



Forty Gavels

The Life of Reuben Soderstrom
and the Illinois AFI-CIO

Volume Three
1950-1970



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FORTY GAVELS

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

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www.FortyGavels.com
www.GlobalPSD.com
ISBN 978-0-9982575-2-5

It is conventional to say the future belongs to our unborn children, but the fact is it belongs to us. What we do today determines how the world shall go. Tomorrow is made up of the sum total of today's experiences. No one knows what formula, nor how slight a change may reshape the pattern to our heart's desire. Far from feeling hopeless or helpless, we must seize every opportunity, however small, to help the world.

- Reuben G. Soderstrom, 1960

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.

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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' 50th 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 VII

1950-1959

AFL-CIO MERGER

IN THIS ERA

Reuben unifies organized labor in Illinois. In 1952, the leaders of both the AFL and CIO die unexpectedly. National unification talks begin in 1953. In 1955, Reuben is one of six selected by the AFL and CIO Executive Committees to draft the new organization's governing policies. That year, he personally makes the motion on the floor of the AFL national convention to officially create the AFL-CIO. After tense negotiations, the Illinois AFL and CIO merge in 1958 with Reuben as president. The Illinois AFL-CIO is born.

Soderstrom expands his legislative legacy when his son, Carl Soderstrom, wins a seat in the Illinois House of Representatives in 1950. Carl becomes labor's voice in Springfield, and passes important legislation in support of teachers and firefighters. Reuben's wife Jeanne dies unexpectedly in 1951.

Reuben defeats several anti-labor attacks, including an anti-picketing law and new so-called "right to work" legislation. The 1952 election of Republican governor William Stratton strengthens Reuben's hand. In 1953, he helps open Olander Homes, an affordable housing project named in honor of his friend.

Soderstrom's message reaches a national audience. He welcomes both the Republican and Democratic National Conventions to Chicago in 1952, and meets with the Prime Minister of Sweden. In 1953, Reuben is honored in a grand ceremony by the Jewish Labor Committee of Chicago for his efforts on behalf of civil rights. AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer William Schnitzler delivers the keynote address. In 1954, Reuben is called to Washington to help increase national safety standards. Later that year, AFL President Meany sends him to represent the AFL-CIO at the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada. He charts an optimistic vision for labor's future.

"The amalgamation of the CIO and the AFL on the state level is a magnificent finale to the great labor drama unfolding today. Still, saying goodbye to an organization that has done so much good is, indeed, tinged with sadness. It has been a wonderful experience and a privilege to head the Illinois State Federation of Labor for 28 years. While at times it was, indeed, grueling, hard work, I have enjoyed every minute of it, and I can honestly say this to you—that I would like nothing better than to live it all over again."

-Reuben Soderstrom at the dissolution of the ISFL, just prior to the creation of the Illinois AFL-CIO, 1958

CHAPTER 39

1950

REUBEN'S NEW PARTNER: SON CAPTURES LEGISLATIVE SEAT

“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 is the very beginning—for the commonest food, hunger for clothes and for 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.”

-Reuben Soderstrom, ISFL Convention, 1950

REUBEN WEIGHS IN

1950 began a decade of unprecedented change. No corner of life—from entertainment to politics to (of course) labor—was left untouched. By the start of the decade America was more populous and prosperous than ever before. The post-war baby boom had produced over 30 million babies by the decade's start. Televisions were rapidly replacing radios as the household entertainment medium of choice; by the start of 1950 Americans were buying 100,000 TVs a week! Those with a preference for the movies (like Reuben) could instead take their car to one of the over 2,000 drive-in movie theatres that had popped up across the country in the last three years to gaze on the likes of Elizabeth Taylor and Marlon Brando.¹ Of course, the most frequent drive-in visitors were the newly-named teenagers, young Americans between the ages of 13 to 19 who were being catered (and sold) to in unprecedented fashion. Mechanical marvels like the electric clothes dryer and the garbage disposal became ubiquitous, filling new homes that were being built in suburbs, pre-planned and mass-produced housing complexes complete with their own schools, community halls, and shopping centers. Across the nation, there was a growing sense that an old age was ending and new one was being born.

Accompanying that sensation was the deep desire to record and memorialize the era. Labor was no exception to this impulse. From the 30th Anniversary of Chicago's *Federation News* to the mid-century edition of the *Illinois Labor Bulletin* to the centennial celebration of Samuel Gompers's birth, labor seemed every inch as eager as the rest of the nation to make 1950 a year of remembrance. It wasn't long before ISFL President Reuben Soderstrom received requests from across the country to contribute his thoughts and experience. The Illinois State Federation Archives from 1950 are filled with requests from local and national editors, directors, and chairmen asking Reub to write pieces for their paper or speak at their commemorative events.

Soderstrom didn't hesitate to firmly establish the role he and the ISFL played in bringing legislative and economic rights and gains to the working men and women of Illinois—and, in fact, the nation. The story of the ISFL could, he said, be summed up in one word: progress. As he detailed in his contribution to the *Federation News*:

For a period of sixty-eight years the Illinois State Federation of Labor has been a progressive leader of organized

working men and women in this State. Continued progress marks the history of the Illinois State Federation of Labor since its establishment—progress in its legislative affairs, progress in its fiscal standing, progress in civic consciousness, progress in human relationships. These relationships have been consistently friendly throughout the years. All of its progress comes from public acceptance of our aims and ideals, mutual respect between Illinois management and workers, understanding of each other’s problems, and recognition of a common interest.²

It was this mechanism of change, an altering of the public mind and discourse rather than an agenda of revolution, which Reuben was most proud of. He wanted posterity to record the philosophy, policy and political practice of the AFL broadly and his ISFL specifically. As he wrote in one of his many commemorative essays that year:

Over the years the Illinois State Federation of Labor has worked to implement freedom and economic power. A free union is one which is controlled exclusively by its members. It is not dominated by employers, by a political party, nor by the government. This tradition is as old as the American labor movement.

While union members in Illinois have shown little interest in revolutionary philosophies, workers of this State have taken a particular active interest in state and national legislative labor issues; Illinois workers have, and are, vigorously supporting Social Security proposals, Minimum Wage and other Federal labor laws, and opposing, at the same time, the Lea, Hobbs, and Taft-Hartley enactments, which are oppressive and harmful to labor.

While a labor party as such has never commanded their interest or support to any great extent, Illinois unions, through proper labor agencies, endorse or oppose individual candidates for public office, regardless of their party affiliations; they support and lobby for legislation, and maintain legislative agents to represent their interests in Congress and the Illinois legislature. They operate on a non-partisan basis—partisan only to principles.³

FIGHTING FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Standing for Welfare, Against Communism

Reuben’s portrayal of a labor movement democratically governed, legislatively focused, and “partisan only to principles” was a visionary statement of what all unions could and should be. Sadly, the country’s press-driven (and manufacturer-funded) impression of labor was a portrait of an organization that was autocratic, pseudo-communist, and wholly owned by the Democratic Party. All too often over the past half-century, unions and their leadership had given substance to such caricatures. John L. Lewis, arguably the nation’s most recognizable face of labor, was famous for his dictatorial style of leadership, while the organization he helped found, the CIO, had long been plagued by its Communist ties.

That was beginning to change, however. In November of 1949, the CIO decided to definitively deal with the issue, beginning with two Communist-dominated affiliates: The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers (UE) and the United Farm Equipment and Metal Workers of America (FE). As Arthur Goldberg details in his book *AFL-CIO: Labor United*:

The 1949 convention of the CIO took two decisive steps. First, it expelled the UE and the FE by direct vote of the convention. It took this direct action against them because of their open defiance of CIO principles and policies and their open and notorious adherence to the Communist party line. Second, the convention created a new procedure for the expulsion of affiliates. This was done by adding to the constitution a new section (Article VI, Section 10) authorizing the executive board, by a two-thirds vote, to expel any union “the policies and

activities of which are consistently directed toward the achievement of the program or the purposes of the Communist Party, any Fascist organization, or other totalitarian movement, rather than the objectives and policies set forth in the constitution of the CIO.⁴

These actions weren't occurring in a vacuum. In October of 1949, the Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong defeated the Nationalist Chiang Kai-shek and declared the creation of the People's Republic of China. News of Mao's success in the populous country shocked the American public and sparked fears that the fall of China was only the beginning of a broader Communist advance. Those fears were seemingly realized on June 25, 1950, when Communist North Korea, a proxy of the Chinese Communists, invaded their democratic Southern counterpart. By early July, U.S. troops were on the ground fighting on South Korea's behalf.

This aggressive action reverberated throughout the world of work. Soderstrom immediately issued a statement and subsequent articles placing Illinois labor squarely in support of US action. As he declared in his essay unambiguously entitled "Labor supports Uncle Sam":

The end of the "cold war" came early in July of this year when the United States of America decided to intervene in the Korean civil conflict, between the Communists in the North and those who were trying to maintain a democratic form of government to the South, in that troubled country. Both nationally and internationally nothing is more vital to advance the principles of democracy and freedom than the work of our labor movement. It is especially important to let the world see its operation in time of war.

In Korea wage earners have been the object of infiltration and communistic propaganda and something concrete should be done in the field of American propaganda to counteract this evil program. The free trade unions of America, better than any other group, can demonstrate to these peoples of the earth, that totalitarianism is not interested in their welfare. The entire American labor movement is a living, breathing, fighting protest against the communistic philosophy of absolutism which makes human beings slaves of an all-powerful state.⁵

The article highlights a key component of Reub's philosophy on the connection between unionism and democracy. Unions weren't just noncommunist, but America's best weapon against it. Anti-Communists, Soderstrom argued, needed strong, healthy unions to lift up as an example to the world how a democratic nation cares for its working poor. As Reuben wrote in the *Illinois Labor Bulletin* that same month:

We believe the way to defeat communism, or any other extremism, is to give the people, including the workers, something better. Through trade union freedom, the mid-century edition of the *Illinois Labor Bulletin* finds the American worker better off than any other wage earner in the world.⁶

Of course, if America hoped to provide such an example to the workers of the world, it had to do more than pay lip service to laborers. A strong and democratic America, according to Soderstrom, was one that provided for its citizens' welfare through progressive policies. Week after week, Reuben featured articles and authors in his *Weekly Newsletter* calling for national responsibility with regards to the common good. Federal Security Administrator Oscar Ewing, whose article "Who Is Afraid of the Welfare State" Reub featured in July of that year, was one such example:

Last fall we heard a good deal of talk about the so-called Welfare State. The idea seemed to be that there was something wrong about being interested in the general welfare. You don't hear that talk any more. The reactionaries did such a good job of advertising the aims of the New Deal that they quickly discovered, to their horror, that the American people were pretty much in favor of these aims. Nobody is scared of the Welfare

State except a few selfish, near-sighted reactionaries.

The reason, of course, is that Americans have more faith in themselves than the reactionaries have. We are not afraid of using government as a servant of the people. We are not afraid of pooling our resources in order to protect one another from the hazards of daily life.⁷

Truman Proposes National Health Insurance

Of all the hazards that working men and women faced, none were more perilous or potentially destructive than those of injury and illness. These threats to health were ones that Reuben had spent a lifetime fighting, working as recently as the last legislative session to increase benefits paid to workers through Illinois's Occupational Disease and Workplace Compensation laws. Still, Soderstrom believed, such efforts didn't go far enough. When President Truman called for a National Health Insurance funded by payroll deductions, Reuben came out strongly in support, stating unequivocally:

National Health Insurance has the support of the labor movement. It is the only constructive answer to the crisis in American health. Thousands of Americans are suffering ill health, or risking death, because they cannot afford to pay for the medical and hospital care that might make them well. The only way to solve this problem is to establish an insurance system that would let people help pay for medical care when they are well and working, so that they would not have to face the nightmare of huge bills when they are sick in bed.⁸

President Truman made a strong case for National Health Insurance, contending that there were "certain rights which ought to be assured to every American citizen [including] the right to adequate medical care and the opportunity to achieve and enjoy good health [and] the right to adequate protection from the economic fears of sickness."⁹ Despite this demonstrated need and the President's best efforts, Truman had been unable to budge the Congress. Frustrated supporters placed the blame for this failure on many different quarters, from moneyed special interests to the President's desegregation of the Army, which cost him Southern Democratic support.

Reuben tended to discount such arguments, believing the core problem to be a lack of popular, rather than legislative, support. Laser-focused on public opinion and its influencers, he placed the blame squarely on doctors and their professional organizations. In 1949 and 1950, the American Medical Association (AMA) made an unprecedented push against Truman's plan, throwing their support behind an alternative bill introduced by Senator Taft (author of labor's hated Taft-Hartley law) that would instead provide workers with coupons (subsidies) to purchase private insurance. Fearing their financial interests were at stake, doctors spent over \$1.5 million, more than any lobbying effort to date, to destroy any hope of national insurance. Instead of reasoned arguments about the benefits of costs of national health insurance, the AMA ran expensive, full-page ads smearing the President's plan as a Communist plot. As Melissa Stone of the University of Miami's Humanities in Medicine writes:

In the 1950s the AMA went to unprecedented lengths and used extreme measures to insure the defeat of Truman's health care bill, and many historians believed that it worked. During the course of the campaign, the AMA contradicted and condemned the government. The campaign encroached on the public's lives by telling them what they should do and believe, and if they didn't listen to the AMA, they would be un-American—something that was greatly feared during this time.¹⁰

Soderstrom was deeply angered by these attacks. He fumed that the AMA's opposition came from deep-seated anti-union bias. Such AMA attacks were not only unprofessional and dishonest, Reub claimed, but hypocritical as well. As he wrote in 1950:

The attitude of the medical profession, as an association, is hostile to labor unions. There are, of course, notable exceptions to this generalized statement. There are many individual doctors who are friendly to the labor movement. But the spokesmen of the medical profession are unfriendly to the unions of workmen. This is a historic reputation that has been built up through many years of critical union opposition.

In this attitude towards the labor union the medical profession is in a very poor position because it has copied or adopted many of the tactics and practices of organized labor. In this respect nowhere are the union activities more evident than in the organization field. The doctors have closely organized their profession into “associations” that cover the members in counties, states, and nation...The doctors, instead of calling their organizations “unions,” classify them as “associations.” Otherwise they are close-knit organizations which guard what they believe to be the interests of members more closely than the unions ever dared to do. Far be it from the medics to ever admit this resemblance to unions. Talk about closed shop!

The American Medical Association, supported by every reactionary in America, has smeared this proposal as socialized medicine which would regiment doctors and patients. This is a plain lie, and the only reason they are getting away with it is that too many people don't have the facts about what National Health Insurance would really do. It's time the people got the facts in this great health plan, so that we can begin to solve the financial problem of health care.¹¹

Fighting Racial Discrimination

Health reform, while important, was far from the only progressive fight Reuben took on in 1950. In a period defined by deep racial divides and legalized discrimination, Soderstrom stood out as a strong supporter of minority rights. While Reuben had long been against racial discrimination, 1950 did seem to mark a turning point, with Reuben speaking out more often and in starker language than he had previously. The death of Victor Olander, who was much cooler on the subject than Reuben, may have played a part in this change. Whatever the reason, as the 1950s began Soderstrom called on labor to support anti-discrimination legislation. In an early address to those within unions skeptical of minority rights, Reub reasoned:

A lot of thoughtless people are asking today “Why all this clamor for rights? Don't minority groups know they are well off?” But—have you noticed how many of the people who say that are those who have never met with discrimination? They have never moved outside of their own particular orbit, but the barrier that has kept them back has not been that of “restriction” or “discrimination.” Instead it has been a lack of money, or desire, that restrained them. As individuals they knew they were acceptable anywhere. Before you condemn minority pleadings, just think how you would feel if you weren't wanted—not after having had a chance to prove your worth, but before and regardless!

These minorities want to belong. They want the same rights we possess—the right to work and be useful, the right to economic security, the right to freedom from want for their families, and—most important of all—the right to participate on equal terms in our common life.¹²

Reuben's support for laborers of color wasn't just restricted to speeches. As the new decade dawned, Reub renewed his advocacy for bills designed to prohibit discrimination in employment because of race, color, religion, national origin or ancestry. He also supported the creation of an Illinois Fair Employment Practice Commission to enforce such protections. Within the ISFL, Soderstrom used his power and influence to make sure workers of color weren't discriminated against by Illinois Locals. When he learned from Charles Jenkins, a black state representative, that one of Jenkins's constituents believed he was being barred from union membership because of his color, Soderstrom immediately set things straight. He wrote to the ISFL's chief

attorney, Dan Carmell, telling him:

State Representative Charles J. Jenkins, who has a very good labor voting record, has been trying to secure an appointment for Mr. Otho Hammond as a blacksmith's helper at the Calumet Plant of the Sanitary District...The job is still open and Mr. Hammond gave up a perfectly good position in the County Treasurer's office to take it but is denied the privilege of doing so because Local Union No. 5 will not permit him to become a member. Is there anything you can do to open the door of this Union so that Mr. Hammond can become a blacksmith's helper? Representative Jenkins insists that the job is still open and that Mr. Hammond is denied union membership and the appointment because his skin is black.¹³

In using his office to force a local union to open its ranks to members of color, Reuben was taking an unprecedented step, one Olander had previously viewed as a violation of a union's right of voluntary association. More so than any other action, Soderstrom's efforts at the start of the 1950s to end union discrimination marked a clear departure from the policies of the past and signaled Reuben's coming into his own on this issue.

THE ELECTION OF 1950

Carl W. Soderstrom on the Ticket

The election of 1950 marked the second time Labor would put to the test its new election machinery, the Labor League for Political Education. Reuben chaired the organization in Illinois. As in the 1948 election, he favored a nonpartisan approach, fundraising early and spending heavily in Republican primary elections. The decision was both principled and tactical. "Perhaps the best place to beat [US Representative Robert] Chipperfield is in the Republican primary," Reub wrote to John DeYoung, Secretary of the Tri-City Federation of Labor in Rockford during a conversation on how to best to beat the anti-labor Republican. "At any rate a good hot primary fight on the Republican side might ball up the situation enough to assure the election in November of a friendly Democrat."¹⁴

There was one Republican primary that mattered considerably more to Reuben than the rest, however. In the 39th district a young lawyer by the name Carl W. Soderstrom was running in the Republican primary for state representative. The 35-year-old Carl, who, along with wife Virginia and their four young children, lived with Reuben in his Streator home, sought to continue his father's legacy. Under the Illinois constitution elections operated under a policy called *minority representation*, meaning each district elected three representatives, only two of which could be of the same party (ensuring the minority party in each district would be represented in the General Assembly). It made for complicated electoral math—one that Reub knew well. In his first successful run for the House in the conservative 39th, Reub won by running as a progressive in the Republican primary. This way, he didn't have to defeat a "real" Republican or entrenched Democrat; as long as he came in second in the primary he was virtually guaranteed a seat. As the elder Soderstrom later shared:

Two or three times the Republican Party up there, they read me out of the party with their resolutions, their motions, so something of that kind, because they said that I wasn't a real Republican, which was true. I was running on the Republican ticket.¹⁵

When Fred Hart, a Republican from the Soderstroms' hometown of Streator, decided to make a run for the Illinois Senate, Carl decided to seize the moment and make his father's play. However, by 1950 the field was much more crowded than when Reub first ran. At the start of 1950 Carl was in a four-way heat for the two available Republican general election posts.¹⁶ Two more candidates announced their candidacy in the following months, making a six-person race by primary day. Soderstrom's political skill proved more than

equal to the task, however. As the Bloomington *Pantagraph* reported in the wake of the primary:

J. Ward Smith, incumbent of Ottawa, and Carl W. Soderstrom, Streator, left opponents far behind in the race for Republican nominations . . . Smith received 16,941 (votes), and Soderstrom, 11,997 . . . Behind the Republican winners were Terrence S. Martin with 6,736, Elmer E. Armstrong with 6,686, Joseph Marchesi with 4,167 and Robert J. Kacinski with 887.¹⁷

Carl's primary victory did not ensure a seat, however. In the general election, the Democrats decided to field two candidates, incumbent Joe Stremlau and Streator native Leo Doran. The Democrats' confidence was not unwarranted; although a traditionally conservative stronghold, the 39th could swing Democratic as well.

Suddenly, Carl found himself fighting a war on two fronts. On the right, he faced anti-labor reactionaries—the Illinois Manufacturers' Association in particular—who would sooner see a Democrat take the seat than Soderstrom; as Reuben confided to friend and Oglesby labor official Martin Pietrzek in a handwritten letter:

The Manufacturers' Association, and other enemies of labor, are not concerned about who is elected to the legislature from La Salle County—just so Carl W. Soderstrom stays at home. In fact, my information is they are supporting the other three candidates in an effort to defeat Carl. These evil elements are aware that Carl Soderstrom will use his training and know-how to be helpful to the Illinois State Federation of Labor. There is only one way to successfully combat this kind of opposition and that is to urge all of those who understand the situation, and know what it means, to give Carl Soderstrom their three legislative votes.¹⁸

As Reuben noted, under the Illinois constitution each voter had three votes to cast for state representative (one for each open seat), and they could spread them across the candidates as they chose—one vote for three candidates, three votes for one candidate, or in a two-to-one split. The elder Soderstrom believed the surest path to a victory was to convince labor voters to cast all their votes for Carl, and he didn't hesitate to tell them so. In an official letter sent to all labor officials in La Salle County that October, Reub advised:

Dear Sirs and Brothers:

The political campaign is warming up. I am reliably informed the Manufacturers' Association, and other enemies of labor, are supporting every candidate for the Legislature in the 39th Senatorial District except Carl W. Soderstrom. They want him defeated because he is not only for the things the wage-earners need and want but because he is especially trained to effectively fight for working people...

Please distribute the campaign cards enclosed. I will deeply appreciate it if all of you will not only vote for Carl W. Soderstrom but work hard for him until the polls close on November 7.¹⁹

Some LaSalle County labor officials did not approve of Reuben speaking in his capacity as ISFL President to endorse his son, Carl. There was tension amongst members of the Streator Trades and Labor Council over the idea of supporting the Republican Soderstrom over the Democratic Doran, who like Carl was a Streator native. There was also some lingering doubt concerning Carl's ties to former Governor Green. In an expose the previous year, the *St. Louis Dispatch* released the names of 19 people—including Carl, who was a private attorney at the time—who had received undocumented payments of \$300 to \$1,000 from the Governor's office. While not illegal, this "secret payroll" had shocked labor, causing the ISFL delegates to implement constitutional reforms barring such activity in the future (overruling their resolution committee for the first time in their 67-year history). The revelation may have even contributed to the resignation of Earl McMahon as ISFL Secretary-Treasurer. Stanley Johnson, McMahon's replacement (so new that his name did not yet appear on the ISFL stationary) wrote to Reuben concerning the protest. Johnson's letter no longer exists, so

we cannot know his sentiment; Reuben's response, however, was retained, and portrays a man clearly furious at any hint of impropriety:

Friend Stanley:

Replying to yours of the 23rd inst.

