Reuben oversaw the introduction of legislation providing for a 30% increase in the Illinois Workman's Compensation and Occupational Disease Acts. A third bill, HB 29, actually combined the two Acts, creating a seamless garment of care for the working sick and injured.<sup>1201</sup> To secure these benefits, Reub did what he did better than anybody else—he worked directly with the other side to argue for an increase. That spring Reuben entered complex negotiations with Alan Gordon of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association, convening a conference under the auspices of the Industrial Affairs sub-committee.<sup>1202</sup> After months of complicated talks, Reub finally convinced industry groups to agree on a new bill to increase the weekly benefits to sick and injured workers by 15.4%. Spokesmen for the AFL, CIO, and the United Mine Workers all hailed the results, calling it the "best possible" of solutions.<sup>1203</sup>

Reuben didn't stop there. All through the legislative session he worked the halls of Springfield, loudly advocating for society's weakest members. He secured new improvements in the old age assistance act, raising maximums from \$50 to \$65 a month. He increased unemployment maximums from \$20 to \$25 per week. He won new benefits for widows, lifting the award from \$7,150 to \$8,500 when there were four or more children. Most importantly to Reuben, he fought off a last minute effort to weaken the Child Labor Act, preventing Senator A.L. Marovitz of Chicago from introducing a new round of exemptions on the final day of the General Assembly near the close of an all-night session.<sup>1204</sup>

Soderstrom also continued to push for women's rights and representation, doubling his efforts in the wake of the death of famed women's rights advocate and personal friend Agnes Nestor in December of 1948. He sought passage of an improved Equal Pay Bill, advocating for HB 222 and reporting on its status almost weekly in his *ISFL Newsletter*, declaring "women everywhere are looking to the General Assembly for fair treatment in the industrial world"<sup>1205</sup> When conservative legislators balked at the idea that women could perform as ably as men in all fields, Reuben shot back in testimony before the House, "There are those who believe that there are certain operations in industry which can be performed better by women than by men and that it logically follows that women should receive better pay than men in these special activities."<sup>1206</sup> Reub also strove to be inclusive with respect to women within his own organization as well. When Vice President Earl McMahan was promoted to Secretary Treasurer, Reub appointed Madge King of the United Garment workers to fill the vacancy.<sup>1207</sup> Agnes O'Connor, head of the Boot and Shoe Workers Union and one of the most prominent women's rights activists in Illinois, personally wrote Reub on this selections:

Dear Brother Soderstrom (I'm not writing out your official title),

Let me most sincerely thank you and congratulate you on your selection of Madge King for the Executive Board. I knew you would make a good appointment, and she being a downstate person balances the Ex. Bd. Earl McMahan, too, is a fine appointment, and hope he will eventually give full time to the job. To me, it just

don't seem possible that both Agnes Nestor and Olander is no more with us. But the work must go on.

Thanking you and Best Wishes,  
Agnes J. O'Connor<sup>1208</sup>

Reub, who was still as overwhelmed by Olander's loss as O'Connor was by Nestor's passing, wrote back:

Dear Mrs. O'Connor:

Replying to yours of the 4th inst.

There are so many puzzling matters attached to guiding a great State Federation of Labor successfully, that sometimes I am amazed that working people are able to do as well as we do, do. It was good to receive your letter of congratulations with respect to Executive Board appointments. Thank you very much.

With every good wish, I remain,  
Your friend,  
Reuben G. Soderstrom  
President<sup>1209</sup>

Ultimately, Reuben failed to secure passage for the new Equal Pay Act. He was, however, able to win passage of generous increases in pay for school teachers, a field at the time populated predominately by women.<sup>1210</sup> "I want to say to this group, that the Department of Education appreciates and gets a great deal of satisfaction out of the support that this organization has given to our department on many occasions," said Vernon L. Nickell, superintendent of Public Instruction for Illinois, to the delegates of the ISFL convention later that year. "It has been due, to a large part, to the help and support through your great representative here Reuben Soderstrom, that we have been able to secure good school legislation. He has supported on every occasion our demands for increased school aid from the state level."<sup>1211</sup>

By the time the sixty-sixth General Assembly adjourned, Soderstrom could credibly point to an impressive string of successes within Illinois, even while national efforts to enact a pro-labor legislative agenda floundered. In truth, Reub's record in Springfield stood in stark contrast to national efforts; all attempts to repeal Taft-Hartley met with failure, despite labor's success at the polls. His ability to produce such benefit increases was even more remarkable when one considered the national economic picture. In 1949, unemployment sharply spiked; Soderstrom's successes had come at the moment when wage-earners needed them most.<sup>1212</sup>