The Joint Labor Legislative Board of Illinois recommended Carl W. Soderstrom for the Legislature. These Joint Board endorsements or recommendations were printed in the Weekly News Letter October 7th 1950. These endorsements are not a secret and the Federation supports all candidates with this kind and other publicity, all of which is consistent with effective legislative work but, of course, no financial aid is ever given.

As to the matter of the Green affair, Reub turned the very charges back on Carl's accusers, contesting that their objections were more manufactured than genuine:

Political parties place Central Body people on their payrolls. Both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party have been guilty of this practice not only in the Streator Trades and Labor Council but in a vast number of other Central Bodies through the state...I think this is some more payroll politics which probably can be traced, also, to the Manufacturers' Association of this highly industrialized section of Illinois. The 39th Senatorial District is wholly within LaSalle County. The protest is a little on the insulting side and deserves merely a curt reply of the facts...²⁰

Reuben did not back down an inch. As he saw it, his position as President was not being used to unfair advantage. Just the opposite—the entire reason the IMA opposed Carl was because in their view “his Father is too damn strong in the legislative activities of Illinois as it is.”²¹ Reuben reasoned he would have supported a candidate of Carl's caliber no matter his relation, so why should he further handicap labor by staying silent only because of his last name?

Election Results: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

In the end, neither Soderstrom needed to worry. Carl crushed his opponents in the general election, accomplishing a feat even his father was never able to achieve—he won more votes than any other candidate. As Reuben wrote to his niece Esther:

Carl won handily in the election contest. He was high man, which surprised everybody. He is a very conscientious young man and a very good lawyer, so he should make a success of lawmaking. Politics and law are closely related so he'll feel at home in the General Assembly.²²

While Carl's election was a resounding success, labor's overall result in the 1950 election was disappointing, to say the least. In Illinois and across the nation, pro-labor candidates went down to stinging defeat, including Illinois Senator Scott Lucas. Much of this had little to do with labor issues. The Korean War had deeply hurt the President's and the Democrats' popularity, as had key economic conditions. As Soderstrom wrote in his election autopsy:

Failure on the part of the political party in power to attain peace between nations, and this national situation seemingly resulting in endless war, undoubtedly contributed to the 1950 election defeat. High prices, high taxes and the administration's failure to establish controls granted by Congress were other factors.²³

Fears of the Communist “Red Menace” also played a major role in the 1950 campaign, especially with regard

to the Lucas race. Senator Lucas, who also served as Senate Majority Leader, was personally targeted by a freshman Senator Joe McCarthy, who was fast gaining popularity by adeptly exploiting fears that the US Government was captured by Communist infiltrators.²⁴ Conservative interests also greatly outspent their labor counterparts. The Labor League, which relied on voluntary donations, raised \$592,222.40 for political activity in 1950, relying mainly on \$2 contributions from 5% of its membership²⁵ The AMA alone, in contrast, raised triple that amount through mandatory contributions of \$25 per member.²⁶

Still, Soderstrom and labor could not escape the fact that their message had failed to make an impact. “In many states candidates opposed by labor polled strong votes in heavily industrial centers,” Reuben noted. “That was particularly true in Ohio. Taft piled up big margins in industrial counties where unions worked hardest to defeat him.”²⁷

Why did this happen? To some extent, labor unions were a victim of their own success. As Secretary Stanley Johnson wrote, “attendance at local union meetings has been small, due to good employment at wages which each group constantly seeks to improve.”²⁸ While unions had delivered, the politicians they supported hadn’t. “Groups of workers were peeved,” Reuben explained, “Because the Democratic Party, nationally...was unable to redeem its pledge to repeal the Lea, Hobbs and Taft-Hartley Acts, and the Knowland Amendment, all of them repressive enactments.”²⁹ Why would working men and women waste their votes on candidates who couldn’t deliver?

In the end, Reub agreed with the analysis of LLPE Director and fellow Illinois laborer Joe Keenan, who wrote to Reuben and other state presidents:

We have lost some good friends in both Houses of Congress and some of our enemies have returned. In short, we were not as successful as we had hoped to be...The returns also show that we cannot relax but rather that we should intensify our efforts to bring a true discussion of the issues confronting the working people of this country to our members, their family, and friends.³⁰

FAMILY MATTERS

The year 1950 had brought joy to the Soderstrom household with Carl’s smashing success, but it delivered devastating losses as well. Reuben’s wife Jeanne, who had never been in the best of health, had recently begun to deteriorate. At the same time, Reub’s last living brother, Paul, died on February 17. Throughout his legislative career, Reuben had counted on Paul to serve as a trusted set of eyes and ears on the ground among workers. Still, Paul had his demons, compounded by wartime injury and the death of his beloved wife Clara. Together, Paul and Clara had a little girl named Lorraine, and after her mother’s death Lorraine was raised by Reuben’s mother. Although Paul later remarried, the young girl stayed with her grandmother, and Reuben remained especially close to his niece. Despite their estrangement, Lorraine took her father’s death very hard, suffering depression the following year. Although exactly what happened was not recorded, she appeared to temporarily depart for New Orleans to recover. It clearly worried the family patriarch, who wrote to her:

Dear Lorraine:

Your recent letter came through. I am glad you are feeling better and on the way back to a comfortable recovery. We are beginning to have bright sunshiny days in Illinois. April is a nice spring month and we do have quite a large number of nice April days. Of course the month of May has Glorious weather and the summers in Illinois are gloriously attractive, with all the warm weather and wondrous beauty.

Almost everyone feels weak and depressed at times, especially when they are worried about their health. One

should postpone worry until morning. Strange as it may seem, it is almost impossible to feel depressed and to do any worrying in the morning – so all worry should be postponed until then...

I do hope the weather will be agreeable during your visit to New Orleans and that warmer weather in Illinois will make an early trip back home attractive. It's always nice to do one's convalescing at home with the family—and after all, there is no place like home.³¹

Lorraine wasn't the only niece Reuben watched over. Ten years earlier, Reuben's kid brother Lafe, his closest confidant and ally, had died tragically in a car accident. Ever since Reub had watched over his daughter Esther, helping whenever and however he could. That November he reached out to her again, inviting her to come home:

Dear Esther,

It was nice to hear from you. The snapshot photograph was indeed interesting. You most certainly have a peach of a family. I haven't seen the littlest lady as yet but I'll be around one of these days to meet her. The boy I have met and he surely is some boy.

Now that you have two beautiful children why don't you come down to Streator and show them off? It would do all of you a lot of good, including your splendid husband, to strut around a little. Especially when you have so well balanced a family to display.

Flats are hard to find but if you want me to I'll ask the officers of the Flat Janitor's Union to be on the lookout for a reasonably priced place to live. Sometimes they know about vacancies even before the people move out. Let me know the neighborhood you would like to live in and I'll ask them to check...

Have a big time throughout the coming holiday. Christmas is the outstanding family day of the year, and since I like all my relatives I do like to see them during the Christmas season. It may be that I will be able to find the time to see all of you before the first of the year.³²

As the "outstanding family day" approached, Reuben received quite an unanticipated gift from a spectacular source. As the *Western Catholic Edition of Our Sunday Visitor* reported on Christmas Eve:

R. G. Soderstrom of Streator and Springfield, president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, a few days ago received a rare Christmas gift of which he is very proud. It is a document from Rome from His Holiness Pope Pius XII bestowing the Holy Father's apostolic blessing upon Mr. and Mrs. Soderstrom³³

To be sure, Reub, though not a Catholic, had certainly proven himself a friend to the Church. Father Donahue, who had beseeched the Holy See on Soderstrom's behalf, was elated to honor his friend with the engraved Blessing of the Holy Father Pope Pius XII. As he had told the ISFL convention delegates gathered in Peoria that year:

Openly I thank Mister Soderstrom, my dear and cherished friend... for the visions and dreams that slowly and gradually reared a state federation that is the most active, most alert, and most progressive in these United States... Because in my way of thinking you have the greatest of leaders, you have a man at the top of your fold, who, when the history of this great state of ours is written, shall find his name at the top of the list among those who have contributed toward the advancement of humanity in this, our prairie state.³⁴

As the year came to a close, Reub could breathe a heavy sigh of relief. Despite a difficult start, with his

brother's death and the viability of his son's candidacy in doubt, it had ended in fine fashion. The trials and tribulations of the 1940's had been vanquished, and a bright future lit the horizon. The 1950's held great optimism as well as responsibility. As he wrote in the annual Executive Board report that year:

The world is looking to us for an example of what free men can achieve. We dare not fail. The destiny of generations to come is in our hands—we are making history. This is our challenge, and our opportunity.³⁵

Onward, into the future.

PILLAR IX

RELIGION: REUBEN'S FAITH

REUBEN'S FATHER, LUTHERAN MINISTER

In the 1860s, John Soderstrom, Reuben's father, a Lutheran preacher and journeyman cobbler, traveled to the United States from Sweden in no small part to pursue religious freedom. He wanted to break from the established church, which in his view had become unequal and materialistic by charging pew fees, among other injustices. He came to the New World to worship as he pleased.

While serving as a pastor in Minnesota, John met and married Anna Cedarholm, who had also emigrated with her family from Sweden. John and Anna soon began a family of their own, naming their sons after Biblical characters—Paul, Reuben, Levi (Lafe), and Joseph. They named their daughter Olga, derived from the Swedish word “holy.” Even as John moved his family across Minnesota, repairing shoes and seeking an elusive profit from farming, he remained perched in a pulpit. The Soderstrom children regularly spent Sunday mornings listening to their father's sermons, followed by an afternoon of hymns played on the family organ.

A gentle man, John always cared for those in need, routinely waiving the meager fees he earned as a cobbler for his poorest clients. From an early age, he taught Reuben the need to empathize with those less fortunate. “My father was a very thoughtful sort of person...intensely interested in proper care” for the sick and aged, Reuben later recalled. “He was interested in religious activities and, like most Scandinavians, [he] devoted a good deal of time to church work and activities of that type...He was the kindest man that ever lived.”³⁶ Reuben carried that lesson forward as a state representative and president of organized labor in Illinois. Over the decades, he enacted several pieces of social legislation directly inspired by biblical principles, including the Old Age Pension Act, Workmen's Compensation Act, the Occupational Safety Act of Illinois, and pensions for widows who lost their spouses to workplace accidents.

“LIKE A PRIEST CARING FOR HIS FLOCK”

Throughout Soderstrom's 18-year tenure as a state representative and 40 years as president of organized labor in Illinois, he maintained a relentless pursuit of fairness, justice and equality of opportunity for all people. As president, Reuben would often speak at various churches, especially during the annual labor conventions. Addressing congregations of all types, he would talk of the shared values and responsibilities of faith and labor. “It is clear that organized labor and the churches have a duty to perform,” he said. The challenge of bringing the nation's powerful to account “is a moral issue which can be solved jointly by these two great moral forces. Organized labor and the Church must set all leaders an example of Christian fairness and human brotherhood—real Christian human brotherhood—in order to restore understanding, tranquility, and peace on earth.”³⁷

In 1931, during his first full year as President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor (ISFL), Reuben Soderstrom set a precedent—continued throughout his entire career—by attending local churches in manufacturing towns to speak to congregations of laborers and their families. In that year, Thomas Downie, editor of the *Galesburg Labor News*, wrote:

One of the outstanding features of the presence of the convention is the fact last Sunday... a labor leader took to the pulpit... At the First Christian Church, President R.G. Soderstrom made the address in the morning, bringing out some very clear facts in regards to the present economic conditions, and the part that the church can play in the solution. Those who heard Brother Soderstrom, express the opinion that the speech they heard was one of the best that had been rendered in a long time. The minister and the members of the church were well pleased with the speaker.³⁸

President Soderstrom welcomed all who walked through the doors of a union event. "In our union halls and convention halls," he said, "Men and women of different faiths come together to acknowledge a common devotion to the Great Ruler Above and His divine authority over our lives."³⁹

Reuben's message won him many religious allies. One of the earliest was Father John Maguire, professor and president of St. Viator College in Bourbonnais, Illinois. Fr. Maguire was a powerful advocate for labor; Reuben called him the "one man in Illinois who has been at the beck and call of every branch of the labor movement in the state... He does not carry a card, but he truly represents our people, because his heart beats with the heartbeats of the workers."⁴⁰

When Father Maguire died in 1940, Soderstrom introduced a new priest to the labor faithful. Father Joseph Donahue, chaplain of the Chicago Building Trades and himself a union lather, was a familiar face to union delegates. At Reuben's invitation, he spoke at most of the state conventions held during Reuben's tenure as president and, like Fr. Maguire before him, was frequently called to argue for labor bills at Soderstrom's side. The labor priest was more than just a colleague; he was also a personal confidant. "Father Donahue was a close friend to Reub, and gave him much comfort in later years," his sister Olga recalled. "He was there when [Reuben's] wife passed away. Also when [his brother] Paul passed away... [Fr. Donahue] always said a prayer that helped us in our sorrow."⁴¹

Father John Brockmeier, a union printer, attorney, and chaplain of the Springfield Federation of Labor, was another Catholic leader Reuben often asked to address the delegates of the convention and the legislators of the General Assembly. Like Fathers Maguire and Donahue, Fr. Brockmeier saw complementary roles as a Catholic priest and union advocate. When asked if he had to convince the Church to be in favor of the labor movement, Fr. Brockmeier replied, "No. There was no occasion for it... labor became Christian the very day that the young man—the child Jesus—picked up the carpenter's tools of Saint Joseph, his foster father, and began to work."⁴²

In 1950, Reuben's friendship with the Catholic Church was commemorated with an apostolic blessing bestowed by Pope Pius XII himself. The most unusual aspect of the apostolic blessing Reuben received was the fact that it was given to a non-Catholic. Soderstrom cherished the honor. "This Blessing becomes my most treasured possession," he wrote to his friend Father Donahue, "And I am having it framed so that it will be preserved for grandchildren and generations of Soderstroms yet unborn to reverently view and meditate upon."⁴³

During his time as president, Reub befriended and enrolled a number of ministers—including Episcopalians, Methodists, Evangelicals, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Disciples of Christ, and of course, Lutherans—to speak at the Illinois labor conventions. At Soderstrom's request, most of these leaders also lent their voice to labor's cause in the Illinois General Assembly, for which Reuben was eternally grateful. "The leaders of religion have left a deep impression upon the labor movement, and upon labor officials," he said. "Representatives of the Church have frequently come to the rescue when labor needed help in the legislative halls."⁴⁴

Soderstrom felt a kinship with the preachers and teachers he worked alongside. “Reub felt his job was like a priest caring for his flock,” Bob Gibson, Soderstrom’s protégé and future Illinois AFL-CIO president, later explained. “You have to believe in yourself; you have to believe in what you’re doing, or it won’t work.”⁴⁵

JEWISH SOLIDARITY

Soderstrom forged a deep and lifelong bond with his Jewish friends in Illinois, including several rabbis and Jewish trade unionists in Chicago. It was certainly not lost on him that the great A.F. of L. was founded by an immigrant Jew, Samuel Gompers, or that the union tradition owed a heavy debt to organizing Jews. “The American Federation of Labor has long adhered to the fundamental principle laid down by our forefathers—that all men are created equal,” he said. “One of our first acts was to draft a set of principles dedicating the A.F. of L. to the idea of equality of opportunity without regard to race or religion.”⁴⁶ In Reuben’s 40 years designing and presiding over the ISFL and Illinois AFL-CIO annual conventions (he handpicked the guests of honor and closely choreographed the agenda), he invited rabbis to deliver invocations or address the delegates on 17 occasions.⁴⁷

Soderstrom declared labor’s support for German Jews when the Nazis introduced anti-Semitic legislation, and called on Germany “to stop the persecution of the Hebrews, not merely because they are Hebrews, but because persecution is wrong.”⁴⁸ In 1938—and against the backdrop of increasingly troubling news out of Europe—Reuben invited Rabbi Harry Paster of Anshai Emeth Temple to speak to the Illinois labor delegates. He called on labor and the nation to reject both intolerance and fascism. “You cannot have democracy without tolerance, and you cannot have tolerance without democracy,” he warned. “If you love democracy, then with all your heart and soul guard the spirit of tolerance. Take the spirit away and you will have a dead husk, a corpse.”⁴⁹

In the late 1940s, Soderstrom supported the creation of a Jewish state, declaring “We believe the independence of the State of Israel is a matter of deep concern to all who favor freedom and democracy.”⁵⁰ He also served as an honorary chairman of the Israeli Federation of Labor, Histadrut, and helped lead fundraising efforts for the organization in Illinois. At home, Reuben joined with the Jewish Labor Committee to promote an end to all discrimination based on race, color, or creed. In 1953, the Jewish Labor Committee of Chicago honored his efforts with an extraordinary dinner banquet, presenting him with a long and moving tribute which read in part:

With courage, conviction, and clarity, you have championed the cause of the wage earner, the needy, the aged, and the disenfranchised of our community, our State, and our Nation. Every legislative measure designed to promote the welfare of the people of Illinois for nearly two score years past bears the imprint of your mind and is influenced for good by the zeal of your mission...You are truly a vigorous, distinguished, and happy warrior for human rights and human liberties.⁵¹

In his acceptance speech, Soderstrom renewed his commitment to liberty and equality, reaffirming that “The trade union movement has made important gains for all workers, white and black, Christian and Jewish... We will never halt our struggle until discrimination is banished.”⁵²

THE CARPENTER OF NAZARETH

Soderstrom’s commitment to Judeo-Christian principles permeated every aspect of his leadership, including his interactions with individual laborers in need. Throughout his entire 40-year career as president of organized labor in Illinois, Reub received and responded to letters from people at all levels of life. He

frequently found ways to help a widow get her husband's pension payments, a family to qualify for unemployment compensation, or an unemployed worker to find a job—all part of his mission to make the world a better and more just place. He spoke frequently about how biblical values had inspired the labor movement:

Christianity and its representatives laid down the principles upon which good trade unionism and living is founded... Representatives of the churches have tried to fill our labor halls and our convention halls with a spirit of human brotherhood. They have tried to make our labor temples and our convention halls similar to the temples of God, a place where the truth should be told... The similarity between the philosophy of the churches and the philosophy of organized labor, too, is striking. Both the representatives of the churches and the representatives of the labor movement want wage-earners to respect the truth, to tell the truth, to detest the things that are false. Moral principles and moral law were given to mankind by outstanding writers in the Holy Scriptures... Organized labor wants wage-earners to try and preserve the democratic heritage of equal opportunity for all men to earn and learn. 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.⁵³

Reuben often joked that, "Some of us believe that if the Carpenter of Nazareth was on earth today, he would carry a union card."⁵⁴ As he wrote in his 1945 "Carpenter of Nazareth" speech, a moving and inspired tribute:

The Carpenter of Nazareth was a man born in a small village, the son of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village and worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty years of age. Then for three years he was an itinerant minister. He never wrote a book; he never held an office; he never had a family; he never had a son; he never put his foot inside of a large city; he never traveled more than two hundred miles away from the place where he was born; he never did any of the things associated with greatness. He had no credentials except himself.

While still a young man, the tide of public sentiment was turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to the cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had left, which was his coat. After he was dead he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone since these incidents occurred, and today He is the center piece in the column of progress.

I think I am well within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever were built, all the Parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned have not influenced the life of mankind as this one man, the Carpenter of Nazareth.⁵⁵

Like the Carpenter of Nazareth, laborers were simple folk, men and women who were unlikely to hold positions of importance or travel far from home; who organized for their rights and were met with scorn and derision; were sometimes treated like criminals by the authorities; and departed from this world with hardly anything to their name. Yet, Reub believed, their principles—unity and compassion—had the power to change the world.

No finer ideal exists in all the world than the trade union utopian goal of human brotherhood... The thoughts of the lowly Nazarene too have come closer to assuming reality in America... The poor boy has a chance to rise from obscurity to positions of great power and influence if he has it in him.⁵⁶

No doubt he saw the saw the union movement in that, and certainly a bit of himself.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

RELIGIOUS LEADERS SPEAK TO THE ILLINOIS AFL-CIO

Religious Leaders Invited by Reuben Soderstrom to Speak or Deliver an Invocation at the Annual Conventions of the Illinois State Federation of Labor and Illinois AFL-CIO, 1931—1970

- 1931 Rev. H.S. Zendt, Pastor, First Christian Church
Rev. George Doubleday, Pastor, Corpus Christi Church
- 1932 Rev. W.M. Briggs, Pastor, Grace Methodist Episcopal Church
Rev. John Maguire, President, St. Viator College
- 1933 Rev. Keene Ryan
Rev. Thomas Egan, Dean, Loyola University
- 1934 Most Rev. Joseph Schlarman, Bishop, Diocese of Peoria
Rev. B.G. Carpenter
- 1935 Rev. Howard M. Kelly, Pastor, Epworth Methodist Episcopal Church
- 1936 Rev. Msgr. Cusack, St. Peter Catholic Church
Rev. Gerhardt A. Friz, Pastor, St. Paul Evangelical Church
- 1937 Rev. Emanuel Crusius, Evangelical Protestant Church
Rev. Theodore Wujak, Pastor, Sacred Heart Church
Rev. John Maguire, President, St. Viator College
- 1938 Rabbi Harry Paster, Anshai Temple
Rev. Robert Clarke, Pastor, Union Congregational Church
- 1939 Rev. C.B. Bruner, Pastor, Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church
- 1940 Rabbi Feinberg
Rev. Paul Washburn
Rev. Monsignor McMillan
Rev. F.P. McNally
- 1941 Rev. Thomas Lineweaver, President, Danville Ministerial Association
Rev. Francis Cleary, St. Patrick Church
Rev. Joseph Donahue
- 1942 Rev. J.D. Shaughnessy, St. Patrick Church
Rev. Joseph Donahue

- 1943 Rev. Donald Finley, Pastor, Stuart Street Christian Church
- 1944 Rabbi Harry Paster, Peoria Jewish Temple
 Most Rev. Joseph Schlarman, Bishop, Diocese of Peoria
 Rev. Dr. B.G. Carpenter, Peoria Ministerial Association
 Rev. M.P. Sammon, St. Bernard Church
 Rev. Joseph Donahue
 Rev. James D. Shaughnessy, Assistant Pastor, St. Cecilia Church
- 1945 Most Rev. James A. Griffin, Bishop, Diocese of Springfield
 Rev. William Roth, Pastor, St. Anthony Lutheran Church
- 1946 Rabbi Leo Bergman
 Most Rev. John J. Boylan, Bishop, Diocese of Rockford
 Rev. Paul Washburn
 Rev. Francis McNally
- 1947 Rabbi Julius Hyatt, Agudis Achim Synagogue
 Rev. Robert Peters
- 1948 Cardinal Samuel Stritch, Archbishop, Archdiocese of Chicago
 Rabbi Morton M. Berman, President, Temple Isaiah Israel
 Rev. Armand Guerrero, Methodist Mayfair Church
- 1949 Rabbi Lewis Satlow, B'rith Sholom Temple
 Rev. John Brockmeir, Pastor, Sacred Heart Church
- 1950 Rabbi Julius Hyatt, Agudis Achim Synagogue
 Rev. Joseph Donahue
- 1951 Rev. H.M. Hildebrandt, Pastor, Third Presbyterian Church
 Rev. John Brockmeir, Pastor, Sacred Heart Church
 Rev. Joseph Donahue
- 1952 Rabbi Joseph Ginsberg, Jewish Temple of Peoria
 Rev. Theodore Larson, Pastor, Salem Lutheran Church
 Rev. William R. O'Neill, Westminster Presbyterian Church
 Rev. Edward J. Gates
 Rev. John Brockmeir, Pastor, Sacred Heart Church
- 1953 Most Rev. Charles Clough, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Springfield
 Rev. John Brockmeir, Pastor, Sacred Heart Church
 Rev. Joseph Donahue
- 1954 Rabbi Joseph Ginsberg, Jewish Temple of Peoria
 Rev. H.G. Bradshaw, Executive Secretary, Peoria Council of Churches
 Rev. Theodore Larson, Pastor Salem Lutheran Church
 Rev. John Brockmeir, Pastor, Sacred Heart Church
 Rev. Joseph Donahue

- 1955 Rev. Msgr. Thomas Jordan, Sacred Heart Church
 Rabbi Jordan I. Taxon, Tri-City Jewish Center
 Rev. William O'Connor, St. Ambrose College
 Rev. Fred J. Rolf, Evangelical and Reform Church
 Rev. William Grimes, Second Baptist Church
 Rev. Joseph Donahue
- 1956 Rev. Richard Paul Graebel, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church
 Rev. Donald J. Finley, Capital Christian Church
 Rev. H.M. Hildebrandt, Third Presbyterian Church
 Rev. A. Ray Grummon, Pastor, First Methodist Church
 Rev. Joseph Donahue
 Rev. John Brockmeir, Pastor, Sacred heart Church
- 1957 Cardinal Samuel Stritch, Archbishop, Archdiocese of Chicago
 Rabbi Jacob Weinstein, KAM Temple
 Rev. Dr. A. Leon Barkey, Carey African Methodist Episcopal Church
 Rev. Raymond Spore
 Rev. Joseph Donahue
- 1958 Rev. Edmund Grzybowski, Vice-Chancellor, Diocese of Peoria
 Rev. Bodine, First Methodist Church
 Rev. H.G. Bradshaw, Peoria Council of Churches
 Rev. William Howe Donaldson, Pastor, Zion Baptist Church
 Rev. Charles Miller, Pastor, Sacred Heart Church
 Rev. Walter Teesdale, Forest Hill Methodist Church
 Rev. H. Russell Coulter, First Methodist Church
 Rev. William Cousins
 Rev. Joseph Donahue
 Rev. John Brockmeir, Pastor, Sacred Heart Church
- 1959 Most Rev. Bernard J. Sheil, Auxiliary Archbishop, Archdiocese of Chicago
 Rev. Theodore Richardson, Pastor, Metropolitan Community Church
 Rev. John Brockmeir, Pastor, Sacred Heart Church
- 1960 Brigadier C.H. Dragsback, Salvation Army
 Rev. Donald J. Finley, Pastor, Capital Christian Church
 Rev. Richard Paul Graebel
 Rev. John Watson, Assistant Minister, Westminster Presbyterian Church
 Rev. John Brockmeir, Pastor, Sacred Heart Church
- 1961 Rev. James D. Shaughnessy, Assistant Pastor, St. Cecilia Church
 Rev. Leonard Hall, Executive Secretary, Council of Churches
 Rev. William J. Johnson, Ward Chapel Church
- 1962 Rev. Donald J. Finley, Pastor, Capital Christian Church
 Rev. H.M. Hildebrandt, Pastor, Third Presbyterian Church
 Rev. David Blake, Pastor, St. Paul African Methodist Episcopalian Church

- Rev. Joseph Donahue
- 1963 Rev. Dr. Ralph Abernathy, Southern Christian Leadership Conference
Most Rev. Raymond Hillinger, Auxiliary Bishop, Archdiocese of Chicago
Rabbi Jacob Weinstein, KAM Temple
Rev. Clarence Cobbs, First Church of Deliverance
Rev. Joseph Donahue
- 1964 Rabbi Julius Hyatt, Agudus Achim Synagogue
Rev. Richard O'Brien, Pastor, St. Monica Church
Rev. Dr. Robert Watts Thornburg, First Methodist Church
Rev. Joseph Donahue
- 1965 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Southern Christian Leadership Conference
Rev. Clarence H. Essman, Pastor, Asbury Methodist Church
Rev. Milton Mosbacher, Pastor, Clementine Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. David Blake, Pastor, St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church
Rev. Joseph Donahue
- 1966 Most Rev. James Montgomery, Bishop Coadjutor, Episcopal Diocese of Chicago
Most Rev. John Patrick Cody, Archbishop, Archdiocese of Chicago
Rev. Clarence Cobbs, First Church of Deliverance
Rev. Dr. Dean Luginbill, Pastor, Rogers Park Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Brockmeir, Pastor, Sacred Heart Church
- 1967 Rabbi Julius Hyatt, Agudus Achim Synagogue
Rev. James Shaughnessey
Rev. Robert Watts Thornburg, Pastor, First Methodist Church
Rev. Calvin Hightower, Morning Star Baptist Church
- 1968 Rabbi Meyer Abramowitz, Temple B'rith Sholom
Rev. William Krueger, Pastor, St. Luke Episcopal Church
Rev. William L. Toland Jr., Associate, Christ Episcopal Church
Rev. David Blake, St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church
Rev. Joseph Donahue
- 1969 Rev. Dr. Ralph Abernathy, Southern Christian Leadership Conference
Rev. Dr. Marshall Scott, Director, Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations
Rabbi Mordecai Simon, Executive Director, Chicago Board of Rabbis
Rev. Timothy Lynne, Pastor, Holy Name Cathedral
Rev. John Brockmeir, Pastor, Sacred Heart Church
Rev. Joseph Donahue
- 1970 Rev. Sister Dorothy Mikesell, Chaplain, Hotel & Restaurant Employees
Rev. Jackson Canafax, Bethel United Methodist Church
Rev. Joseph Donahue

CHAPTER 40

1951

DEATH DEALS A BLOW

“Labor believes free men can achieve more than slaves. But to implement this ideal we must and we do accept the responsibilities that go with freedom. We must work together as a team to meet the common problems. Cooperation, not antagonism, is the key to achievement. The world is looking to us for an example of what free men and women can achieve.”

-Reuben Soderstrom, Federation News, 1951

CARL SODERSTROM, SR. BEGINS POLITICAL LIFE

The Son Rises

January 3, 1951 was a celebratory date for Reuben G. Soderstrom. For 16 years he had served as LaSalle County’s representative in the Illinois General Assembly, fighting the battle for workers’ rights. Over the years he’d fought the good fight, passing a slew of labor bills that transformed the world of work. From ending injunction abuse to instituting workplace protections; from creating funds for the old, sick, and unemployed to affirming the entitlement of all workers to such benefits; from establishing the principle of weekly rest to persevering against any and all attempts to compel laborers to serve against their will. Through it all Reub had built a legacy that reverberated throughout the halls of Springfield and touched workers around the state.

Now, that legacy took new form in the inauguration of his son, Carl W. Soderstrom, as a House Representative for Reuben’s own 39th District. Reub took deep satisfaction in his son’s accomplishment; as he proudly proclaimed at the Illinois State Federation Conference later that year:

Friends, there is nothing in our lives that gives us more satisfaction than to see our children take our places as they grow. This happens to be a proud moment... My son now occupies a seat in the Illinois House of Representatives. He and I have a father and son combination in the capitol building, and he supported all of the legislation that the Illinois State Federation of Labor wanted in the last session. He just about ran his legs off for his dad during that session.⁵⁷

The moment was as daunting for Carl as it was exciting for Reub. Joining his father on the convention platform, the younger Soderstrom told the delegates:

While I was sitting over there as a member of the House... I was trying to think how in the world am I going to fill these big shoes, you know, that my dad had... so I did my level best... I just want to assure you that as long as I am a member of the legislature, labor is going to have a loyal and staunch friend there.⁵⁸

Carl didn’t waste any time proving that friendship. He soon began making headlines by introducing a host of new bills to help those who worked for a living. On February 6th he introduced legislation to increase the ceiling on old age pensions from \$65 to \$78 per month.⁵⁹ He also brought forth two bills for new building projects: a new bridge over the Illinois River at Peru and a new viaduct and bottom road for the Shipping

Port Bridge at LaSalle.⁶⁰ Two weeks after that he introduced a bill to place all state employees on a 40-hour work week, with overtime and time-off provisions.⁶¹ That proved only the beginning; over the course of the legislative session, Carl sponsored or co-sponsored bills amending the Workmen's Compensation and Occupational Disease Acts, the Prevailing Wage Act, and more.⁶² By late March, there were 38 bills pending in the Illinois legislature backed by the ISFL affecting roughly 70% of Illinois residents.⁶³

The Lion of Labor

While Carl played an important role in introducing legislation, there was no doubt that Reuben remained the "Lion of Labor" in the legislative world. He began the year with a succinct open letter to Governor Adlai Stevenson, detailing exactly what he expected to see from him:

With the 1951 session of the Illinois General Assembly upon us, you are undoubtedly beginning to think about the message which you, as Governor, are called upon to deliver on the opening day. There will, of course, be a labor section in this historical 1951 Governor's Address, and the men and women of the Illinois State federation of Labor will deeply appreciate it if you will kindly mention specifically, and urge the enactment of, the following legislative proposals...⁶⁴

Reuben then began to detail each and every legislative act on which he—and his 800,000 members—expected the Governor's support. Over the next several months, Reuben personally appeared before legislative committees to argue for the passage of pro-labor bills. When multiple committees were in session, Reub would send in his stead his two most trusted allies, ISFL Attorney Dan Carmell and Secretary-Treasurer Stanley Johnson. Reub also worked the press, making sure labor bills were covered in the news. The tactic worked; papers throughout the state chronicled the legislative struggle and kept pressure on legislators.

Most importantly, Reuben ensured that all in the sometimes fractious Illinois labor movement spoke with one voice. He worked closely and well with Frank Annunzio, the governor's Secretary of Labor, despite the fact that Annunzio was a CIO man and his Assistant, Fern Rauch, was a political opponent within the ISFL. In 1951, Reub set aside these personal and political differences, striking a more conciliatory tone with the CIO and calling explicitly for unity. "We must work together as a team to meet the common problems. Cooperation, not antagonism, is the key to achievement," he told the union faithful that year in his Labor Day Message.⁶⁵

All this made Reub the central, if largely self-effacing, figure in Illinois Labor politics. In a state known for bombastic labor leaders of regional and national stature, Reuben was "in the forefront of the legislative fight."⁶⁶ Through it all, Soderstrom constructed an agenda that was not only protective but positive. In the words of Illinois House Speaker Warren L. Wood:

One of the reasons why organized labor has the regard that it has in the legislative halls, I think, is because... the program of labor is a positive program. You are for things. I have enjoyed, and I mean that word sincerely, a very pleasant relationship with organized labor... With your president it has been on a personal basis, because he was my colleague in my very first term, and that personal relationship... continues right down to the present, because at this time his son is again a representative from the Ottawa district.⁶⁷

Through this collaborative, affirmative, and personal approach, Reuben and labor won an impressive string of early victories. On April 25, the House passed his bill creating a 40-hour week for state employees by a vote of 102-17. Soderstrom's success came despite strong opposition from Democratic House spokesman Paul Powell, who considered the price of fair wages and hours for state workers too costly.⁶⁸ Wins on old-age pension increases soon followed.⁶⁹ As summer approached, it appeared as though labor might perform a clean

sweep of its sponsored legislation.

Then the hits came. The State Employee Wages and Hours Bill, which Carl had passed through the House by an overwhelming majority, was killed by the Senate Committee on Efficiency and Economy, denying the legislation a vote in the Senate.⁷⁰ Bills proposing sick benefits for wage-earners also failed, as did legislation allowing unions to enter a contractual relationship with public bodies.⁷¹ The biggest shock, however, came on June 9 when lawyers for the Illinois Manufacturers' Association backed out of concessions they'd made just the week before on Workmen's Compensation, declaring they would now only support increases to the minimum and maximum benefits, doing nothing for large amounts of workers who came in between.⁷²

The move was dangerous. For years, labor's largest gains were made through the "agreed process," a mechanism invented by Reuben where representatives of the ISFL met with representatives of the IMA to hammer out agreed legislation before it was introduced to the General Assembly. The agreed bills process had allowed the two organizations to work together and find just levels of care for agreed protections like workman's compensation and unemployment insurance, even as they fought each other bitterly on other issues. If the IMA carried through on their threat to end the process and take the fight directly to the legislature, it would turn every labor-management negotiation into a political affair, effectively ending incremental benefit increases.

Reuben would have none of it. He brought in the heat, directing Attorney Dan Carmell's office to summon lawyers for the United Mine Workers, Progressive Mine Workers, and the CIO to Springfield along with the IMA's Harlan Hackbert. As soon as they arrived, the lawyers "placed them in the hands of R.G. Soderstrom," who wasted no time silencing any hint of backtracking from the June 1 agreement. They had a deal, Reuben said, and they were going to seal it then and there.

When manufacturers' representative Harlan demurred that the current agreement could allow some workers to receive benefits higher than their average weekly raise, the labor lawyers responded by adding language that expressly forbid such a scenario. Reub then immediately called in State Representative Robert Allison, who was given confirmation by all (including the chastened IMA representative) that the agreed legislation called for a 13.3% increase across the board, not just at the margins. Allison in turn advanced the bills to the second reading.⁷³ When the legislation passed shortly thereafter, Reuben praised it in the press as the "outstanding labor achievement" of the 1951 General Assembly.⁷⁴ He had willed it across the finish line.

The success made front page news. By the close of the legislative session Reub had reaffirmed his status as the preeminent voice in Illinois Labor. All but eight of the labor-backed bills put forward that session became law.⁷⁵ It was a lengthy list, covering everything from care for the aged and injured to health care and workplace safety. It also included a litany of profession-specific legislation. Whether it was a bill correcting firemen's arbitration, increasing teacher retirement benefits, or improving standards in the barber trade, the ISFL worked with individual unions to pass legislation that would have a meaningful, positive impact on their industry.

The attention did not go unnoticed. Several unions that year wrote to Soderstrom, thanking him for the role he played. James McGuire, President of the Chicago Fireman's Association, told Reub "The Firemen of the City of Chicago and the State of Illinois will be forever grateful to you, and your Secretary, Stanley Johnson, for the support and advice that was given to us so freely during this past session."⁷⁶ George Bynum of the Journeymen Barbers, Hairdressers and Cosmetologists likewise wrote "I want to personally thank you on behalf of this local union, and all of the barbers in the state of Illinois...It is most gratifying to us now that our lot has been greatly improved, in spite of all opposition offered during the past session of the 67th General Assembly."⁷⁷ It was this specific, targeted, and responsive lobbying on behalf of individual unions and professions that made Soderstrom and his philosophy of change through legislation so popular with Illinois

workers.

Reuben Opposes Racial Discrimination

While many of the bills Reuben supported dealt with specific unions or targeted issues, others had to do with basic fairness and equality in the workplace. Most important of these were House Bills 50 and 67, which dealt with gender pay equality and fair employment for workers of color, respectively. Reuben had long been a supporter of equal pay legislation; he had helped pass an earlier, weaker version of the law and had argued for stronger legislation (which would actually provide recourse for those discriminated against) in the last General Assembly. Unfortunately, Republican resistance to the bill remained incredibly high, and conservative legislators did all they could to bottle up the bill. In April, Republicans on the House Committee on Industrial Affairs voted in overwhelming numbers to recommend against the legislation (Carl Soderstrom was one of only five Republicans to vote in favor of the bill).⁷⁸ When the bill came to the full house in June, Republicans killed the bill by abstention; while the majority of those voting cast lots in favor of the bill by a margin of 64 to 39, supporters couldn't reach the constitutionally mandated number of "yes" votes.⁷⁹

The struggle to end discrimination proved even more problematic. Publicly, organized business was against discrimination in employment. That year the Illinois State Chamber of Commerce produced a slide film entitled "It's Good Business" that sought to convince its membership that adopting non-discriminatory hiring practices was not only morally just but also smart business. Reuben was actually featured in the film, making the case for management to end discrimination on the conditions of race, color, or creed. When the film was screened that April in the Grand Ballroom of the Leland Hotel, Soderstrom was sent a cordial invitation from Chamber Executive Vice President Ormond F. Lyman.⁸⁰

Still, the Illinois Chamber of Commerce and other manufacturing organizations vehemently opposed the bill proposed by the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC). Unsurprisingly, the most reactionary testimony against the bill in the General Assembly came from the Illinois Manufacturers' Association. As the Illinois Fair Employment Committee detailed in their *FEPC News*:

The low-point (in any sense) of the opponents' testimony was plumbed by R. David Clark, General Counsel of the Illinois Manufacturers' Association, when he irresponsibly attempted to distort and misrepresent the conciliation and persuasion features of the bill, provided for the protection of the employer, into a Nazi inquisitorial process, in utter and complete disregard of the actual provisions of the bill.⁸¹

Sadly, irresponsible language from the IMA comparing the FEPC to Nazis was only the tip of the iceberg. A deep, vitriolic well of racial hatred lay behind opposition to equality. Reuben received a bitter taste of such venom in letters from individuals and groups such as Joh Fleck, Chairman of "Americans for Republican Action," who wrote a host of public officials in a near rage:

Re. the ballyhoo for FEPC. In the days of the Old Testament it was a miracle if an ass spoke. How times have changed...There is a N****r in the woodpile somewhere...Abraham Lincoln had the power but he did not have the right to free the slaves. And, if he did, what article, section, or clause in our Federal Constitution gave him the right? Moreover, the Negro has never been constitutionally made a citizen, and he has no right to vote, be a juror or be on any public payroll whatsoever...A carbon copy is being mailed (to) the President, Chief Justice, Council of State Governments, Governors, Senators, et al. I need not tell them that the jawbone of an ass (blatherskite, demagogue, dupe, fool or idiot) is just as dangerous as a weapon today as in the days of Samson.⁸²

Despite such hate-filled antagonism, Reuben and others continued to speak out, aggressively arguing for the adoption of the FEPC bill. On April 5, Soderstrom was one of the key speakers before the Senate Committee

of Industrial Affairs, arguing forcefully for FEPC passage. Testifying after Edith Sampson, US Delegate to the United Nations, Reub reiterated some of the points he had made previously in support of racial equality, appealing to the legislators:

Minorities want to belong. They want the same rights we possess—the right to work and be useful, the right to economic security, the right to freedom from want for their families, and—most important of all—the right to participate on equal terms in our common life...There is some discrimination in the labor movement but I am happy to report there is less of it there than in any other section of society. Honest labor is working hard to eliminate it and if the American Federation of Labor in Illinois had its way, there wouldn't be any of it. S.B. No. 67 prohibits discrimination in employment because of race, color, religion, national origin or ancestry, and the eight hundred thousand members of the Illinois State Federation of Labor will deeply appreciate it if you...vote to report out, favorably, this justifiable proposal.⁸³

Heartbreakingly, Soderstrom and his allies fell one vote shy of the 26 votes necessary to pass the bill in the Senate.⁸⁴ Reub sent letters to all Senators in a last ditch effort to find one last vote, but in the end his efforts were to no avail. Still, Reuben's actions and words did not go unnoticed. The Jewish Labor Committee, which fought for the FEPC bill as protection against anti-Semitic discrimination, was particularly impressed. As Lillian Herstein of the JLC wrote to the labor leader in the days following his testimony, telling him:

I am literally bursting with pride about the very fine letter which you sent to the members of the Industrial Affairs Committee of the Illinois Senate concerning the Fair Employment Practice Commission bill and about your splendid performance at the hearing of the committee. I am not at all surprised because I know how genuine is your desire for fair employment practices. I know how forthright and eloquent you can be in any good cause...I am wondering whether there would be any objection to giving your letter wide circulation. Could I send copies of it to some of the labor papers who are very much interested in the bill and the position of the Illinois State Federation of Labor?⁸⁵

Reuben was of course happy to see his letter circulate, telling her she was “free to make whatever use of the letter as you desire.”⁸⁶ He may have lost the fight for fairness that year, but Soderstrom at least furthered his reputation as an advocate for equality and deepened his alliances with like-minded institutions. His forceful defense of fair employment legislation helped define the fight against discrimination in Illinois, and solidified Reub's reputation as a leading advocate for equality years before the Montgomery bus boycott sparked the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.

City Manager Struggle

Of all Reuben's fights in the 67th General Assembly, none appeared more quixotic or proved more unpopular than his fight against the rise of the City Manager form of Government. Ever since the reform of civil service and increasingly since the 1930s, many good government advocates had supported a form of city management that transferred the administrative functions of government from the democratically elected mayor to a manager typically appointed by the city's legislators or councilors. In 1951, City Manager supporters in the House introduced HB 213, a bill that would enable cities in Illinois to hold referendums on adoption of this form of government.