Reuben's vigilance didn't stop at the statehouse, however. As President of the ISFL, he spent a considerable portion of his time advocating for individual members who wrote to him with problems regarding their benefits. A substantial number of these requests concerned treatment workers received at the hands of local Unemployment Compensation agencies. That May Reub sent a message to all ISFL members, encouraging them to write him with their problems:

It has come to the attention of the officers of the Illinois State Federation of Labor that some State employees in charge of local Unemployment Compensation agencies and duties have been mean, discourteous and officious in their treatment of working people when they have applied for their unemployment compensation. Any unfair attitude, unwarranted delay in providing unemployment benefits to qualified workers, or any unnecessary inconvenience or discourtesy from public servants of this character is indefensible and reprehensible and should be reported at once. Such treatment of unemployed workers should not and will not

be tolerated by the A.F. of L. branch of the Illinois Labor movement, which constitutes a large section of the taxpayers who foot the bill to meet the payroll of public employees. Complaints should be filed with R.G. Soderstrom, President, Illinois State Federation of Labor, 503 Security Building, Springfield, Illinois.<sup>1213</sup>

It wasn't long before a flood of complaints overwhelmed Reub's tiny Springfield office. Letters such as the one from Paul McKleroy, a member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, was a typical example:

Dear Brother:

In regard to your letter of May 14, 1949, I have one question regarding the legality of a form "Illinois Public Aid Commission Statement of Income and Expenses" IFAQ Form SS-158 (rev. 9-28-48), form enclosed. This form was sent to me in regard to my Father receiving an Old Age Assistance check each month. He had received such assistance since 1943 and they have just gotten around to this now.

The office in Cumberland County not only sent me this form but sent some irritating letter also in regard to this matter which I have. My Father and I made a trip into this office for further information regarding this matter. I was told during this interview that a sworn affidavit would be sufficient for this matter, just a few days later I received a letter saying the affidavit would not be acceptable. On June 1st he did not receive his assistance check and has not as yet received same...

My Dad and Mother with what little help I could give them have made a briar patch into a moderately livable home, they are people who take care of every little thing, therefore it looks like a lot more than it is. Any help I can get in this matter will be appreciated.<sup>1214</sup>

No matter how busy he was or how long it took, Reuben responded to each and every of the men and women he represented. As he later described:

We have a vast number of pieces of correspondence that comes into the President's office. Sometimes they'll run as high as 85 pieces of correspondence in the day. So I devote my mornings pretty much to taking care of the correspondence. No letter remains in my office more than one day if I can help it. So that these people who take the time out to write to me have an opportunity to have a reply.<sup>1215</sup>

This was Reuben at his best. Throughout his entire life, Reuben had demonstrated the repeated ability to take the personal tragedies that had befallen him—a youth lost to child labor, lack of a formal education, parents haunted by impoverishment—and use them as motivation to fight for public policies that would protect and better the lives of those who faced similar challenges. There is a clear direct line connecting Reuben's personal experiences and his struggle for child labor laws, public education, and old-age assistance. When the courts hit him with injunctions, Reuben didn't just fight the court order; he took on the entire system, ending unfair injunctions for everyone. Even Soderstrom's support for equal pay for women generally and good pay for teachers specifically could be traced to the experiences of the working women in his life, including his daughter Jeanne who was by 1949 struggling to earn a living wage as a teacher in a small one-room school in Streator. Simply put, when something bad happened to Reuben or to those he loved, he set out to make it better not just for them, but for everyone in a similar situation.

### *Honored by Jewish Workers*

One of the personal experiences that most profoundly affected Reuben was the faith of his father. John Soderstrom's Christianity was a practical one, a religion shaped not by doctrine or dogma but by what he

would define as the message of Christ—compassion for those in need and a life lived in service to others. This impacted Reuben in two major ways. First, he saw a deep and abiding connection between his work as a labor leader and the calling of a preacher. He always invited multiple ministers to speak at the annual labor conventions, and typically opened his keynote speech with language either implicitly or (more often) explicitly connecting the messages of the Bible with labor. 1949 was no exception; as he professed to the assembled delegates that year:

I want to thank the representatives of the churches who appeared upon this opening program and who prayed so earnestly for the success of our deliberations. Our records show that representatives of the churches have always been in attendance at each of our annual conventions...The practical Christianity created by the labor movement has many staunch supporters and champions among church leaders, and organized labor, in turn, believes in human brotherhood and subscribes to the teachings of the Lowly Nazarene as presented to us by the representatives of the churches at each of our national conventions.<sup>1216</sup>

As Bob Gibson, a later ally of Reub's, recounted in an interview:

Reub compared [being president] to being a priest. We're here to help other people. It takes dedication to do more than you were hired to do. It takes motivation. Religious leaders had an influence on Reub... Sometimes people would come to me and be like, "Are we going to have another damn priest today?" and I'd say, "Well, these are his friends." It wasn't political. Reub felt his job was equal to a priest caring for his flock. You have to believe in yourself, you have to believe in what you're doing or it won't work.<sup>1217</sup>

Father Donahue would indeed speak that year upon invitation. He and Reub had a close personal friendship and affection, despite the fact the Reub himself was not Catholic. In fact, it is not clear that Reuben closely identified with any particular denomination, and it was this pluralistic character that constituted the second hallmark of his faith. Reub could find common ground with men of different denominations and faiths, a trait that helped him easily find common cause with organizations like the Catholic Church or the Jewish Federation.

This expansive view of fraternity also endeared him to the Jewish trade union movement. In 1949 Reuben instructed the officers of the ISFL to participate in the Illinois Trade Union division of Histadrut, the organization of trade unions in the newly formed state of Israel. It was a move which the organization's Chairman Samuel Gassman claimed "is giving heart to the members of our committee to further its humanitarian aims."<sup>1218</sup> In appreciation, he asked Soderstrom to head his organization as Honorary Chairman; the following month Reuben was also named Honorary Vice-Chairman of the National Committee for Labor Israel.<sup>1219</sup> On December 8, 1949, the Israel Histadrut Campaign held a luncheon at Chicago's La Salle Hotel in honor of Reuben and his efforts on Israel's behalf. A small, intimate group of the AFL Chicago leadership attended, as did National Committee for Labor Israel Treasurer Max Zaritsky. Addressing the group assembled on his behalf, Reuben said:

May I say this on my own behalf and with respect to my own experience—that all of my life I have tried to be of service, of genuine service, to my fellow man and particularly to my fellow worker. In the early days, like most of those who are assembled here today, I was at times knocked around from pillar to post and denied the right to earn a livelihood at my calling or at my craft because of labor and political activities, yet it has given me extreme satisfaction to be of service and all that I ask of my fellow man, all that I ask of my fellow workers assembled here today, is that I be permitted to continue in that service under the guidance and with your cooperation as your friend and your honorary chairman of the Illinois trade union division of Israel Histadrut campaign.<sup>1220</sup>

## *Chastened but Renewed*

Ultimately, Rauch decided not to run against Reuben at the ISFL convention that year. The crisis caused by the *Post-Dispatch* discoveries also abated, at least for the most part. Carl Soderstrom and John Walker, Reub's son and mentor, respectively, emerged with their reputations largely unscathed because they were not elected officials and most likely operated as retained consultants. Earl McMahon, however, was a different case. Unlike Carl and Walker, he had accepted the governor's payments while serving as an ISFL vice president, which was in clear violation of the group's charter. At the 1949 convention, a resolution demanding an immediate special election to fill Olander's unexpired term was proposed.<sup>1221</sup> While the official reason cited for the election was the many responsibilities McMahon already held, the "Green gravy train" payments McMahon received were likely the real reason behind the call. Reub was able to stop the resolution on the grounds that the regular election would come before any special election could be held, allowing McMahon to quietly resign the following spring.<sup>1222</sup> Instead, the delegates passed a resolution demanding complete lists of those on the state payrolls—an implicit rebuke of ISFL leadership. As the *Bloomington Pantagraph* reported:

In passing the resolution, the convention delegates over-ruled the resolution committee. It was the first time that a convention committee recommendation was turned down. The committee opposed the measure because, members said, "undoubtedly" the names of some labor leaders with legitimate state jobs would appear on such a list and it would "make it possible to hold them up to public scorn." But delegates disagreed with the committee. "We know it's necessary to have payrollers," said Lloyd Butterfield of the Will County Central Trades and Labor Council, which sponsored the resolution. "But we want to know who our friends and who our enemies are." Butterfield continued, "This is not a government of secrets. We're entitled to know who is on the payroll..." The overwhelming approval of the resolution, followed by applause from the floor, was one of the few times that the convention departed from the strict routine of okaying committee recommendations.<sup>1223</sup>

Soderstrom thus emerged from the 1949 convention—and 1949 as a whole—chastened but renewed. He had faced an unprecedented series of personal losses, rough battles, costly attacks, and a scandal in the governor's office. But in the end he had survived, as always, retaining the loyalty of those he served as President and ready for the fight to come. As he proclaimed in his Labor Day address:

A review of the record of the past makes it clear that there is no good reason for pessimism with respect to the present or the future...Today the labor movement has a membership of about sixteen million wage earners. Today we are strong and experienced. We know how to steer clear of the legal rocks and weather the storm.<sup>1224</sup>



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