Reuben hated the idea. To him the idea of replacing an elected official with an appointed, less accountable manager was thoroughly anti-democratic. As he wrote in an essay that year:

It would be much better to devote some time to municipal affairs and make our democracy work on that level rather than to talk about and promote military, managerial, and other obnoxious set-ups... The Illinois State

Federation of Labor has always felt that our form of government was worth preserving, worth defending, and worth retaining on the municipal level as well as on the state and national levels. The word “manager” is an industrial term. The city manager proposal is designed to establish industrial controls over municipal affairs...The managerial form would substitute industrial management for our democratic processes in city government.⁸⁷

In private correspondence Reuben took an even harsher tone against attempts to allow City Managers. In a letter to Dan Kulie, President of the Village of Brookfield, Soderstrom stated:

“Manager” is an industrial term and while managers are necessary in private autocratic factory and production establishments they have no place in democratic public bodies whose business is to service all the people. H.B. No. 213 is an undemocratic and un-American proposal. Not to oppose it is a form of compromise with something evil...I would not want to provide the people with an opportunity to attain a fascist or soviet form of city government. Substitute the word “Soviet” for the word “city” in this city manager proposal and I think that you will understand why a referendum on things that are wrong should have no place in city government proposals...What we need in our country is more democracy in industry and not more industrial autocracy in city government.⁸⁸

Soderstrom’s position, however, was a lonely one, at least if newspaper accounts are to be believed. Newspaper editorial boards across the state had become enamored of the City Manager and its promise of an efficient, patronage-free government. Soon the measure became a cause celebre, attracting countless articles in support. Of all the newspaper editorial boards in the state, however, none was more public in its support of the City Manager bill—or in its denunciation of Reuben—than *The Daily Journal-Gazette*. As it boasted in its own pages that summer:

Editorials published in this newspaper were reprinted in most of the 85 daily newspapers in the state and in the 600 weekly and semi-weekly papers. The 38 presentations we made were publicized in most cases before we appeared and in all instances on the days the speeches were made. The audiences, mostly civic clubs, numbered from 35 to 225 and in no instance was a disconcerting voice raised against our arguments for this permissive legislation. If we stepped on any political toes their owners suffered in silence.⁸⁹

All, of course, but Reuben. Faced with his strong opposition, the paper did its best to isolate Soderstrom, casting him as their villain, as the sole impediment to passage of the bill that they admitted to spending “tremendous effort and expense” to support, writing:

The one, lone objector so far to raise his voice is President Reuben G. Soderstrom of the Illinois Federation of Labor...How un-democratic can one become? Soderstrom forgets, while he is making his speech, that he would deny the citizens of Illinois the right to hold elections for the type of government they might desire.⁹⁰

It wasn’t long before other writers and editors joined in on the attack. An April column by Edwards Lindsay in the *Southern Illinoisan* was one example:

Reuben G. Soderstrom, president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, has written a letter to members of the Illinois House opposing the ‘city-manger’ bill. This is not surprising, but it is too bad. It is not surprising because Mr. Soderstrom has been against every reform in government that has come up in the state the first half dozen times the proposals have been considered. He instinctively fears change. It is too bad because he has a good deal of influence.⁹¹

The *State Register*, so often a supporter of Reub, likewise opposed him on H.B. 213, albeit in a more

respectful tone. As they stated in an article entitled “We Like Mr. Soderstrom. But —”:

The State Register, which so frequently agrees with him, believes that he is not following his usual course of sound judgment when urging the Illinois General Assembly to defeat the so-called “City Manager bill” now pending in the Legislature...To oppose the right of the people to express their convictions through referendum is, in our opinion, to strike at the very roots of our democratic form of government, of which we have long recognized Mr. Soderstrom as an able champion.⁹²

Ultimately, the City Manager proposal won by overwhelming margins, passing by a count of 90 to 19 in the House and by unanimous vote in the Senate.⁹³

So how and why did Soderstrom fight and lose so badly? It could be that the straightforward explanation—that he opposed HB 213 because he viewed it to be industrial and undemocratic while a majority of editors and legislators viewed it as the best way to defeat inefficiency and patronage—is the correct one. However, other factors may have well been at play. It is impossible to talk about city management in Illinois without talking about Chicago, and Chicago politics in 1951 were at a crisis point. Mayor Martin H. Kennelly, who originally ran as a business-friendly reformer in 1947, had managed to make enemies out of nearly everyone. Progressives opposed his discriminatory and segregationist housing policies. In the words of historian and author Thomas Dyja, “Kennelly fiddled as many of Chicago’s neighborhoods burned.”⁹⁴ At the same time, the Mayor had upset the city’s powerful “Gray Wolves,” the often corrupt city Aldermen who thrived on patronage, with half-hearted anti-racketeering efforts that left them wounded but still powerful. Even Jacob Arvey, the anticorruption-minded leader of the Chicago Democratic organization, called Kennelly “the most inept man I ever met.”⁹⁵

This, then, was the context for the fight over what power a mayor should possess. Certainly, the corrupt Gray Wolves of Chicago would love nothing more than to have a manager, chosen at their discretion, take control over city administration. A city manager in Chicago would deliver the city straight into their eager hands. Reuben would not have been blind to this, even if he couldn’t make such an argument publicly—to do so would start a fight that would be counterproductive for organized labor. State legislators knew this, too, which is why the city of Chicago was specifically excluded from the 1951 City Manager Act. Still, everyone considered the bill a necessary first step to placing Chicago under the Aldermen’s control. As Reuben wrote in his opposition essay, “It is rumored that an attempt will be made to bring Chicago under the City Manager Act by amending the law in the 1953 session of the Illinois General Assembly.”⁹⁶ Of course, regional papers cared little for the fate of Chicago; as *The Daily Journal-Gazette* derisively commented, it didn’t matter that Chicago wasn’t included in the City Manager Act because it “probably should be a state of its own.”⁹⁷

If the fight over the City Manager bill was really a proxy fight over control of Chicago, then Reuben’s opposition had more sense and urgency. Council control of Peoria may be benign, but such rule in Chicago would extinguish any hope of reform in the Second City; the City Manager Act of 1951, then, was not the end of the fight—it was only the beginning.

DEVASTATING LOSS

Reuben’s Wife Jeanne Dies

On Tuesday, May 22, 1951, Jeanie Shaw Soderstrom, Reuben’s loving and faithful companion, died suddenly of a heart attack in their hometown of Streator.⁹⁸ Papers across the state, including the sometimes antagonistic *The Daily Journal-Gazette*, noted her passing with sadness. The June 2 edition of the *ISFL Weekly News Letter* shared in Reuben’s profound sadness, writing:

Labor in Illinois was joined by men of all political faiths, business, civic and industrial leaders in extending condolence to President Reuben G. Soderstrom in the loss of his beloved wife. Her sudden death was a distinct shock.

While staying in the background of her eminent husband, her faith, loyalty and understanding of a labor official's absence from home the major portion of time, endeared her to her family and friends. Her companionship and encouragement to her husband when they were together was the basis for the closely knit relationship of the Soderstrom family.

We mourn the passing of the beloved helpmate of our President. We know the memory of her love and compassion will sustain the members of her family in the days ahead to continue their daily tasks – confident that in so doing, they will be doing what she would wish, and in which she had so ably assisted in the past.⁹⁹

All across the state, letters offering sympathy and support came pouring in. One of the most touching came from John Walker, Reuben's predecessor and mentor:

Dear Rube,

I just wish to convey to you my heartfelt sympathy on the death of your wife. No one can understand what that means, except those who have gone through that experience themselves. I went through it, about 11 years ago, and I feel her absence now just as much as I did when she passed. In fact, I honestly believe that it is more painful now than it was, at that time. When someone whom one loves, and loves you, passes on, and who is also one who cared for you, more than anyone can describe, in all of the intricate details of daily life, there is nothing that one can do to appease it. All one can do is to feel and hope that we will meet again, in a better world. If there is anything that I can do to help, let me know somehow, and you may be sure that if possible at all it will be done.¹⁰⁰

Among those who sent notes of mourning to Reuben on the loss of his wife was Miss Halo Hibbard, longtime secretary and close confidant to the late, great Victor Olander. After the death of the powerful ISFL Secretary, Miss Hibbard had stayed on for a time, assisting Victor's successors Earl McMahan and Stanley Johnson as they attempted to fill his shoes. By the close of 1950, however, Miss Hibbard had found her fill and on December 31, 1950, she left the Illinois State Federation of Labor after 32 years of faithful service for what Reuben described as "a retirement of southern sunshine and comfort which she so richly deserves."¹⁰¹ Upon hearing of Jeanne's passing, Halo wrote to Reub as only a longtime friend and confidant could:

While there is little anyone can say at a time like this that helps very much, I do want you to know you have my heartfelt sympathy. Nothing can take from you the memory of a long and happy life together, of a lovable wife who was a splendid mother to your children, who brought up two as lovely young people as I have ever met. I wish there was something I could write that would ease your heartache just now, but I know how futile it is to try. But I do want you to know you have my deepest sympathy.¹⁰²

Reuben did his best to carry on, to continue his daily routines and habits. He threw himself into his work, doubling down on the business of the legislative session. Still, friends like Luther German of the United Mine Workers could still see his pain. As he wrote to Reub at the session's end:

Dear Rube,

The excitement, turmoil and worry of the Legislature is over and I know that more than ever your thoughts

return to your beloved wife and the great sorrow the shock of her departure has brought unto you. Myriads have suffered likewise through the loss of loved ones and it is only by our loss that we can understand and sympathize to some degree in your bereavement.

Rube, I just want you to know that when I saw you in the closing days of the session “carrying on” with the same smile, courtesy and determination you always display, my heart went out to you and if you ever need my help or friendship in any manner or form it is yours.¹⁰³

With his work at an end, Reuben finally allowed himself to grieve. He and his daughter left for some time away as soon as the session ended. He spent the next several weeks in mourning, allowing him to finally feel the loss of his helpmate, the mother of his children, his closest friend. Still, it was in Reub’s stoic nature to turn his loss into something useful. It is unsurprising, then, that shortly after his wife’s death Soderstrom was counseling others, like his friend Joe Ward. His advice to Joe gives the reader a window into how he was coping with his own loss:

Friend Ward,

I have been thinking a lot about you lately and I have wanted to see you personally to express my sympathy in the great loss which you have experienced. One who has had the same sadness and who is going through a similar sorrow knows how terrible you feel. I am sorry that I missed the services. I knew nothing about Mrs. Ward’s death and services until I returned home on Sunday from a busy weekend in Chicago.

Well, Joe, take things easy. After all these separations are temporary. Some sweet day you will be with her again in what good people believe to be a much better world.¹⁰⁴

Jeanne was the only woman Reub had ever loved, and there could be no other.

Labor in Mourning and Tribute

Through her life, Jeanne had stayed with Reuben through all the years and miles they spent apart, anchoring him to Streator during his apprenticeships in Chicago, Madison, and St. Louis, and later during his years in Springfield and Chicago. She was his moment of clarity, accepting Reub’s proposal after the pain of his father’s death awakened him to his own mortality. She stood by his side for years, through the failed campaigns and threats of unemployment, long before he became a fixture in the statehouse. She struggled for over 20 years to raise a family and make a home while Reuben passed the better number of his days away from home as ISFL president, with more nights spent in the Eastgate and Leland Hotels of Chicago and Springfield than in Streator. She supported him in all his choices, even the ones that led him to turn down financially lucrative lobbying posts and those that put him (and possibly his family) in harm’s way. Reuben’s job as ISFL President was often grueling, unrewarding, and always requiring of sacrifice; Jeanne’s role as Reuben’s wife was doubly so.

At the ISFL convention of 1951, all of labor paid Jeanne long overdue credit for her sacrifice. As the convention began in Springfield that year, Reuben’s friend and counsel Father Donahue told those assembled:

In the last year your leader, Reuben Soderstrom, has faced a tremendous loss. Only a man as courageous as he could come back and carry on and give our state federation of labor the same dynamic service, the same enthusiasm he gave before that woman who inspired him since she has been sixteen years of age, gave to him...Ladies and gentlemen, out of respect for this great leader of ours, I wonder if you would rise and say a little prayer, say it in your own heart, in your own way, a silent prayer for her who inspired him to lead us.¹⁰⁵

Father Donahue was indeed a personal friend to Reub and a priestly advocate for labor, but he was far from the first. That year one of his most prominent predecessors, Father Maguire, received special posthumous tribute as well. The Catholic priest and former president of St. Viator College was for years a legislative ally to then State Representative Reuben Soderstrom, a powerful advocate who helped Reub pass important lasting pro-worker legislation, including the Injunction Limitation Act, the One Day Rest in Seven Act, the Women's Eight Hour Day Act, and more. Their friendship stretched back years; as ISFL Secretary Stanley Johnson reported:

[Father Maguire's] ability and an honest ardor to help working people... coupled with the spiritual background of seeking nothing for himself, attracted Reuben Soderstrom's attention one night in Streator, when he heard Father Maguire address an open forum meeting about the steel strike. As a result of that meeting... another great voice was added to labor's triumvirate... In teaming up with [former ISFL President John] Walker, [former ISFL Secretary-Treasurer Victor] Olander and Soderstrom, a new twist was given to the Illinois State Federation of Labor's legislative progress by this spiritual leader, philosopher and educator who joined forces with the state federation to achieve some measure of equity.¹⁰⁶

Despite his early passing in 1940, Father Maguire's influence and impact on the modern labor movement could not, in Reuben's opinion, be overstated. So when in 1951 an opportunity came to pay tribute to his old friend, Soderstrom didn't hesitate. As he wrote in a communication to all local unions in the state:

Recently...an opportunity has presented itself to recognize the effective and wonderful service of Father Maguire and at the same time to honor his memory. His Catholic Order of St. Viator is erecting a \$500,000 Seminary Building at Arlington Heights, Illinois. Permission has been granted the membership of the Illinois State Federation of Labor to participate in the construction and dedication of the Chapel of this building to the memory of Father John W.R. Maguire. The Executive Board of the Illinois State Federation of Labor has started the list with a \$10,000 contribution.¹⁰⁷

It is likely that thoughts of legacy were playing an increasingly important role in Reuben's thoughts. In the past three years he had lost both Jeanne and Victor, the two most important people in his world, both personally and professionally. Now in his 60s and with the world seemingly stabilizing after depression and war, some may have thought that Reuben's boldest years were behind him. But after a very successful legislative year, he charged headlong into a great period of economic prosperity and union expansion. It's astonishing to think he had nearly two more decades of leadership in front of him.

PILLAR X

EDUCATION: REUBEN SODERSTROM, “P.L.G.” (PUBLIC LIBRARY GRADUATE)

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 throughout his early adulthood, joining public libraries in every city to which his work took him. Throughout his life, Reub remained a voracious reader, known for his literary appetite. Soderstrom never forgot the debt he owed to the public library and the free access to information it provided. 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.

Reub's love of the “poor boy's school,” as he called it, was reciprocated. In 1952, Walter E. Myers of the Illinois State Reference Library at Springfield, wrote an essay on the life of Reuben Soderstrom, lifting him up as an example of how the public library system can help anyone reach a high level of achievement—even someone with little to no formal education. The piece is a touching tribute to Reuben's love of and dedication to public information and education. We now reprint Mr. Myers's work in its entirety, as it appeared in the June 12, 1952 issue of the Streator Daily Times-Press:

"Reub, did you run the bills for Jim Martin's sale?" "Don't for get to sweep up." "If it's cold in the morning, you better start a fire, Reub"

If you peeked in at the composing room of the Independent Times, at Streator, Illinois, about forty-eight years ago, you would have heard the boss talking to a hustling young boy who had just passed fourteen. His name appeared in the family Bible as Reuben G. Soderstrom, born March 10, 1888, but he was familiarly known around the town as Reub.

At that age, Reub had no way of knowing he would become president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor in September, 1930, when he was forty-two. He has been re-elected to that office every two years since then. His good health, intelligence, alertness, geniality, and progressive outlook promise many more years of faithful service in this work.

PRINTER'S DEVIL

Speaking from his boyhood job, Mr. Soderstrom says, “I started out as a printer's devil. My work consisted at the outset of lighting the fire in the old cannon stove in the morning, sweeping the floor, setting heads occasionally, and feeding the flat bed press all afternoon while the daily edition of the *Independent-Times* was

run off.”

As time went on, Reub became a linotype operator in the composing room of the *Independent-Times*. In the early days, the paper had only one ad-machine and one news-machine. Reub worked at the news-machine for many years. In fact, he was there when the composing room expanded and the *Free Press* consolidated with the *Independent Times*. The new paper became the Streator Times-Press, and is so-called today.

Of course, everybody in the office knew Reub. The hand compositors, pressmen, foremen, editor, reporters and special writers were his intimate friends. One special writer, whom we would refer to today as a columnist, was the famous bard, John E. Williams, who later became the first arbitrator for Hart, Schaffner and Marx. Williams' work in establishing piecework wage rates was one of his outstanding achievements in the company's employer-employee relationships.

INSPIRED BY WILLIAMS

Mr. Williams wrote a column in the *Independent-Times*, called “The Fabian,” and he signed it “Fabios.” Reub was attracted to Mr. Williams' fair economic philosophy. A friendly relationship soon developed between the man and the boy. Frequent conversations and friendly banter around the shop encouraged the boy to better his position in life.

Mr. Williams being a good judge of human nature, as well as a student of economics, said “Reub, you've got a good chance to make something of yourself. Here's a list of books for you to read. Get a card in the Public Library and I'll sign it for you.”

Among the early books Soderstrom read were John Mitchell's *Organized Labor* and Richard T. Ely's *Elementary Principles of Economics, Labor Movement in America, Monopolies and Trusts*, and *Outlines of Economics*.

Reub knew that information is always a good substitute for formal education, so he eagerly pursued the course of reading prescribed by his friend, John Williams. Reading of this character gave Reub a background in philosophy of labor and labor history. This fitted him for a career that ranged from a linotype operator in a small print shop to a great labor leader in Illinois.

“Yet, I branched out also on my own,” says Mr. Soderstrom, “and made many trips to the library to take out books on history, biography, literature, and fiction.” Reub admits that whatever cultural interests and attainments he has are the result of this early habit of using the public library. As he says, “Even then I knew the best thoughts of the greatest minds in the world were preserved in the books available to me in the Streator Public Library.”

WRITES FOR LABOR

While working as a linotype operator, Reub began to contribute articles to labor papers. At the age of twenty-one he began to move around a bit, taking a job in St. Louis, where he joined his first union—the International Typographical Union. After a short time there, he moved to Chicago to a better job, and joined Chicago Typographical Union No. 16. While in Chicago he remembered the good advice of his former mentor, and took steps to become a patron of the Chicago Public Library. This time the officers of the union signed his application, and this studious young man became a regular borrower at the Chicago Public Library.

Presently Reub made a discovery that gave him a pleasant hobby for many months. He found a whole section

of shelves in the downtown library devoted to the life of Abraham Lincoln. Reub spent his spare time one whole winter searching for information about Lincoln and his associates. He found material both pro and con, but like many other young boys in those days, he came away with a profound admiration for the Great Commoner.

Printers were a restless lot in those days. It wasn't long before Reub Soderstrom got itchy feet. Traveling northward, he landed at Madison, Wisconsin. While working at this trade, he found time to visit the state legislature. He saw the Progressive Movement in action, and caught the spirit of the famous Robert La Follette, then so much in the limelight. As Reub says, "Robert La Follette's quotation 'The will of the people shall be the law of the land' left a permanent impression on me, and has governed my activities since then."

Now comes a period of moving again, first to Milwaukee, where he became an active union member, attending meetings regularly and learning first-hand the problems confronting the working people of Wisconsin and the nation. After six months, he returned to Chicago for a new job. Now he was on his own. He no longer needed Local No. 16 to sign for him. He renewed his card at the Chicago Public Library, and began once again to fill in the gaps in his formal training.

When Reub was twenty-four, his thoughts turned toward his boyhood sweetheart, Jeanne Shaw, back in Streator. He returned home, and they were married Dec. 2, 1912. She, too, encouraged him in his ambition, and much of his success is due to her inspiration (She passed away a year ago today, May 22, 1951).

Reub was pretty well liked by union members. Not long after he was married, he had a chance to put his foot on the first rung of the ladder of success. He was elected president of the Streator Trades and Labor Council. He was also well known in the community. His tremendous earnestness and oratorical supremacy soon attracted the attention of political leaders in La Salle County, who asked him to run for the office of State Representative. He made the grade all right, and was elected to the Illinois General Assembly in 1918. He served successfully in that capacity until 1938.

HONORED BY LABOR

Because of Reuben Soderstrom's help in placing on the statute books of Illinois all the humanitarian laws enacted since 1918, his friends and associates in the labor movement elected him in 1930 president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor. While working in this role, even more than as a state legislator, he remembered his debt to the public library. Consequently, in each of his annual reports he includes a section on the use of libraries.

Usually, this takes the form of encouraging the union members to take advantage of their local library resources. Sometimes he mentions special services offered by various libraries, such as the reading courses offered by the Illinois State Library to any citizen of the state.

In his 1949 annual report, Mr. Soderstrom says, "The thoughts of the greatest minds in the history of the human race are to be found in the library books. They come from the pen of thoughtful notables ranging from ancient leaders to modern philosophers. The biographies of statesmen, both native and foreign, are also available in the modern public library for those who like to study history and ascertain what each statesman contributed to the advancement of his country and the period in which he lived."

He closes with the thought that "The public library is the poor person's school. Those who thirst for knowledge and information, rich or poor, can satisfy this thirst by absorbing the thoughts, recorded in books by the world's wisest men and women. The Illinois State Federation of Labor is in full accord with the free

services rendered to its members by the public library, and has, in turn, often performed worthwhile legislative work whenever there was an opportunity to stand up and be counted on the side of this great educational institution.”

USEFUL SERVICE

In the 1950 Annual Report, Mr. Soderstrom is equally complimentary. “The Public Library today,” he says, “is particularly well provided in history, economics, jurisprudence, the political sciences, and American fiction. It is the greatest reference bureau available to the average person and is patronized extensively by serious minded labor unionists who like their information straight. The Illinois State Federation of Labor will continue to be friendly to all proposals designed to enlarge the field of usefulness of the Public Library.”

Such statements as these show that Reuben Soderstrom has not forgotten his “Alma Mater.” As he says, “I tip my hat every time I pass a public library.” Through his long career as printer, news and editorial writer, legislator, and great labor leader, Reuben G. Soderstrom has used his influence to promote the general welfare and bring more happiness to the great mass of working people in Illinois.

Reuben G. Soderstrom will never write Ph. D. after his name, but he can write something that gives him greater satisfaction, P.L.G., Public Library Graduate.¹⁰⁸

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS LABOR SCHOOL

Of all Reuben's accomplishments in the field of education, none was more impactful and enduring than the founding of the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations at the University of Illinois, known today as the School of Labor and Employment Relations. Soderstrom's push for an Illinois "labor school" began in earnest in 1942, when the ISFL passed resolution 96, which called for "a department [to] be set up in the University of Illinois with properly qualified labor economists and analysts to advise and supply information which will assist the workers in their many complex problems."¹⁰⁹ Reuben opened talks with University President AC Willard the following month, and by January of 1943 a committee chaired by Law School dean and University provost Albert Harno was formed to explore establishing such a program. By early 1943, the creation of an Illinois Labor School seemed inevitable.

Then came the Illinois Manufacturers' Association. When IMA leader Joe Donnelly learned of Soderstrom's proposed school, he immediately confronted Harno, threatening to bring the full force of his organization against the University if they went through with their plans. Harno protested that the school would be "objective and impartial," stressing that he had personally told Soderstrom in no uncertain terms that "under no circumstances could or would the University become a special agency or special advocate for any group in the State, whether that group be industry or labor."¹¹⁰ Still, the IMA was not appeased; after a subsequent meeting between University representative HM Gray, Graduate School dean, and IMA officials, Gray complained, "The conference was very unsatisfactory. The group was almost exclusively open-shop, anti-labor. They objected to everything."¹¹¹

While he had taken a firm, almost scolding, tone with labor, Harno went to great lengths to appease Donnelly. He gave industry equal representation on the organization's board of trustees, and changed the proposed name from "Labor" to "Labor and Industrial Relations." Second (and arguably more important), there would be no "labor school" in the formal sense, or even a labor department; instead, the program would be established as an interdisciplinary institute, existing outside the traditional University structure. While this allowed for flexibility, it also greatly limited the organization's influence, funding, and potential long-term viability. Most devastating, however, was the suggested budget: \$50,000, a meager amount that, when paired with its administrative design, appeared an almost deliberate attempt to kill the institute in its infancy.

Soderstrom fought back hard, bypassing the University administration and going directly to the legislature. He sponsored HB 462, a measure which called for a dedicated labor college, replete with its own dean, building and a \$400,000 budget.¹¹² Of course, such a measure was highly unlikely to pass even if it had University support, but that wasn't the point—Reuben wanted to put the University and the IMA on the defensive. His plan worked; Soderstrom was able to triple the University's proposed funding and secured the hire of Phillips Bradley, the head of the prestigious Cornell University School of Labor and Industrial Relations, as director of the new institute.¹¹³ Finally, on September 9, 1946, the University of Illinois Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations opened its doors for the first time.

Armed with a healthy budget and a powerful advocate, Illinois's labor institute thrived. It grew from a single room in Mumford Hall with one professor, a graduate course, and five students at its start to a multi-room suite filled with 13 faculty, 20 specialized courses, a Masters' program, and 45 students within the first three years.¹¹⁴ The IMA continued to attack the program, attempting to defund it in the Illinois General Assembly

over unsubstantiated accusations of socialist ties amongst its faculty, all to no avail. The program's stature continued to grow, and in 1955 the legendary Frances Perkins, FDR's pioneering Secretary of Labor, came to the institute to offer her own 15-lecture series. The event was so successful that Perkins returned for a repeat performance in 1958.

In 1956, the school began a funding drive for a new building. Of course, organized labor financed most of the project. Soderstrom used his influence as Secretary of the AFL's national Committee on Resolutions to secure \$50,000 towards the building, a gift that was soon matched by the CIO.¹¹⁵ Reuben's ISFL gave an additional \$37,000. Management organizations, in contrast, gave less than \$50,000 in total, despite having equal authority and responsibility for the institute's management and curricular design.¹¹⁶ The new building, located at 504 East Armory Avenue, Champaign, Illinois, was opened on April 12, 1962. Since then, the institute has continued to expand, with a Labor Education Program in Chicago, a Ph.D. program, joint programs with the University of Illinois College of Law, and more. In 2008, the Institute was officially made a School, with its director positions becoming dean titles. After 66 years, Reuben's dream was finally realized: A School of Labor, with its own building and a rich array of undergraduate and graduate programs offered to students both on and off campus.

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

CHAPTER EXCERPT

REUBEN'S LEGACY OF EDUCATION

Reuben dedicated considerable time, effort, and political capital to advancing education in the state of Illinois. These efforts can be traced as far back as 1919, when he and his fellow trade unionists proposed and passed a local ballot measure to provide free textbooks for the schoolchildren of Streator.¹¹⁷ In 1929, Representative Soderstrom was named chairman of the Illinois House Education Committee, a post he would hold for the next eight years.¹¹⁸ Nationally, Soderstrom served on the AFL's Education Committee for five years before being promoted to the powerful Resolutions Committee in 1936.¹¹⁹ He also chaired President Roosevelt's Committee on Training and Re-Training of Skilled Workers during the Conference on Labor Legislation in Washington at the request of Labor Secretary Frances Perkins.¹²⁰

CHAPTER 41

1952

SODERSTROM RISES ON THE NATIONAL SCENE

“The Illinois State Federation of Labor is a human institution. It does not claim to be perfect, but in its record of seventy years of existence it has worked hard for the welfare of those who toil, and has accomplished much good for working people, and it is today one of the strongest bulwarks of the cause of freedom, brotherhood and justice for working people everywhere in the State of Illinois.”

-Reuben Soderstrom, ISFL Convention, 1952

A FIRST STEP TOWARD UNIFICATION

A Jubilee Celebration

It was a splendid affair. Over 425 union members and their friends had worked hard to make the Golden Jubilee Anniversary of the DeKalb County Trades Unions a celebration not just for labor but for everyone. The event’s organizers wanted to emphasize that the unions’ 50 years of existence had “organized and maintained a stable and continuing good influence in the county,” enriching not only the lives of working men and women but all members of the broader community.¹²¹ To that end they opened the doors of their commemorative feast at the local Masonic Temple to businessmen and industry representatives from the cities of DeKalb, Sycamore and beyond. It was a gala for the record books, full of toasts, tributes, dancing, and more.

At the climax of the feast, the toastmaster rose to introduce the keynote speaker of the evening—Illinois State Federation of Labor President Reuben G. Soderstrom. Amidst the cheers and applause, the “smiling warrior” stood to address his fellow workers and distinguished guests. “I want to convey to you the greetings and good wishes and felicitations of the Illinois State Federation of Labor as well as my personal and official congratulations to the representatives of management,” he began. “To the representatives of industry and the representatives of all other business groups who are joining tonight with the representatives of labor in commemorating 50 years of success of A. F. of L. union activities in the city of DeKalb.”¹²² With a voice at once welcoming and commanding, he instructed his audience to take note of those around them, to see the gathering as proof that people of good faith could disagree on economic matters and yet remain friends. To illustrate his point, Reub told the story of Henry Ward Beecher and Bob Ingersoll, two American figures of the 19th century:

Henry Ward Beecher was the greatest defender of the Bible of his period. Bob Ingersoll was probably the ablest opponent, as well as the harshest opponent, of the Bible of the same period. However, Bob Ingersoll and Henry Ward Beecher were great friends. One day, so the story goes, Henry Ward Beecher became very ill and he was about to die. He called his servant to his bed and told him to go out and find Bob Ingersoll, and no matter who was waiting to see him to bring Bob Ingersoll in directly to his bedside.

So the servant went out and found Bob Ingersoll and when they returned to the home of Henry Ward Beecher they found a long line of preachers and church workers standing in line waiting their turn to see Henry Ward Beecher before he passed on.

However, Bob Ingersoll was ushered in directly to the bedside of H. W. Beecher. The greeting between these two great men was very friendly and affectionate, and after it was over Bob Ingersoll stepped back a step or two from the bedside of Henry Ward Beecher and said, “Henry, if you should die now without telling me I would always be wondering—just why did you send for me? It seems to me, Henry, you would rather be spending your last moments on earth with those preachers and church workers, with folks who think the way you do.”

“Well, Bob,” said Henry, “I will tell you I am going to spend all eternity with them out there, but this might be the last five minutes I will ever spend with you.”¹²³

Reuben laughed along with his audience, sharing in the joke before adding with a broad grin, “Well, this might be the last opportunity I will ever have to address this particular audience, and I want to make the most of that opportunity.” Over the next several minutes Reub extolled the virtues of unionism, both for workers and their employers. He spoke on the unity of purpose the founders of the AFL shared with the forefathers of the nation—to provide a framework both for freedom and organization. He charted a straight line between the democratic institutions of the republic with the governance of the AFL, drawing direct comparison between the state-national model of U.S. government and the union-federation model of the AFL. Then, with his analogy established, Reub went in for the unexpected attack:

No one would think of advocating that their state should secede from the United States, but we do have union members who advocate that their international unions should disaffiliate with the American Federation of Labor. This condition exists now within the labor movement and we all know nothing can be broken up into smaller pieces and retain its strength. So let’s work and talk for unity...There should be only one national organization and that organization should be the American Federation of Labor.¹²⁴

It was only then that the audience realized who the true target of Reub’s speech was—who was the Bob Ingersoll to his Henry Ward Beecher. It wasn’t the guests of business and industry; it wasn’t the Republican Party or anti-labor politicians; it was the CIO.

Competing Values

The year 1952 marked a landmark change in the relationship between the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Before the year’s end both organizations would experience unprecedented changes in leadership, changes that appeared destined to set these two rival organizations on a path of radical change. What form that change would take, however, remained to be seen.

While they shared many goals and constituencies in common, the AFL and CIO were very different organizations, even if the original distinction of craft vs. industrial unions had been long since blurred. The AFL (or as Reub still referred to it, the A. F. of L.), the elder organization, claimed a larger membership and longer institutional memory. As Soderstrom frequently noted, it also had a very democratic form of organization, with individual unions enjoying comparatively more autonomy within the Federation than their CIO counterparts. Politically, the AFL was more mixed, and (in theory) upheld a nonpartisan approach to political endorsements, although they largely supported Democratic politicians through their Political Action Committee. By and large, the Federation valued continuity and caution, committed first to the preservation and limited expansion of existing rights, rather than seeking dynamic change or rapid expansion.

The upstart CIO, in contrast, was a hotbed of activism. In some respects, this had propelled the rival organization to the forefront of progressivism, especially with regard to civil rights and minority representation. As noted labor historian Philip Taft details in his history of the AFL, “Although the A. F. of L. was officially opposed to discrimination for reasons of race, creed, or color, discrimination against Negroes and other minority groups was tolerated in practice throughout the years. Only this much can be said for the federation’s policy; the A. F. of L. had no power to compel international unions to obey its pronouncements against racial discrimination.”¹²⁵ While many AFL unions actively discriminated with impunity, the CIO sought from the outset to organize workers of color. The large number of black workers in industrial professions, pre-existing policies of the major CIO unions, and the comparatively top-down approach to leadership helped ensure CIO had the motivation and ability to act against discrimination within its ranks. By 1950 nearly 500,000 of the 1.25 million Negroes in the labor movement were from the CIO, despite the organization’s much smaller representation of the labor movement as a whole.¹²⁶

Unfortunately, the CIO tendencies toward leftward political philosophies (and autocratic leadership) also brought their own set of troubles. From its inception, the CIO had been plagued by its associations with Communism. However, in recent years the organization had taken dramatic steps to purge its ranks of foreign influence. In 1949 the CIO expelled its Communist-dominated affiliates, including the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers (UE) and the United Farm Equipment and Metal Workers of America (FE) by a direct convention vote. It also revised its constitution to allow the expulsion of any union that consistently promoted Communist or Fascist objectives.¹²⁷

Still, the CIO remained true to its activist roots, pushing the frontiers of labor rights while recruiting on an increasing scale. The AFL, in turn, had escalated its expansion efforts, working harder than it had in a generation to organize workers in a variety of industries. The effort had born considerable fruit; despite the division within organized labor, the AFL had seen an increase of roughly 3.5 million workers through the affiliation of new union shops from 1948-1950 alone.¹²⁸

Illinois Shakeup

Illinois had helped lead this charge. Under President Soderstrom, ISFL membership had swelled from less than 200,000 when he first took office in 1930 to over 800,000 by the start of 1952.¹²⁹ He had done this in part by keeping the costs of membership constant, despite increasing inflation. As Reuben proudly announced at the close of 1951:

Last year twenty thousand new members came in to the fold. About 115 new affiliations in the record attained since our convention twelve months ago. The per capita tax has never been raised during the twenty-one years which I have served as president. The increased cost of running the Illinois State Federation of Labor has always been taken care of by a corresponding increase in membership.¹³⁰

Still, the Illinois CIO made substantive advances as well, and used those gains largely to undermine ISFL efforts. They struck an adversarial pose early on, accusing the ISFL collectively and Reuben personally of obstruction and corruption. Ray Edmundson, the group’s first leader in Illinois, had also rebuffed Reub’s offers of cooperation, declaring “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.”¹³¹ While their membership was comparatively small—roughly 350,000 to the ISFL’s 800,000—by 1952 they claimed outsized influence, and labor’s enemies had taken advantage of the labor split, exploiting intra-labor rivalries to business’s gain. The best example of this was the appointment of a pro-business coal merchant, Francis Murphy, to the powerful

post of Director of the Illinois Department of Labor (IDOL) in 1941. Edmundson, desirous of influence and eager to diminish the ISFL, backed then-Governor Green's candidate, despite his utter lack of labor experience, primarily to prevent the post from going to an AFL man.

By decade's end the CIO had graduated from simply denying the IDOL post to the AFL to filling it with its own men. In 1948 the CIO backed Adlai Stevenson in the Governor's race while Reub (over considerable ISFL objection and to subsequent controversy) backed the incumbent Green, who had by then replaced Murphy with an AFL-affiliated IDOL Director. As a reward for their support, Governor Stevenson appointed CIO Secretary-Treasurer and Political Action Committee head Frank Annunzio to the Directorship, placing a CIO man in the post for the first time ever. Stevenson's attempt to placate an angry Reuben by appointing Fern Rauch, an ISFL vice-president, as Assistant Director was met only with contempt. The ISFL's Executive Council instructed Rauch not to accept the post, and removed him from his ISFL leadership post when he took the job anyway.

But in 1952 the ISFL's fortunes finally began to change for the better. In February, Annunzio became embroiled in a scandal involving his financial entanglement with Alderman John D'Arco of Chicago's First Ward. As soon as the charge hit the papers, Stevenson acted, reportedly calling on Annunzio for his resignation or face termination.¹³² While Annunzio publicly denied wrongdoing, he stepped aside, claiming in his resignation letter to Stevenson that, "I feel that the current politically inspired flurry of newspaper criticism directed against me may unjustly bring adverse effects upon your administration."¹³³

The battle for his replacement began immediately. Joe Germano, head of the Illinois CIO Industrial Council, pushed hard for a CIO replacement, arguing that the vacancy "belongs to the CIO." Reuben and his Secretary Stanley Johnson, however, saw an opportunity to retake the post. There was no love lost between Reub and Fern, to be sure; Rauch had even considered running against Soderstrom for the ISFL presidency in 1950.¹³⁴ Still, Rauch was an ISFL man, and his nomination would give the organization a public advantage in its push against the CIO. As he had done many times before, Reub buried the personal animosity he carried for a political foe for the sake of his beloved Federation, and let it be known in the press through Secretary Johnson that "if Rauch should be given the top labor job he feels that all elements of the AFL will be satisfied."¹³⁵ Days later, Stevenson appointed Rauch as new IDOL Chief.

Soderstrom pressed the advantage. In a string of speeches across the state Reub sang a familiar refrain—that the current system of competing labor organizations could not hold. Reuben sensed weakness in his old opponent; as he declared in an Executive Board missive that year:

The Illinois State Federation of Labor added approximately 25,000 new members since our annual convention in Springfield a year ago...About one hundred new union affiliations have been received during the past twelve months, which matches the record or high peaks of good years in its seventy years of existence.¹³⁶

Future recruitment looked bright as well, especially when compared to competing organizations. Unlike the Illinois CIO, the Illinois State Federation of Labor could look to a large number of AFL unions that had yet to affiliate with the ISFL. One of Soderstrom's main methods of ISFL recruitment had been to go to these nationally affiliated unions and convince them to join (and pay dues to) his statewide organization. While the ISFL had made great strides over the years, Reuben said, a substantial number of union workers remained unaffiliated:

There are a million A. F. of L. members in Illinois and eight hundred thousand of them are now enrolled in our great state body. While this is regarded by the Executive Board as a good showing, the drive for additional affiliates should continue until every one of the 3,300 Illinois units of the American Federation are brought into

the fold.¹³⁷

The message was clear: The ISFL was and would continue to grow at a pace that competing organizations had no hope of matching. At the 70th Annual ISFL Convention that year, Reuben made the AFL vs. CIO divide the focus of his address. He began on a humorous note, connecting the host city of Peoria's ties to an old AFL–CIO dispute:

A humorous incident occurred in this municipality some years ago when the CIO and the A F of L were engaged in a contest of supremacy at the Caterpillar plant. An election was about to be held to determine which organization was about to become the bargaining agent. One of our A F of L fellows, so the story goes, became ill and decided to see the doctor. He was told by the physician that his case was critical and he would not be with us very long... "In that case," the A F of L member stated, "I think I will join the CIO." The doctor said "In Heaven's name what do you want to do that for?" "Well," he said, "if anyone is going to die around here it would be a lot better to have one of them pass on than one of us."¹³⁸

The humorous anecdote belied a deep animosity that had been eating away at labor in Illinois and across the nation for years. Now, Reuben proclaimed, the time had come for that acrimony to end. Launching into remarks he'd been perfecting for weeks, Soderstrom told the crowd:

We all know nothing can be broken up into small pieces and still retain its strength. So during the coming year let's work and talk for unity and march on together to a brighter and happier tomorrow, to a brighter and happier future! This is a great country, and a big country, but it is not big enough to permit two national governments to function down in Washington D.C. That was tried in 1860 and it resulted in a great civil war between the states. This is a great country, and a big country, but it isn't big enough, either, to permit two national federations to function within its borders. There should be only one. The CIO, the Railroad Brotherhoods and the independent unions ought to come into the American Federation of Labor and subscribe to the regulations and discipline of the American Federation of Labor!¹³⁹

And with that, Reuben renewed the AFL's call for an end to labor's "civil war" in Illinois. But this was no olive branch. Just the opposite; by declaring for a peace on AFL terms, with the CIO and others submitting to AFL rules and AFL discipline, Soderstrom made it clear he wasn't interested in suing for peace; he was ready to accept their surrender.

NATIONAL MOVES

Changes in Labor Leadership

Reub's actions weren't occurring in a vacuum; the astute politician was in fact reading a growing number of signals that a new fight over labor unification was drawing near. The first major sign was the creation in December 1950 of the United Labor Policy Committee. Jointly formed by the AFL, CIO, the Machinists, and the Railway Labor Executives Association in response to the Korean War, the ULPC provided a clear example of how powerful a united labor front could be, particularly when confronting governmental threats and challenges. When the ULPC withdrew all labor representatives from government defense and mobilization agencies to protest what leaders viewed as unfair treatment of labor, the government quickly came to favorable terms. However, by August of 1951 the AFL had already pulled out from the council. "Functional unity, as frequently proposed by CIO representatives, is no substitute and cannot be accepted," AFL President William Green declared. "Today, there is no reason whatsoever for any bona fide free trade-union organization remaining outside the ranks of the AFL... There is no difference over organizational structure or form."¹⁴⁰ AFL leaders had brought that message home to affiliates across the country, including in

Illinois. “We are concentrating our efforts to bring about not merely shadow unity, functional unity as you might call it,” Green told the delegates of ISFL convention that year, “but are centering our efforts to bring about organic unity; a united labor movement in a united family, all speaking as one and acting as one and walking as one together.”¹⁴¹

CIO leadership predictably recoiled at the notion that functional unity necessitated structural unity (i.e. returning to the AFL). In his remarks to the convention that year, CIO chief Philip Murray thrashed the AFL’s withdrawal from the Unity Committee and subsequent comments as the product of a “misconception of the AFL executive council...that the CIO is ready to be swallowed by the craft unions which dominated that federation.”¹⁴² As the 1952 CIO convention approached, he prepared remarks without any mention of labor unification, a clear indication that he intended the fight to continue.

Murray never had the chance to give that speech. On November 9, 1952, a mere week before the convention, the CIO leader died of a heart attack. A few weeks after that, AFL President William Green, leader of the Federation for 28 years, passed away as well. In less than a month, the entire world of labor seemed to turn on its head. In the words of then CIO legal counsel Arthur Goldberg:

The leading spokesmen for the two branches of labor—men who had agreed at times, and disagreed at others, in jest or in bitter fury—were stilled by death. Each had fought, with vigor of action and expression, for his beliefs...Yet each was a symbol of a period that was coming to a close...Truly, by the end of 1952, there were few remaining differences in outlook and attitude between most of the AFL and most of the CIO.¹⁴³

Reuben Raises his International Profile

The passing of two powerful figures in labor created a vacuum that men like Reuben were eager to fill. Already, Soderstrom had been building an impressive post-war national profile. In addition to his long-standing service on the all-important AFL Resolutions Committee, Reub was also frequently dispatched by the AFL to represent national leadership at a variety of celebrations, conventions, and political events. He’d been sent to mediate union jurisdictional disputes like the Los Angeles Council Revolt of 1943. He’d been called repeatedly to testify in Washington D.C. on proposed legislation affecting a range of labor issues. Reuben also served on a number of governmental committees, including his recent appointment by U.S. Secretary of Labor Maurice Tobin to the Seventh Region Labor Management Committee, a group created in response to the Korean War that oversaw the allocation of civilian manpower for defense and other essential activities in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Indiana.¹⁴⁴

As big as his national exposure was, 1952 was a year that saw that presence grow considerably. This was partly due to geography; as America’s Second City, Chicago was a place of national and international importance. Speakers at Chicago events, even those sponsored by local organizations, often found themselves reaching a much broader audience, and Soderstrom was no exception. For example, his 1952 address to the Chicago Federation’s Committee for Human Relations was carried by Voice of America, carrying Reuben’s message to workers in countries across the globe. With his characteristic mix of optimism and energy, Soderstrom declared to a listening world:

A working man of any kind who earns his bread in the sweat of his face has not done his full duty to himself and to his fellow workers and to those depending upon him until he has joined the labor union of his calling, and he becomes one of those who strive for the uplift of the masses. As 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 has the trade union movement. It has educated the working man’s children; it has made the life of the wife and mother happy, and has brought an intelligence into the home which could not

and would not have had existed were it not for the movement of labor...

A man who joins the union does so for a noble purpose. The longer he is in the organization the more he sees of its benefits. He does not look for favoritism or privileges over other men, all he asks for is a square deal and an occasional raise in salary in proportion to the rise in prices of the necessities of life. He is invariably proud of his calling and feels every penny he has earned is honestly earned and in many cases more than earned. But I do not believe that the working man should be satisfied until that day arrives when he shall receive all that he is entitled to.¹⁴⁵

In this and other speeches Reuben clearly articulated a theory of labor and capital that he viewed as essential in combating the threat of international Communism, a “humanized capitalism” in which unionism was not a mere “necessary evil” but the indispensable soul of American economics, the worker’s guardian of rights and guarantor of entitlements. It was this uniquely American relationship between labor and capital, Reuben argued, that would allow the American economic model to spread across the world. As he described in his annual ISFL keynote address:

We have a great economic system in America, made up of capitalism which has been humanized by American trade unionism, and which has made the United States the greatest country in all of this world. Capitalism and Unionism, the American brand, implies mass production, a high standard of living, and a good deal of social welfare... The chain assembly line at Detroit, Michigan, makes it possible for Americans, who represent less than seven percent of the of the world’s population, to own seventy-five percent of the world’s cars. That is capitalism plus unionism. I ask in all fairness what is wrong with an economic system that gives the American people these advantages?¹⁴⁶

This message soon found resonance abroad, and it wasn’t long before Soderstrom was meeting with heads of state to discuss his ideas. In April of 1952 Tage Erlander, the Prime Minister of Sweden, met with Reuben at a formal breakfast meeting hosted by the ISFL. The event, which included speeches, entourages, and honors, was a high point for Reub, who was extremely proud of his Swedish heritage and still fluent in his father’s native tongue. The delight was evident in his formal address to the PM and assembled guests:

Scandinavians have been identified with the Illinois Sate Federation of Labor during all of these 70 years, and have helped to build up its present wonderful membership of almost 800,000 people. During the last half of its existence labor leaders of Swedish extraction have held the major offices in the Federation—that is the office of President and the office of Secretary-Treasurer. We are very proud of the many nationalities that make up the Illinois State Federation of Labor, but I am particularly proud on this occasion to be able to inform our distinguished visitor the Prime Minister of Sweden that sons and daughters of Sweden and those who are an extract of that nationality, have made a noticeable and worthwhile contribution to advancing labor’s great cause in the State of Illinois...

It now becomes my pleasure and high honor to extend the greetings, felicitations and good wishes of the members of the Illinois State Federation of Labor to our distinguished visitor, Prime Minister Tage Erlander, and through him to the working people of Sweden, and it is also my pleasant duty to welcome him to America and particularly to the State of Illinois. It is my sincere hope he will enjoy our hospitality and that he will enjoy a safe and happy journey back to his home of the ancestors of all those in attendance at this breakfast.¹⁴⁷

POLITICAL FACE-OFF

Soderstrom Floods Primary

While welcoming the Swedish Prime Minister may have been a personal high point for Reuben, the most important hosting duties Soderstrom assumed in 1952 were undoubtedly those connected with that year's dueling Presidential conventions. Both the Republican and Democratic parties decided to hold their nominating conventions in Reuben's backyard of Chicago, and Reuben was determined to make the most of it.

Unlike many labor leaders in the 1950s, Soderstrom worked hard to maintain a nonpartisan approach to ISFL political involvement and endorsements. This was in part pragmatic; as Reuben explained in an essay he wrote that year entitled "Our Non-Partisan Policy":

There is a sound, practical reason why organized labor must remain non-partisan. It requires a constitutional majority of 77 votes to pass a bill in the Illinois House of Representatives. Neither the Democratic nor Republican party alone has ever given 77 votes to a highly controversial labor measure...The labor movement has had the same kind of experience in the Illinois Senate. There 26 votes are required to pass a bill...Labor, then, like the major political parties, must appeal to both Republicans and Democrats in order to enact legislation, and labor must reward both friendly Republicans and friendly Democrats who 'stick out their necks' and vote for our legislation.¹⁴⁸

However, Reuben didn't hold to nonpartisanship out of simple necessity. He believed in this political approach as foundational to labor's legislative philosophy. He continued:

Samuel Gompers knew what he was doing when he created labor's non-partisan policy and slogan "elect your friends and defeat your enemies, regardless of their political party affiliation"...It would be fatal for the labor movement to tie up or unite with either political party...The time honored policy of disregarding political parties and supporting candidates who are friendly to labor, no matter what party they belong to, is not only right in principle, but also definitely practical and workable. It has proved eminently successful in Illinois and should be continued.¹⁴⁹

To that end, Reuben directed considerable time, attention, and effort toward primary races, particularly the Republican primary elections. In 1952, those elections took on an added urgency due to the ambitions of one Republican Presidential candidate in particular: Robert Taft, labor's arch-nemesis. Taft had made two previous runs for the Republican nod for President, losing each time by decreasing margins. This year, however, Taft appeared to be the likely nominee. General Eisenhower had declared his intention to run in January, but his comparatively late entrance, newness to national politics, and physical absence (he was serving as commander of NATO forces in Europe) gave Taft a heavy advantage.

Reuben was terrified. Most political observers, including Soderstrom, expected a Republican Presidential win in 1952, regardless of who they chose. Therefore, Reub decided to direct all Illinois labor political effort to denying Taft the nomination. The first step was to defeat Taft in the Illinois Preferential Presidential Primary. Unfortunately, Eisenhower's late entry meant that he would not be on the ballot; former Minnesota Governor Stassen, however, would be, and Reub wanted to drum up all the support he could to at least reduce the size of Taft's expected win in the non-binding vote. As he wrote to James McDevitt, Director of the AFL's Labor League for Political Education, that February:

Stassen and Taft will battle it out in the Illinois Preferential Presidential Primary. Unless something is done to discredit Taft he will carry Illinois by a margin of 5 to 1. He is running way ahead in all the straw votes. In the event that Taft comes through as popular as it looks the results of the Illinois Presidential Primary will be used to popularize his candidacy in the coming Republican convention, which will also be held in Illinois. Using victories in Ohio and a smashing new victory in Illinois there wouldn't be any convincing argument left that he

was unacceptable to labor. Something should be done in Illinois to discredit Taft and silence his army of boosters.¹⁵⁰

How could labor hope to defeat Taft in the primary? Reuben's answer was simple: flood the primary with labor voters. By 1952 most labor voters in Illinois were Democrats. However, the Democratic contest was of little consequence. Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson had Illinois if he chose to run, but he hadn't declared yet, making the perfectly acceptable Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver the almost certain winner of the Illinois primary. Therefore, Reuben reasoned, all voters currently registered as Democrats, including labor voters, should switch party affiliation in this primary and cast their votes for Stassen. "There is no contest in which labor is interested on the Democratic side in the coming April 8 primary," he wrote. "Therefore, all the Democrats, who profess to be friendly to labor, and certainly all trade unionists, ought to be invited to come into the Republican primary and vote against Taft."¹⁵¹

Reuben confirmed with Illinois Attorney General Ivan Elliott that such a switch was legal. According to Illinois law voters were confined to a party primary only 23 months in Illinois, meaning that anyone whose last primary vote was in the 1950 primary election (24 months ago) was permitted by law to vote in any primary they desired.¹⁵² To Soderstrom, such a move was not only legally permissible but strategically imperative. As he told McDevitt:

Organized labor should be non-partisan. Political parties are designed, somehow, to divide working people against themselves and thus make good people hate each other. Wage-earners should be free to invade *en masse* either the Democratic or Republican party to defeat bad candidates if the situation warrants such invasion. In Illinois they are.¹⁵³

That February Soderstrom led his *ISFL Weekly Newsletter* with a full, front-page story title "Changing Parties Permissible." While not specifically instructing labor voters to do so, Reuben published his correspondence with the Attorney General in full, leaving no doubt as to the legality of such action.¹⁵⁴

Unfortunately, the call for labor to "go Republican" had little effect on the Presidential primary; Taft had too strong a base of support, Stassen was too weak a candidate, and Eisenhower support could be write-in only. It did, however, have a noticeable effect down-ticket; pro-labor Republicans like State Senator R.G. Crisenberry and State Representative August Grebe enjoyed strong shows of support.

Presidential Conventions

Undeterred by Taft's primary success, Reuben continued his attacks throughout 1952. While he refrained from attacking Taft as a Presidential candidate, he renewed labor's attack on his signature piece of legislation. In speeches, essays, and articles, Reuben cast the election as a fight to overturn Taft-Hartley, which he denounced with renewed vigor as an infringement of basic liberty. As he proclaimed:

The Taft-Hartley law is designed to penalize labor and give advantages to the employer. It has worked to the disadvantage of both. The rights of workers to organize for their own protection, to bargain freely on equal terms with the employer and to strike, are implicit in the American Bill of Rights and are now so recognized. The Taft-Hartley law disregards the Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution by providing for injunctions to establish forced labor during so-called cooling-off periods. It is unconstitutional in America to keep citizens at work by injunction power. Legislation affecting these rights should be replaced.¹⁵⁵

In a pitch to more conservative voters, Reuben cast a vote against Taft-Hartley as a vote for government deregulation, arguing:

To me it seems very clear that the absence of the Act, or the repeal of the Act, would result in more serious and sincere efforts at collective bargaining. What is needed now is less and not more of labor-management legislation. The rock bottom truth is no legislation can be passed which would stop all strikes... so long as men are free, strikes will continue, because both parties honestly disagree and are more than willing to take temporary losses in order to try for long-term gains. The only alternative is an arbitrary, undemocratic governmental fixing of wages and working conditions. This should not be tolerated by the employers and certainly would not be tolerated by labor.¹⁵⁶

Reub's efforts were this time met with greater success; in what was one of the closest convention struggles in American history, Dwight Eisenhower was able to defeat the despised Taft. Still, the platform agreed upon at the Chicago convention left much to be desired. The Republican Party officially favored the retention of Taft-Hartley, came out against inflation stabilization controls, and was largely silent on issues like housing, tax fairness, and the minimum wage.¹⁵⁷

The Democratic Chicago Convention, in contrast, invited labor and largely adopted its principles. As President of the hosting state's Labor Federation, Reuben enjoyed considerable access and influence. He was invited as guest of his good friend, Senator Paul Douglas, to the National Democratic Convention sessions, where he was proud to witness the nomination of Illinois's own Adlai Stevenson as the Democratic nominee for President of the United States.¹⁵⁸ Although Reuben had endorsed Stevenson's opponent in 1948, the Governor's pro-labor record had endeared him to the ISFL leader. While at the convention Reuben also took meetings with Democratic political operatives, including George Harrison, Chairman of the DNC's Labor Division. Later that October, in the heat of the political campaign, Harrison arranged for a personal meeting between Reuben and President Truman himself.¹⁵⁹ Despite his professed nonpartisanship, by the conventions' close there was no question that Reuben's star was ascendant in Democratic politics.

Mixed Results

While Reuben was busy courting Democrats, his son Carl concentrated on the other side of the aisle. By 1952 the freshman representative had consolidated a firm base of support. He ran without opposition in the Republican primary that year, garnering praise from both sides of the aisle. Although a firm labor vote, Carl took pains to publicly endorse the Republican Party and its platform. The day after Reuben met with President Truman, Carl rapped Stevenson's record. "In Streator, State Rep. Carl Soderstrom (R-Streator) said a Republican administration would be friendly to labor," the *Edwardsville Intelligencer* reported. "Soderstrom pointed to the labor legislation record of the 1951 state legislature, controlled by Republicans in both houses."¹⁶⁰

Carl's efforts paid off. He garnered a "heavy complimentary vote" in the general election, solidifying his status as a newly powerful player in the Illinois Republican party.¹⁶¹ It was a status that would become vitally important in the coming legislative year, as Republicans scored an impressive swath of victories nationally and across the state. Republicans not only retook the governor's mansion (Democrats lost the advantage of the incumbency when Stevenson decided to run for President) but dominated in state Senate and House races as well. By the end of Election Day, Republicans had claimed 38 of 50 Senate seats and 86 House seats to the Democrats' 67. It was a tough defeat for labor; the best Reuben could hope for was that the candidates he'd supported in the Republican primaries would maintain their resolve in the coming session. Still, Reuben remained undeterred; labor had persevered against worse odds, as he reminded the labor faithful:

Neither depressions, nor wars, nor political setbacks, have been able to destroy (the AFL), or stop its progress or growth... it has written a history replete with courage and determination on the part of the plain people... we

are facing many complex and difficult problems, but we are facing them with a quiet confidence that they will be solved. Just as the pioneers of unionism conquered their difficulties, performed their duties and solved their problems, so we, in our day, will overcome our modern difficulties; we will perform our duties and we will solve our problems.¹⁶²

CHAPTER 42

1953

HONORING LABOR’S “HAPPY WARRIOR”

“Labor’s rights have been notably safeguarded during our generation. Labor’s political freedom and participation in public affairs has been notably extended and expanded. These facts spell out more than just the progress and comfort to the wage earner directly affected. They mean we have succeeded in making the lives better for all of the families; they mean we have succeeded in making the lives better for all of the people.”

-Reuben Soderstrom, ISFL Convention, 1953

SHELTER FROM THE STORM

It had been a brutal summer for Matthew Brandon. The heat was bad enough; temperatures had already topped 100° in Chicago by June—20° hotter than normal—and August was proving to be the worst month yet. The weather, however, was the least of Matthew’s worries. When he first brought his English war bride and their first child home to America, the world seemed full of hope and opportunity. For a brief while it was. But now, with recession of 1953 in full swing, the former soldier turned freelance photographer couldn’t sell a single picture. He was working as a cab driver to make ends meet, but rent was killing him. Earning less than \$65 a week, and now the father of four, he could barely afford their overcrowded one-bedroom apartment.

Life was little better for Randall Savage. When the war veteran, now an Illinois State employee, and his wife were both working, they could afford the \$100 a month it cost to stay in their two-room unit in an apartment hotel (the only quarters they could find). But when Mrs. Savage was forced to quit her job as the birth of their first child neared, Randy found himself unable to make the rent. Before long the Savages and their newborn baby were homeless. His brother had taken in the struggling family, but he had no room to spare; sleeping on a sweaty makeshift cot in the apartment’s main room, Randy fell into despair, unsure of how he’d ever make a life for his wife and child.¹⁶³

On August 18, 1953, hope came to the Brandon and Savage families in the form of the Victor A. Olander Homes, a new south-side public housing project that opened its doors for the first time on that warm summer day. This complex and those like it were the fruition of a long, hard struggle led in part by Illinois labor. Illinois Federation Secretary Olander and President Soderstrom had spent years pushing for bills that would bring relief to Illinois families like the Brandons and Savages, comprised of hard-working men and women who, after serving their communities and country, needed and deserved some help in achieving the American Dream. From their first successful housing legislative drive in the 1933 Illinois General Assembly to their national efforts in support of the Federal Housing Act of 1949, Reub and Vic directed millions of federal dollars to Illinois for low-income housing. It was little surprise, then, that when the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) decided to christen the newest round of housing projects, which provided safe and sanitary homes for low-income families at rents at least 20% below privately constructed housing, they chose to honor the late labor giant by dedicating the Oakwood Boulevard and Lake Park Avenue complex in his name.

The building was as ambitious in design as it was in mission, an imposing structure that Victor’s best friend

and closest companion Reuben G. Soderstrom described approvingly in his speech at the building's dedication ceremony:

This 15-story Y-shaped structure rears its head skyward, towering over adjacent buildings. This edifice will be a fitting memorial—it stands on the edge of Lake Michigan on Chicago's great south side, facing the waters on which Victor A. Olander sailed when employed as a sailor, and will become a symbol and monument to his quality...I am proud of the Victor A. Olander Homes and proud to be here to dedicate this housing project to his memory. He deserves this tribute. Victor A. Olander is the greatest labor leader Illinois has yet produced.¹⁶⁴

While the accomplishment was substantial, Reub was just getting started. There were still far too many in need with far too little done on their behalf. The Housing Act was a small first step at best; worse still, Congress had cut back on HA construction with the start of the Korean War. The result was a dearth in defense area housing, driving up working and middle-class housing costs alike. Congress, Reuben declared, needed to support legislation providing long-term, low-interest loans for middle income families. Americans expected action from their government; instead, he ruefully noted:

The members of Congress must think that if you just ignore a problem long enough—if you just look the other way whenever it crops up—it will somehow solve itself. That seems to be the way Congress has been handling the problem, because Congress has gone home without doing the adequate thing to provide housing for millions of families living in dilapidated, unsanitary slums and for the tens of thousands of workers in defense areas who are living, often with their families, in shacks, huts, tents, and trailers. The trouble with this do-nothing or do-very-little approach is that in this world problems just don't solve themselves. It takes positive and responsible action to solve problems.¹⁶⁵

Reuben, along with his Secretary Stanley Johnson and son Carl, would spend 1953 taking that action, not just on housing but on a range of legislation and issues. From workmen's compensation to workplace safety, from equal pay for women to protections for those of any race, color, or creed, they fought the forces of intolerance and indifference. They fought to defend the jobs, homes, and futures of those they represented. They fought the uncertainty, discrimination, and unfairness that still plagued the American workplace. They fought for shelter, for the safety and security of workers across Illinois and beyond, so they too could share in the burgeoning American Dream.

AFL RAPPROCHEMENT WITH THE CIO

Unification Talks Begin

The American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations had been flirting with the possibility of unification for some time. However, old grudges and recurring arguments always appeared to undermine attempts to repair the rift. With the passing of AFL President William Green and CIO chief Philip Murray at the end of 1952, however, it seemed for the first time that real reconciliation was possible. To be sure, Reuben mourned the loss of Green—a man he considered both a leader and friend. Green had in many ways been a mentor to Soderstrom. He cultivated Reuben's leadership skills, naming him to a number of national AFL committees, including the influential Committee on Resolutions. He trusted him to represent the Federation on several joint regional, national, and international bodies, from wartime planning committees to the State War Council.¹⁶⁶ He utilized Reub's negotiating talent as an AFL arbiter, dispatching him to resolve intra-labor arguments ranging from national jurisdictional disputes to Central Body power struggles.¹⁶⁷ Through the years he repeatedly came to the ISFL leader for support and counsel. Reuben likewise admired the man whom he described in a stirring eulogy:

A symbol to the entire world, a symbol of the American way of life, a symbol of a great experiment whose sole purpose was the uplifting and betterment of the common man... He was a humanitarian, crusading against the evils and injustices of a modern system. He learned about social justice the hard way as a boy working in the coal mines of Ohio... he was honored with the highest office the labor movement could provide... to spend the rest of his life never faltering or wavering in carrying out his youthful dream of building a strong and respected American labor movement... When future histories of the United States are written the name of William Green will stand as a shining example not only as the foremost labor leader of his time, but also as a great American and outstanding servant of the working people which he loved so well.¹⁶⁸

Still, Green's passing meant the passing of the torch to George Meany, a leader who was tested (the long-serving AFL Secretary had been overseeing day-to-day operations since 1951), confident, and willing to compromise. He assumed the Presidency on November 25, 1952, without opposition, and immediately pursued the reunification of labor. He reinstated the nine-man committee formed to explore the possibility of an AFL-CIO merger. He proclaimed in press interviews that he was "ready, willing, and anxious" to bring labor unity. Most importantly, unlike Green, Meany framed the pursuit of unity as a melding of two equals, rather than a reabsorption of the "wayward unions" of the CIO by the "legitimate" AFL—an approach that allowed for what then-CIO legal counsel Arthur Golderberg described as a "labor peace with honor." As one *New York Times* reporter put it, Meany "consigned to the history book the approach of 'come back to the house of labor.'" ¹⁶⁹

Meanwhile, new CIO President Walter Reuther (who faced a tougher succession than his AFL counterpart) also indicated a willingness to explore a merger. In his convention speech, Reuther promised delegates that he would not allow any "vested right in an office"—i.e. the politics of personal power or pride—to stand in the way of unification. For the first time in decades, green shoots of hope began to grow on both sides of labor's long-divided field. That fall, both labor groups' national conventions passed and agreed to sign a sensible no-raid pledge. Committed and cautiously optimistic, the revived joint committee stated "This agreement and its faithful observance is the first and essential step toward the achievement of organic unity between the AFL and CIO, a goal which both organizations wholeheartedly subscribe. It is the intention of both parties to continue their joint meetings in an endeavor to achieve this objective."¹⁷⁰ As AFL Secretary-Treasurer William F. Schnitzler, a member of the nine-man group, described to the ISFL convention delegates:

In every conference... there has been a harmonious atmosphere, and a seeming desire on the part of each one who participated in the conference to work towards organic unity... certainly there are many, many trade union reasons why we ought to be together.¹⁷¹

Numerous regional unions also began working across boundaries. Meat Cutter and Butcher Workers (AFL) and the Packinghouse Workers (CIO), for example, signed a "mutual assistance" pact, as did the International Association of Machinists (AFL) and the United Auto Workers (CIO). Soon the Bakery and Confectionery Workers and Teamsters also signed a 10-year "mutual assistance" pact, which included close cooperation for organizing activities and negotiations, an exchange of information and statistics, and a joint effort to meet common problems.¹⁷²

Rooting out Corruption

Before both organizations could truly come together, however, they had to clean their respective houses. The CIO, plagued from its inception with charges of Communist influence, had already begun the process of reform. In 1949 the organization expelled its most notorious Communist-dominated unions, altering its constitution to allow the Executive Board to expel any other union that engaged in pro-communist policies or activities. These efforts were largely successful; as labor historian Professor Seidman testified before a Senate

Committee in 1952, “So far as the present strength of the Communist Party movement in the trade-union field is concerned, it has come to the lowest ebb since about 1935...Both within the AFL and within the CIO, Communist union strength is negligible today, except for a few scattered locals.”¹⁷³

The AFL’s problems with corruption, in contrast, were still on full public display in 1953. Charges of racketeering had tarnished the national AFL’s public image for decades, with the chaos and graft engendered by prohibition and war only deepened by organized crime’s infiltration. The most infamous example of systemic corruption was the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA), whose seedy activities investigative journalist Malcom Johnson described in depressing detail in his 24-part *New York Sun* Pulitzer Prize-winning series *Crime on the Labor Front*:

Organized criminal activity at these piers includes such varied enterprises as smuggling, traffic in narcotics, payroll padding, systematic theft of cargo, extortion, bookmaking, the numbers game, wage kickbacks, and loansharking...Both the union and the employers are jointly responsible for the conditions on the waterfront, each being governed by selfish interests operating against the welfare of the worker, against law, order, and efficiency in the port, and against the general public.¹⁷⁴

The national AFL leadership, while vocally critical of such activities, remained largely impotent, claiming their affiliates’ autonomy left the national organization powerless to take meaningful action. Public anger over this failure, many labor leaders privately admitted, was a major reason why anti-labor congressmen were to pass restrictive laws like Taft-Hartley without general outcry, even from many workers themselves. In the words of Reuben’s future Secretary-Treasurer Bob Gibson, “We hadn’t done enough to clean our own house, so they did it for us.”¹⁷⁵

That began to change slowly in 1953, when the AFL finally began to take action against the Longshoremen’s Association. Several factors likely played into the decision. First, media attention—beginning with Johnson’s expose and exploding after a blistering investigation of the ILA by the New York State Crime Commission—had focused a white-hot spotlight on labor corruption. By the time Elia Kazan’s film *On the Waterfront*, inspired by Johnson’s reporting, was released the following year, the public equated longshore unions with crime and corruption. Secondly, the CIO—which had gone to considerable lengths to purge itself of Communist influence—insisted that the AFL take action if it was serious about a merger. Reuther went so far as to list the removal of racketeering elements as one of his “four principles” upon which the CIO could not compromise (alongside the preservation of industrial organization, a system for resolving jurisdictional conflicts, and an end to any discrimination on the basis of race, creed, or color).¹⁷⁶

Finally, the change in AFL leadership also likely played a role. While both leaders abhorred corruption, Meany had a more expansive view of his authority than Green had, allowing him to do what his predecessor believed he couldn’t. Ultimately, this allowed Meany to take actions for the sake of discipline and unity that the mild-mannered Green, who fervently observed the limitations of his own office, would never consider.

With all eyes on the waterfront, Meany issued an ultimatum to ILA leadership: clean up or clear out. As Soderstrom’s *Weekly News Letter* reported that February:

The American Federation of Labor, in a sweeping and unprecedented statement that sets principles applying to all affiliates, ordered the International Longshoremen’s Association to clean house by April 30 or face expulsion from the federation. The Executive Council of the A. F. of L., meeting in Miami, said that the A. F. of L. is a voluntary association, and that each affiliate has autonomy...“However,” the statement went on, “no one should make the mistake of concluding that the American Federation of Labor will sit by and allow abuse of autonomy on the part of any of the affiliates to bring injury to the entire movement...No affiliate of the A. F. of L. has

any right to expect to remain an affiliate on the grounds of organizational autonomy if its conduct is such as to bring the entire movement into disrepute.¹⁷⁷

When the ILA failed to reform, Meany kept his word. At the 1953 AFL Convention in St. Louis, the Committee on Resolutions, including Reuben, recommended the revocation of the ILA's charter. The vote was overwhelming, with 72,362 in favor of expulsion, handily defeating the 765 votes against it. Soderstrom clearly supported the move and spoke highly of Meany for his bold, decisive action. In his report to the ISFL, Reuben spoke of the new AFL chief in glowing terms, writing:

Meany is destined to become the greatest labor leader that these wonderful United States has yet produced—and ten million members of the American Federation of Labor, with all their hearts, are hoping he will attain that goal! Though he has a flair for diplomacy, President Meany favors blunt talk, forthright action. He has never been found straddling an issue or off balance in debate or discussion. The A. F. of L. is in good hands.¹⁷⁸

Of course, it would be difficult not to notice that the traits that Reuben extols in Meany—diplomatic ability paired with blunt talk, a predilection for action over patience, a black-and-white view of the issues—are characteristics that could easily be attributed to Reub himself. It is perhaps unsurprising that Soderstrom saw in Meany a kind of kindred spirit. Like the AFL leader, Reuben was unafraid to wield the authority of his office, bending entire conventions to his will if necessary. While instinctively inclined to work with those possessing competing interests, he could (and frequently did) rain down hellfire on those he considered underhanded or self-serving. And, just as Meany took on the ILA, Reuben had spent years fighting off extortionists and criminal attempts to infiltrate the ISFL, enduring everything from threats to intimidation to actual attempts on his life. Soderstrom's response to such efforts was always the same: "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."¹⁷⁹

Sadly, Reuben and Meany's fight against racketeering was just beginning. The ILA stubbornly refused to go away quietly. For years the expelled union remained the chosen representative of organized longshoremen, while the AFL-chartered International Brotherhood of Longshoremen lost repeated elections (although intimidation was thought to play a deciding roll in such events). Reuben, meanwhile, would spend years battling the corruption that festered in his own backyard. That year alone, Soderstrom's native *Streator Daily Times-Press* ran multiple stories breathlessly reporting on labor abuses uncovered in St. Louis, the regional hub city located on Illinois's southern border that once served as Reuben's stomping ground, not to mention the host of that year's AFL convention. "Self-seeking labor leaders have extorted money from building contractors and union members and made the St. Louis area the worst in the nation," the paper said, quoting a federal grand jury report.¹⁸⁰ The article went on to paint an all-too-familiar picture of thuggish union bosses who ruled by intimidation, some of whom "carried revolvers with impunity, and on many occasions arranged it so that workers who might complain were able to see such a weapon."¹⁸¹

Later that year the paper reported on a Kansas City labor probe that indicted five union men. Orville Ring, president of Teamsters Local 541 and ringleader of the group, was charged with two counts of embezzlement and two counts of second degree robbery. One of Ring's men, a former vice president of teamsters local 838, was indicted on charges of assault with intent to kill and two charges of carrying concealed weapons.¹⁸² To their credit, the AFL put the offending unions in trusteeship soon after the indictments were handed down, but the damage was already done.

One can only imagine how the seemingly never-ending drip of such stories affected Reub. They filled the pages of his hometown paper. Unfortunately, labor's darkest days were yet to come; it wouldn't be long before Teamsters Union President David Beck—1953's addition to the Executive Council—put the

Federation through its most sordid, agonizing affair yet: the McClellan Committee investigation.

KEEPING LABOR SAFE

The Sixty-Eighth General Assembly

While the national labor movement fluctuated between unity talks and anti-corruption efforts, Soderstrom kept his organization focused on the coming legislative session. Without question, Reub knew, this would be a difficult session; Democrats had taken a beating at the polls in Illinois and across the nation, and Republicans held heavy majorities in both the Illinois House and Senate. They also controlled the governor's mansion with the election of William Stratton.

Still, Reub had reason to hope. While his ISFL had endorsed Stratton's opponent, Sherwood Dixon, based on its tradition of supporting the incumbent if he or she had a favorable labor record (Dixon, as Adlai Stevenson's Lieutenant Governor, was considered to share in the administration's record), they had largely avoided any heated rhetoric or acrimony. Just the opposite; throughout the '52 election cycle Soderstrom had held his Federation to its non-partisan policy, promoting pro-labor politicians regardless of party affiliation. "Labor must reward both friendly Republicans and Democrats who 'stick out their necks' and vote for our legislation," he wrote in the pages of the ISFL's *Weekly Newsletter*. "The labor movement, as such, has no desire to control either party and, as a matter of policy, does not attempt to do so."¹⁸³

This non-partisan approach was soon rewarded by the new governor when he named two AFL men, Roy Cummins and Joseph Hodges, as Illinois Director of Labor and Assistant Director, respectively.¹⁸⁴ This was a pleasant turn of events for Reuben, who under the previous Democratic governor was forced to accept first a CIO man and then a political AFL opponent as IDOL Director. For the first time in years, Reub saw his access to the IDOL fully restored.

Of course, Reuben's greatest asset in the coming session was his son, Carl. After running unopposed in his native 39th District, the younger Soderstrom was now in his sophomore year as an Illinois House Representative. Carl was ready to lead and he didn't waste any time; on January 27, the first day of mass bill introduction, he co-sponsored the very first bill introduced—a measure combining the Workman's Compensation and Occupational Disease Acts, increasing disability awards by 25%. He also entered H.B. 20, a measure to establish safety programs in all businesses employing 25 workers or more. The bill would require employers to promote a safety program, administered by the Illinois Department of Labor, educating employees on how to prevent injury.¹⁸⁵ He soon followed those bills with another, co-sponsored with fellow Republican James Atkins, to provide compensation of \$10 to \$25 weekly for 26 weeks to ill or injured workers. The proposed law, whose benefits roughly matched those provided by unemployment compensation, was designed to fix a quirk in the existing unemployment compensation law that provided benefits to unemployed persons as long as they were healthy but cut them off if or when they got sick, as all recipients were required to be "ready, willing and able to work."¹⁸⁶

It wasn't long before industry went on the attack. Their biggest target, it soon became clear, was HB 20, the Education Safety Proposal. Reuben was seemingly at a loss. Opposition to such a bill seemed bizarre to him. According to the National Safety Council, over 17,000 people were killed on the job in industry in 1951.¹⁸⁷ Illinois alone had seen a total of 52,068 compensable work injuries the previous year, including 428 fatal accidents.¹⁸⁸ These injuries hurt laborer and employer alike, Reub reasoned, and it was in both their interests to reduce such accidents. In this spirit he had spent the last year working with 26 AFL Central Bodies in a drive to produce best safety practices. He appointed John Fewkes of the Chicago Teachers union to act as liaison between the Federation and the Department of Labor, collecting and giving data and material to

Major Charles Cannon, the Department's Industrial Safety Expert. The sole purpose of HB 20 was to disseminate this information, through a \$25,000 appropriation agreed upon by the Governor, in order to prevent workplace injuries.¹⁸⁹ It was a simple education bill; there were no penalties for businesses, no additional personnel to hire or expenses to incur. To Reub, it seemed like a surefire win-win.

But what he hadn't anticipated was the emerging ideology within industry, a purist theory of economics that was attempting to replace the cooperative tripartite model of the 1940s (labor, management, and government working in conjunction) with the anti-labor, anti-government laissez-faire economics of the pre-depression era. This time the business community, led by the Illinois Manufacturers' Association, was committed to defeating HB 20 on principle; they wanted to make the statement that any government interference, no matter how beneficial or benign, would be met with total protest.

And protest they did. On the day the bill was to be considered by the Industrial Affairs Committee, more than 50 business and industry spokesmen lined the committee room halls, eager to put the bill down. John Barkley of the Illinois Manufacturers Association led the charge, accusing Carl and the ISFL of crafting a bill meant to "obtain an unwarranted power over industry, giving the department of labor another club over the heads of employers."¹⁹⁰ In testimony, Barkley ominously warned that requiring employers to set up safety education programs would "drive industry out of Illinois."¹⁹¹

Reuben was disgusted. "An astoundingly callous attitude, with respect to creating an effective safety education campaign in Illinois factories and other places of employment, was displayed by representatives of the employer" the *ISFL Weekly Newsletter* read the following day.¹⁹²

In the end, the show of force worked; the Industrial Affairs Committee gave the bill an unfavorable recommendation by a vote of six to ten. Carl tried his best to resurrect the legislation, asking the House to non-concur and place the bill back on the calendar, arguing that "a bill dealing with such an important matter as safety should be considered by the whole house."¹⁹³ His motion received 70 votes, far outnumbering the 51 no votes but 7 shy of the absolute majority needed to win. Carl was apoplectic, telling reporters after the vote, "I'm amazed at the opposition that has appeared to this bill. Its sole purpose was to save lives, and since no penalty was provided for violation it would have been entirely harmless."¹⁹⁴

Out of options, Carl withdrew HB 20 and replaced it with HB 547, which created a commission of six legislators charged with ascertaining the best methods of preventing industrial accidents and saving lives. For Reub, it was a bitter pill. In his front-page essay entitled "A Tragic Defeat," Reuben unloaded on what he referred to as the "reactionary opposition:"

Instead of subscribing to safety legislation controlled and guided by the State Department of Labor, or some other governmental agency, the employers prefer to set up industrial safety councils. Officers of the safety councils collect revenue from industry, but function inefficiently and half-heartedly, much the same as company unions, and they are just as phony, or as counterfeit.

This is the age-old position of reactionary employers. Their position was much the same with respect to hours of labor for women workers, proper care for aged people, benefits for injured workmen. All down through the years their hue and cry has been, "We don't need any legislation," that industry will take care of these urgent matters without law or governmental supervision. As a matter of fact, however, nothing worthwhile was done about shortening the work week for women until the Women's Eight Hour law was passed. Nothing worthwhile was done for aged people until Old Age Assistance and the Social Security pension law was passed and certainly nothing was done for injured workers on a voluntary or any other kind of basis, until the Workmen's Compensation Act was enacted.

This writer is wondering how many more working people must lose their lives in industrial accidents before industry is willing to accept some guidance, supervision and direction from governmental safety experts.¹⁹⁵

By the end of the legislative session most of labor's agenda shared the fate of H.B. 20. Reub and Carl had managed to pass a few minor bills, including a State Employees' Widows Pension and a Policeman's Minimum Wage Bill, but in truth the best thing the Soderstroms could say about the 68th session was that it was at an end.

Struggle in Streator

The hits didn't stop with the end of the legislative session, however. Days after returning from Springfield, Reub and Carl witnessed their tiny town get torn apart by a tornado, the first to hit Streator in over a quarter-century. According to local accounts, the twister "struck a devastating blow to the southeastern section of the city...causing inestimable property damage at two industrial plants."¹⁹⁶ It blew apart the G& D company warehouse, leased by the Thatcher Glass Manufacturing Company, and tore the roof off the Streator Manufacturing Company plant. Winds ripped through the streets at over 50 miles an hour, carrying a torrential downpour and doing damage to everything in their wake. Miraculously, no one was injured.¹⁹⁷

The storm couldn't have come at a worse time. By the summer of 1953 the U.S. economy was in a deep recession, and the storm's impact only amplified its effects. It soon became clear that the second half of 1953 was going to be a subdued, lean time. Unlike most years, there would be no city parades to celebrate Labor Day. As the *Streator Daily Press-Times* sadly noted, "It will be the first time in years that the various labor bodies, which have sponsored the celebration in the past, allow the day to go by without a street parade, free acts, and other attractions which have made it an outstanding event in this section of the state."¹⁹⁸

Still, the Soderstroms did all they could to make the best of the situation. Reub's daughter Jeannie, whom everyone called "sister," had moved back home to care for her father after her mother's passing, and after two years she had become his homemaker and companion.¹⁹⁹ She was a gentle soul who loved her work as a guidance counselor at Streator High School. She spent nearly all her time tending to the needs of others, including her Grandma Soderstrom, who lived in a small three-room apartment a block away. Although nearly blind from glaucoma and cataracts, she still possessed her signature energy and stubbornness—traits she'd clearly imparted to her son.

Despite the setbacks of summer, life in Streator hummed along quietly until Carl learned that their neighbors, who owned the lot at the corner of Bloomington Street and Lincoln Avenue, intended to tear down their apartment complex and replace it with a gas station. He immediately set out to stop the construction before it could start, canvassing the neighborhood and gathering signatures for petition asking that the property in question be reclassified from commercial to residential. Acting as spokesman for the neighborhood, he took the community's collective grievances to the city council, making an impassioned and well-reasoned case as to why the construction of a gas station on the corner lot could and should be prevented. Then, in an inspired move, he convinced the council to write and pass, on the spot, an ordinance requiring the consent of two-thirds of the property owners within 300 feet of a site before a station could be built in a residential section of the city. It was hastily drawn and clearly at odds with local zoning law, but it prevented construction while the classification issue was settled.²⁰⁰

The lot owners, naturally, were furious. As soon as they heard what happened they marched into the next city council meeting to demand that their rights be respected. The land was zoned appropriately, they asserted, and they could do with it whatever they pleased. Carl shot back that what they wanted to do would be a

“blight to the neighborhood,” and, as a homeowner whose property value would be impacted by their actions, he had every right to intervene. Things quickly deteriorated from there; accusations and eventually insults flew as Carl and the would-be gas station owners went back and forth. The local papers covered the fight as it progressed from the City Council to the Commissioner to the City Planning Commission.²⁰¹ What began as keen (or at least curious) interest turned into seeming exhaustion, however, as the fighting dragged on; weeks turned into months, months turned into seasons. All the while, Carl fought tooth and nail to keep the gas station out of his neighborhood, refusing to budge an inch, even when the Planning Council rejected his argument and issued a recommendation in favor of the would-be gas station owners. Carl redoubled his efforts, returning to the City Council to convince them they should reject the Planning Council’s recommendation. Finally, by mid-November Carl got what he wanted; while he failed to get the land rezoned, the City Council upheld the local ordinance they’d drawn up on the spur of the moment nearly four months earlier, effectively preventing the lot owners from building their gas station.²⁰² Carl celebrated Christmas in 1953 a clear winner, with nary a gas station in sight.

CELEBRATION

While Carl could clearly claim his share of success in 1953, the highlight of the year for the Soderstrom family was, without question, the gala testimonial dinner tendered to Reuben that year by the Jewish Labor Committee of Chicago at the stately Sherman Hotel. Following World War II, the formation and independence of Israel led to the emergence of a nascent Jewish Labor Federation, Histadrut, which had chosen Reub to chair their fundraising effort in Illinois. President Soderstrom helped raise desperately needed start-up funds, welcoming and eagerly embracing those in the movement as brothers and sisters. As he put it, “The trade union movement has made important gains for all workers, white and black, Christian and Jewish.”²⁰³

In appreciation for all Reuben’s tireless efforts, the Jewish Labor Committee of Chicago chose to honor him with a testimonial dinner, a grand affair in his honor given “in recognition of the work that Soderstrom, as legislative head of the trade unionists of Illinois, has done in establishing equality of opportunity for all people.”²⁰⁴ It was an event Reub and his loved ones would never forget. Sharing the excitement of the evening with his mother Anna, son Carl, daughter Jeanne, sister Olga, and two of his five grandchildren, the typically boisterous Reuben was briefly reduced to a humble silence, overcome by the emotion and pageantry of the moment. As his sister Olga, an honored guest that night at the banquet, fondly remembered, “Reub was given a beautiful citation. Civic leaders, the clergy, political spokesmen and labor people gathered to pay homage to the achievements in this field which had been made by a real champion of justice.”²⁰⁵

One after another, guest after guest stood to say a few words about the guest of honor. Chicago Mayor Martin H. Kennelly told the assembly, “It’s always a pleasure to pay tribute where tribute is due. Few citizens have contributed so much to the human relations of this city and this state as Reub Soderstrom. In saluting Reub, we salute the enlightened labor leadership he symbolizes.”²⁰⁶ Chicago Federation President Bill Lee, although called away to Washington on business, still offered congratulations in a letter read at the dinner. “In the field of labor legislation, there is no more outstanding leader than Reuben Soderstrom,” he wrote. “Not only have the members of organized labor benefited from his activities, but he has brought a measure of security to the aged, the disabled, and to the unorganized worker.”²⁰⁷ One of the evening’s highlights was William Schnitzler, the new secretary-treasurer of the AFL, who flew in from Washington, D.C. to deliver the keynote address. He began by relaying a warm message of congratulations from AFL President George Meany, which read in part:

To strengthen the position of the United States in its current role of world leader, to carry out the ideals set down in our Declaration of Independence and to attain fulfillment of the basic precepts of our Judeo-Christian

civilization, one of the most important tasks is to recognize and act upon the principle that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. Reub Soderstrom has been one of the foremost workers toward these ends. He well deserves a testimonial such as you are according him tonight. Let this dinner serve to honor him and also to spur the rest of us to continued efforts in extending equal opportunities for all men, no matter what their race, their creed, or their color. The job is by no means finished. Let this occasion serve to dedicate all of us to renewed effort, emulating what Soderstrom has so well begun.²⁰⁸

Many of the speakers cited Reuben's work on behalf of those of different faiths, backgrounds, and ethnicities; as a reporter for the *Peoria Labor Temple News* later wrote, "It was evident from the many speakers' expressions that equality and anti-discrimination because of race, creed or color, was the theme of the night, woven in and out of the life work of Mr. Soderstrom."²⁰⁹

Reub's Secretary-Treasurer Stanley Johnson then rose to address the crowd. Reminding them that today was also, fortunately enough, Reub's birthday, he began to give a special toast to the 65-year-old Soderstrom. He praised his friend's energy and ingenuity, marveling that "in every conversation Reub brings up some new idea to help the worker, the aged and the needy. His enthusiasm for his work is contagious, and he has the respect of all who know him because he has selflessly devoted himself to the cause of labor. We say he is not 65 years old, but 65 years young."²¹⁰ And on those words, the room went dark as a beautiful birthday cake was brought into the dining room by waiters with flaming torches. "It was a beautiful sight!" Olga recounted. "This was a well-deserved tribute to a man who'd fought for 23 years for the cause of humanity and organized labor."²¹¹

Finally, Reub gave his prepared remarks. As always, he spoke from memory, every word and intonation utilized to full effect. Thanking all in attendance and those who spoke on his behalf, Reub reiterated that simple affirmation of common humanity that had brought him there that night:

Unity between races, a fraternal brotherhood, is the essence of trade unionism...We, of the American Federation of Labor, are in an organization founded by a Jew and named by a Negro. While we may be Jews, and Negroes, we may be French, Swedish, British, Italian or German, we are also union members...We, each of us, stand as individuals, jealous of the rights and determined for the freedoms of every individual both here and across the sea. We, each of us, stand united, too, knowing that there is no greater strength than that of union brothers and sisters, working against intolerance and discrimination, hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder. Unionism and the fight against evil and prejudice are a necessity fifty-two weeks each year. What we preach here tonight we must practice every day throughout the year, and the years ahead...We will never halt our struggle until discrimination is banished.²¹²

CHAPTER 43

1954

PEACE, SAFETY, AND PROGRESS

“The things that labor’s opposition consider impossible are the things that have never been done before. But for ages men of vision, faith and plans have advocated and done the things others thought impossible... Those who do not dream and plan for progress are defeated before they begin.”

-Reuben Soderstrom, Central Labor Union Conference, 1954

“THE PRESS OF PROGRESS”

It was a moment of imagination. Just a year ago, Reuben Soderstrom had inaugurated the opening of Chicago’s newest public housing project, Olander Homes, christened in honor of his lifelong friend and colleague. Reuben was delighted; he saw affordable, publicly-owned housing as a shining example of American opportunity, a symbol of what he called the “press of progress.” For the first time, he argued, workers and progressive thinkers across the nation were awakening to the radical idea that they no longer had to take for granted the intractability of social ills. In speeches and essays throughout 1954, he made his case:

If working people would always bear in mind, when delving into our social problems, the possibility of progress, more of our problems would be solved. Many of us are too inclined to think that the problems which we are accustomed to having with us have to be, never realizing, as we should, that by changing conditions and a few laws, a problem will disappear. Everyone once thought tuberculosis was a disease that man must live with and endure. Today we know that by purifying the water and milk which we drink, and providing sunshine and ventilation in our workshops, tuberculosis will disappear. Once slums were considered an undesirable but inevitable part of a city. Now we are beginning to understand that slums can be cleared if we want them cleared badly enough, and intelligently plan the job to clear them. Things which labor’s opposition are most against are the things that have never been done before. But men of vision, faith and plans, down through the ages, have always advocated and done the things others thought impossible.²¹³

The conviction of Reuben’s will and optimism, however, was matched in intensity by the fatalism and fear-mongering of labor’s opposition. From public housing to workplace safety, fair elections to fighting discrimination, Soderstrom would explicitly challenge the notion that the problems of poverty, disease, corruption, and racism were inescapable evils. To the Illinois Federation president, these were man-made problems that could be solved with man-made solutions. Despite strong opposition without and limitations within, Reuben and his ISFL started to change the conversation about labor. He began convincing workers that the problems they faced should be not just abated but eradicated. Fueled by a growing post-war construction boom and accompanying economic optimism, his audience was primed for just such a message. It was the dawn of the American Age, and Reuben proved its ready messenger.

PUBLIC HOUSING AND DESEGREGATION

Public Housing and Private Corruption

Of all the issues Soderstrom tackled in 1954, none encapsulated the aims of labor or the ills it faced better than the fight for affordable housing. Industrial interests, which had long attempted to manage the lives of its workers both on and off the factory floor, vigorously opposed attempts to loosen their control. The company towns of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were perhaps the clearest example of industrial social engineering. These privately owned and operated communities not only kept laborers in debt with exorbitant housing and food prices; they also enabled owners to control the social and private lives of their workers. From the fun they were allowed on Saturday night (saloons were frequently forbidden) to the sermons they received the following Sunday, everything in workers' private lives was under their employer's influence. Even in non-company towns, early industrialists managed their employees' lives through behavior contracts that forbid "undesirable" activities, even when the worker was off the clock.

Although employers had largely abandoned company housing by 1950, they eagerly joined with construction companies and apartment moguls to undo the provisions of Truman's Housing Act of 1949, which sought to replace decrepit slums with affordable public housing. Such opposition appeared contradictory; after all, the expressed purpose of the company town had been to provide a healthy, safe environment for its workforce. Affordable housing, logically, would be good for business regardless of who was providing it. Reuben made this point himself, writing:

Employers, with all other elements of the community, have a vital interest in good housing. But sometimes perhaps the employer is unable to see how good housing helps him, as well as helping his employees. Here is why the employer has a big stake in elimination of slums and their replacement with dwellings fit for human beings: slums mean bad health. Bad health means inefficiency. No matter how bright and airy working conditions may be, workers who have to live in ill-ventilated, unsanitary homes cannot do the best possible work. Unhealthy living conditions mean more accidents on the job, more absences from the job because of sickness.²¹⁴

Employers' reflexive opposition to any and all government oversight, however, led them to make common cause with those who had a financial interest in restricting access to safe living conditions. This opposition attacked public housing as "creeping socialism," with foes like the National Apartment Owners' Association calling it "a breeder of communism."²¹⁵ Only private companies could adequately provide low-rent housing, conservatives claimed, asserting that "the ultimate responsibility for housing the American people must rest with private enterprise."²¹⁶ These protests were couched as philosophical objections to the means, not the ends. In the words of R.G. Hughes, President of the National Association of Home Builders, "The home building industry is in accord with the principles and objectives...to reinvigorate the drive to eliminate slums."²¹⁷ Opponents claimed they simply wanted government funds and assistance to go through the more "efficient and effective" hands of private business.

While some of the opposition may have been genuinely motivated by fears of communism and distrust of government, many more used these arguments to cover far darker motives. Profit, not principle, proved to be foremost in the minds of home builders who sought government money for affordable housing projects. In his *Weekly Newsletter*, Reuben ran a series of stories covering the housing fraud engaged in by private business, exposed by a series of congressional investigations into the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). These abuses, committed by builders who obtained Government-insured FHA loans, ultimately led to the resignation of FHA chief Guy Hollyday. As Reub's paper detailed in April of that year:

Nationwide housing frauds that might have cost home owners many millions of dollars were revealed as the White House accepted the resignation of the Federal Housing Administration head and the head of the Housing and Home Finance Agency seized FHA files. HHFA Administrator Albert Cole disclosed that many

homeowners had been cheated through home improvement loans far in excess of the cost of construction projects...He said that investigation had unearthed 251 cases, with more to come, in which builders got Federal loans far in excess of the cost of multiple-family projects that involved \$75,000,000. Cole charged that thousands of homeowners had been cheated out of millions.²¹⁸

Such industry graft hurt renters as well as homeowners. According to ISFL reporting:

Families in some developments have to pay 15 to 25 per cent more rent than they otherwise would because of profiteering on the Federal Housing Administration's apartment-house construction program. That charge was made by Sen. Harry Byrd (D. Va.), chairman of the Joint Congressional Committee on Nonessential Federal Expenditures...Meantime, Senate Banking Chairman Homer Capehard (R., Ind.) applied a tongue-lashing to the president of the National Association of Home Builders and charged that NAHB members were responsible for abuses in the FHA program.²¹⁹

In the 1950s, the abuse of government assistance deeply undercut claims that private companies could act as a better steward of public funds than the government. This shoddy record was even worse when compared to examples set by many of the officials and agencies who oversaw public housing projects. Foremost among these was Illinois's own Elizabeth Wood, the crusading Director of the Chicago Housing Authority since 1934. Like Reuben, Wood was a preacher's child (her parents were missionaries to Japan) whose commitment to social justice and progressive ideals were matched only by her political skill and sterling reputation. She skillfully managed Chicago's housing projects through careful tenant selection, strict rule enforcement, and the cultivation of a genuine sense of community. The CHA flourished under her leadership; historian Thomas Dyja notes:

Even with all the built-in pitfalls of housing policy, what Elizabeth Wood and the CHA created in the 1930's and 1940's succeeded. For those, white and black, coming out of kitchenettes, these first projects were a godsend, clean and safe, with playgrounds for the kids and health clinics on-site. "We felt it was just paradise," said one resident. Wood and her staff of social workers established each project as "an engine for upward mobility and an incubator of the middle class." Tenants were carefully screened, and inspectors made annual visits to enforce a list of rules and fines. "If the grass needed cutting and you didn't cut it, they cut it and they charged you," recalled residents of Altgeld Gardens. At the same time, positive behavior was reinforced..."Project People was a term of pride," Wood later said, "Our problem was preventing the tenants from becoming snobbish."²²⁰

Race and Riot

Sadly, it was not government malfeasance but the ugly specter of racism that would ultimately prove to be the director's undoing. In the 1940s, Wood, a committed integrationist, quietly eased segregationist dictates to "follow neighborhood composition" and began mixing in families of different races and ethnicities. Public reaction was swift and violent. When black war veterans John Fort and Letholian Waddell moved in to the Airport Homes housing project on December 5, 1946, they were attacked by white rioters who threw rocks and bricks, overturned cars, and even attacked a squad car. The violence against Waddell and Fort (who was decorated with four battle stars for his wartime heroism) forced the men out of their homes and ultimately lost Mayor Kelly his job. His successor, Martin Kennelly, stripped the CHA of much of its authority, but Wood persevered, doubling down on the fight over integration.

So did the mobs. In 1947, 5,000 white rioters laid waste to Fernwood Park in response to the arrival of eight black families. A race riot in Cicero in the summer of 1951 saw 4,000 white men and women assail the apartment of WWII veteran and Fisk University graduate Harvey Clark Jr. with stones and fire over the

course of three days, until the Illinois National Guard was finally able to restore the peace. Despite the fact that the CHA played no role in the Cicero incident (Clark was renting from a private apartment owner, not a housing project), Wood became a personal target of white rage and a convenient scapegoat for City Hall. By the fall of 1953, a third of all Chicago cops were assigned to some racial conflict as tensions continued to mount. No one of color was safe, even in houses of worship; black Catholic parishioners living in white neighborhoods had to be escorted by policemen to receive the Eucharist, and in May of 1954 three black women were severely beaten by a white gang for the temerity of attending Mass at a traditionally white church.²²¹

All this violence culminated in the months-long siege of black families living in the Trumbull Park Homes at 105th and Bentley. For over a year these men, women and children (26 in all) were terrorized in what local papers described as “an unending series of riots and disturbances (that) has necessitated the continued detail of as many as 3,000 police to the area at an accumulated cost of more than \$5,000,000 to the taxpayers.”²²² Many within the black community suspected this “protective” presence was actually a calculated attempt by police to manufacture outrage from neighboring communities, who were told to blame any rise in crime on the increased demand for patrols of Trumbull Park. White leaders did little to calm their communities. “If the police would crack down at Trumbull Homes and enforce the law,” Rev. King Range of Range Memorial Baptist Church told his flock, “order would be restored and the police returned to their beats. We seldom see a squad car in my neighborhood.”²²³

If the intent was to create an intolerable situation, it worked. In September of 1954, Elizabeth Wood was forced out of the position she had helped create, blamed by the CHA board and in the press for “one of the most disgraceful situations involving race frictions that has ever occurred in an American community.”²²⁴

Reuben Responds

In the early 1950s, President Soderstrom turned more urgently to the insidious presence of racial discrimination in labor. In the last General Assembly, his ISFL introduced the Equal Job Opportunity bill, HB 861, legislation which was far ahead of its time—like the Fair Employment Practices Commission bill Reub championed in 1951—and sought to bring an end to racial discrimination in the workplace. As Soderstrom explained upon receiving the Chicago Journeymen Barbers’ Civic Achievement Award for his work fighting prejudice that year:

IllinoisLabor is determined to do everything in its power to help working people, regardless of race, color, or religion, to win for themselves and their families a greater share of the wealth which they produce. The Illinois State Federation of Labor is also determined to eliminate all misunderstanding and all opposition and all prosecution so that we can work together, in closer unity and more unitedly than ever before, for the things that are right. Work together to usher into existence that period of human brotherhood of all mankind.²²⁵

Reuben refused to let the General Assembly’s failure phase him, charging forward into the political storm of racial politics to advocate for fairness and justice for all. The “Five Point Plan” he put forward at the 1954 Illinois State Labor Convention included the passage of his proposed Equal Opportunity Act as a vital legislative goal for organized labor. As he told those in attendance:

This proposal is designed to eliminate bigotry, intolerance and discrimination with respect to race, color, creed and national origin...It deserves serious attention on the part of our delegates. With proper planning, work, and enthusiasm it might be enacted in the next session of the General Assembly.²²⁶

With respect to the housing projects, however, Reuben appears to have viewed race as a red herring, an

ignorance that the enemies of public housing exploited to sour working men and women on policies that were in their own economic interests to support. Reub's response to this problem was a classic example of his beliefs and leadership style.

Consequently, Reuben set about convincing his membership of the righteousness of desegregation. In his *Weekly Newsletter*, Soderstrom detailed the benefits that ending segregation would bring to all workers, building an argument that the end of discrimination was not only morally good but in labor's self-interest. He touted "gains for Negro unionists" as an unqualified good, impressing upon his audience that the AFL itself had labeled "the fight against intolerance and discrimination (as) one against injustice."²²⁷ Echoing the American Federation's support in his newsletter, he reprinted President Meany's call for equality:

We in the A.F. of L. are determined to do everything in our power to help all workers, regardless of race, color or religion...The American trade union is committed to this cause. We have helped to prove that tolerance works. Wherever racial and religious discrimination has been eliminated by community or trade union action, wherever segregation has been outlawed by state and local legislation, the results have been highly beneficial to all concerned.²²⁸

The AFL credo was itself a call not only for equality but integration. Again quoting Meany, Reub reprinted:

One man's slavery is a threat to the freedom of every other human being. It took us a long time to learn that truth, but today it provides the moral force for our whole effort to attain world peace, freedom, and security. That effort can be undermined by the perpetuation of racial and religious bigotry and discrimination here at home. The American people cannot proclaim to the world that we believe that all men are created free and equal unless and until we practice what we believe...our unions have, for the most part, come to recognize that segregation is also a form of discrimination, and in many communities the first non-segregated gathering within the memory of their citizens has been the local union meeting.²²⁹

Right next to these explicit AFL calls for desegregation, Reuben placed articles in support of public housing. As he had done with desegregation, Soderstrom made clear the AFL position, chronicling the organization's struggle in Congress and its insistence that 135,000 housing units be built yearly, as called for in the 1949 Housing Act.²³⁰ He also reprinted, in full, essays by officials such as AFL Housing Committee Chairman Harry Bates that labeled efforts to replace public housing with 100% insured FHA loans as a scheme to benefit builders, not those in need. As Bates reasoned:

There is not the slightest reason to believe that this program will ever make housing available to even hundreds of low-income families. Yet there is need for decent housing for hundreds of thousands of such families...Relying almost entirely on this untried and probably unworkable program to meet the urgent housing needs of low-income families, the President grudgingly proposed only a token 35,000-unit program for public housing. Yet in the test of actual experience, the low-rent public housing program has made good homes available to hundreds of thousands of low-income families at rents they can afford in communities throughout the nation. It is the only program which can provide decent homes for families in the lowest income brackets.²³¹

By printing articles promoting public housing alongside calls for racial integration during the height of the Chicago desegregation fight, Reuben was linking the two labor causes in the minds of his readership. He wanted them to see the benefits of desegregation and public housing as one in the same. Furthermore, by framing the positions featured not just as his own but also the AFL's, Reuben hoped to give them added weight.

The AFL Executive Council did indeed believe affordable housing to be an issue of the utmost importance.

That February they met in Miami to outline a 4-point housing program that included a call for at least 600,000 units of low-rent public housing in the next three years.²³² In May the group met again in Soderstrom's own Chicago to issue a new call for congressional action, setting goals of 200,000 low-rent units in the next year for low-income families, direct low-interest rate loans for cooperative non-profit rental housing, and a commitment to slum clearance and redevelopment (not just "renewal," which the AFL viewed as slums by a different name). Recalling FHA abuses, the statement they issued after their Chicago conference read in part:

Public interest must come first in America's national housing program. No government agency, charged with a public trust, can be permitted to become an exclusive caterer to commercial profit, which the FHA has become. We ask that labor and the consumer be given participation in the administration of the FHA.²³³

While Reuben grounded his arguments for housing reform in AFL positions and policies, he made no attempt to hide his own positions or beliefs on the matter. To Soderstrom, the best vision of what public housing and desegregation could or should look like was embodied by Olander Homes, the housing project named after his old friend and colleague. He repeatedly returned to it as a template of what labor should strive for, using the project's "Let's Get Acquainted" festival in August of 1954 as a perfect example of a sort of urban utopia for workers:

The party...was a happy occasion for Olander tenants and an object lesson in brotherhood for all Chicago to ponder. Tenants at Olander Homes represent some sixteen different nationalities and races. They are all Americans who trace their ancestry from Italy, Poland, Ireland, England, Bohemia, Sweden, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Abyssinia, the Philippine Islands, Mexico, Puerto Rico and Austria. They are Caucasians, Negroes, Filipinos and Asiatics. Some are Protestants, some Roman Catholics, some Jews, and some adhere to Asiatic religions. But they don't dwell on their differences. The important thing is: they are neighbors, and they like each other.²³⁴

LABOR AND SAFETY

Headed Down the Highway

Part of the focus on public housing in 1954 came from fears that construction simply wasn't keeping pace with demand; as the AFL Executive Council warned in their Chicago statement:

Housing construction in the first four months of 1954 was at the ratio of 856 units compared with each thousand last year, and barely touched the annual average of the past five years. Yet in the course of these five years our population has grown by 11 million. Thousands of new plants have been built and whole new industrial areas have sprung up, clamoring for new housing.²³⁵

This ravenous need for homes helped fuel a building boom. While AFL data showed declines in housing construction, the U.S. Commerce and Labor departments reported record overall construction in the first three months of 1954, beating the previous year's first quarter outlays by over \$100 million.²³⁶ By September of that year private outlays jumped to five percent over 1953.²³⁷

While some of this increase came from an expansion of private residential housing, here was another factor that was beginning to jolt the American economy—highway work. Highways had been a part of the American experience since 1916, when the Federal Aid Road Act first provided matching funds to states to create and connect their major roadways. Over the years this somewhat messy patchwork had grown in fits and starts. When Eisenhower became president in 1952, however, the former general brought with him the

vision of a nation intimately connected by a network of interstate highways just like the ones he had seen in Europe during the Second World War. Although ostensibly for defense (Eisenhower's Secretary of Defense was in fact the former President of General Motors), most saw this system of roads as a way to connect American culture and commerce on an unprecedented level, and everyone saw its potential. By 1954 many states, including Illinois, began building in preparation. Roadway construction became so lucrative in Illinois that many state employees, including Assistant Director for State Public Works, Thomas Humphris, quit their posts to work for road construction companies.²³⁸

While the states salivated, the President began laying the framework for what would by 1956 become the Federal Aid Highway Act. One of his biggest concerns was safety. Already, there were concerns that roadway accidents incurred a dangerously high death rate. In January of 1954 the National Safety Council reported that the previous year's Christmas traffic season had been one of the deadliest in history, with 532 roadway deaths.²³⁹ Over the last two years alone, traffic fatalities totaled 38,000 a year, with more than 1,350,000 injuries (100,000 of which resulted in permanent maiming).²⁴⁰

Fearing government regulation, automobile companies attempted to affix blame on driver behavior as the root cause of highway accidents, specifically what would be described decades later as "road rage." In an early media blitz, the Inter-Industry Highway Safety Committee (an auto industry organization) headlined an ad campaign telling drivers, whom they described as "Emily Post as a host but a heel at the wheel," to "make courtesy your code of the road."²⁴¹ It was a brilliant (if disingenuous) move; creating a campaign that focused on driver behavior, they created the impression that drivers, not the safety design of the cars themselves, were responsible for vehicular death rates, letting car companies completely off the hook. In the words of IIHSC chairman W.F. Hufstader, "The real solution to the highway safety problem lies in the mind of the individual."²⁴²

Eisenhower, however, wasn't convinced. He wanted a comprehensive approach to this safety problem before the rollout of his new Interstate Highway System. To that end, in February of 1954 the President convened a massive White House conference on highway safety, with officials from every state representing seven core interests, including labor.

Governor Stratton asked Reuben to help represent Illinois at this conference, and for good reason. As ISFL president, he had long been an outspoken advocate for safety legislation. Moreover, Soderstrom had personally experienced the cost of unsafe roads when his brother, Lafe, was killed in a traffic accident. This conference gave Reub a chance to make a meaningful difference in the lives of his membership, while helping to prevent the same kind of tragedy that took his best friend and brother. Soderstrom accepted the call.²⁴³

In the end, the three-day conference produced the first-ever permanent advisory group to provide a "direct line of communication from the White House to the grass-roots."²⁴⁴ While the initial focus was primarily directed towards driver and pedestrian behavior, Reuben and his labor compatriots were able to raise public awareness on the importance of automobile manufacturer safety as well. An increased push for "safety-tested" cars emerged. Union mechanics in 1954 donated their time to groups like the Lions Club to offer "safety lane checks" where automobile owners could have their cars inspected for free.²⁴⁵ To combat drunken driving, Soderstrom and the delegates considered calls for increasing punishments from fines to jail time.²⁴⁶

Carl Soderstrom's Reelection

While highway safety was important to Reuben, his main goal remained keeping laborers safe at work. In 1953 Reuben and his son Carl, now a State Representative, had introduced HB 20, an innocuous piece of legislation that sought to promote best safety practices among workers based on research conducted by the

state's Department of Labor. Industry, led by the Illinois Manufacturers' Association, fought back tooth and nail, screaming that such a program was a socialist infringement of their rights, complete with dire predictions that allowing IDOL instructors on the factory floor to conduct safety classes today would invariably lead to state control of the production line before week's end. With a combination of manufactured outrage and money, the IMA and its allies were able to defeat the bill, with Carl only able to pass legislation creating a congressional committee to explore safety issues.

Not satisfied with the bill's defeat, anti-labor interests set their sights on the bill's author. In 1952, the Republican Carl faced no primary opposition. In 1954, in contrast, Carl's 39th district became the most contested in the entire state, with nine other Republicans battling for the chance to claim one of the district's three seats in November²⁴⁷ Carl received quite a shock when, despite being the only incumbent, he came in second in the primary race.²⁴⁸

The blows didn't stop there. In an unusual move, the Republicans announced their intent to field three candidates in the General Election. By law, Republicans could hold only two of the three seats, so the decision ensured that at least one of their own would face defeat in November. On its face, the move made no sense; by splitting their vote among three candidates, the Republicans risked losing one of their seats to the Democrats, who would only be fielding two. For Carl's enemies, however, the potentially suicidal nature of such a move was the very point. They were sending a clear message: It would be better to have a Democrat in La Salle's seat than a Soderstrom.

Reuben, characteristically, responded to these attacks by doubling down. First, he called on friends from every corner to help in his son's re-election fight. To Soderstrom, there was no doubt as to who was behind these efforts; as he wrote to Verna Albert, a friend on the LaSalle Trades and Labor Council:

Beyond a shadow of a doubt my son, Carl W. Soderstrom, is now the ablest State Representative from the county of LaSalle. Big business, corporation executives and rich reactionaries are opposing him because he is my son, and a symbol of labor in the General Assembly. Please move heaven and earth to re-elect him. He cannot win without special help in the west end of LaSalle County.²⁴⁹

When it came to the safety benefits he'd sought, Reuben didn't back down or pare back his expectations; he expanded them. In speech after speech across Illinois and beyond, Soderstrom called for new, expanded worker safety protections. First, he called for the radical expansion of the Workmen's Compensation and Occupational Disease Acts. As he explained in a speech that January at the Fifth Annual Central Labor Union Conference, held at the University of Illinois Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations:

There is no comprehensive and systematic statutory provision in Illinois for the protection of working people against loss of earnings due to non-occupational sickness or accidents...Private insurance is, of course, available to the individual to cover non-occupational illness or accidents—but here the benefits and protection is uneven, unequal and sometimes uncertain. Only a portion of hospital, doctor and medical bills are paid. A comparison of that situation with the Workmen's Compensation Act reveals the tremendous advantages contained in the Illinois law. The injured wage-earner does not supplement these expenses with any financial contribution of his own. His doctor bills, hospital bills and medical bills are paid, not for six months or any other time limit. They are paid by the employer under the provisions of the Illinois law until he is cured.²⁵⁰

This was nothing short of revolutionary. By calling for the current worker protections to extend to non-work related health issues, Reub sought a public solution to the critical problem of weak bargaining power individuals encountered when trying to purchase insurance on their own. Discounted bills for predetermined amounts of time were not enough, he argued; the emerging health care crisis could not be solved unless the

average citizen's medical bills were covered in full until he or she had fully recovered.

Reuben didn't stop there, however. After providing a laundry list of improvement and expansions he and his ISFL would seek in the coming General Assembly, Soderstrom turned to the legislative process of amending Workmen's Compensation and Occupational Disease itself. Every year, Reub said, he and his ISFL faced off against industry and the IMA, clawing for every incremental increase. It was time, he argued, to end the annual stand-off once and for all with automatic increases to end the "continual bickering in the legislature." Industry and its allies, of course, protested that such ideas were dangerous and untested. Passing such legislation, they warned, would expose the people of Illinois to potentially disastrous experimentation. To those critics, Reub responded:

The things that labor's opposition consider impossible are the things that have never been done before. But for ages men of vision, faith and plans have advocated and done the things others thought impossible. From Samuel Gompers and John Williams to William Green and George Meany our labor history tells the story of humanity's march forward because of men of courage and plans lived and worked. Those who do not dream and plan for progress are defeated before they begin, but those who see a prospect of influencing the employer and the Legislature for better things ahead, work to change undesirable conditions and bring about a better life and a better day!²⁵¹

Soderstrom carried his call for expanded safety all the way to the 1954 Illinois State Federation of Labor Convention. He made headlines with his keynote address, fighting the IMA's attempts to neuter the Illinois Department of Labor with a proposal to create a new division within the IDOL dedicated to promoting and monitoring safety. He vowed to fight in the coming Assembly for an appropriation big enough to hire at least 12 safety engineers, proclaiming "there are too many casualties of a preventable nature incurred by wage-earners annually, and legislation is needed to bring about improvements in this safety field."²⁵² He also declared that he would push for a boost in Workmen's Compensation benefits from \$28.50 to \$38, raising it to half the average wage of \$76 per week. In his audacious proposals the ISFL President made it clear to any and all opposition: he was not going away.

Labor's Worth

In all his calls for expanded safety and compensation, Reuben continually drew his audience's attention to the long road labor had traveled and the unlikely odds it had already beaten. In a Chicago speech to the Flint Glass Workers Convention in 1954, Reub began by recalling his own experiences as a child laborer on the factory floor:

Some 40 odd years ago, in the State of Illinois there wasn't any labor legislation on the statute books. As a matter of fact, no child labor law of any consequence was in existence at that time. I worked two years in a glass factory and one year in a print shop before the eight hour day was established for children. I recall my hours of labor started at six in the morning and finished at six in the evening. When the eight hour day for children under sixteen was established I was called upon to work a split shift. I started my day at six in the morning and worked four hours on and four hours off. I returned at two in the afternoon and worked till six in the evening. I was so accustomed to a long work day that I hardly knew what to do with the four hours of freedom which was assigned in the middle of the day.²⁵³

That eight-hour work day and the subsequent protections children enjoyed in the workplace didn't appear out of thin air or industrialist largesse, Soderstrom said. They were hard-fought concessions painfully wrung from owners and managers by organized labor, and they were part of a bigger plan to secure rights for all those working men and women who had been harmed or marginalized in the course of their work:

In addition to child labor protection the Illinois State Federation of Labor had worked out some 47 bills. It was merely a program of proposed legislation. Labor had high hopes, of course, that one day that legislation would be enacted into law. They didn't even take care of blind people 40 odd years ago in the State of Illinois. A blind person would sit on the street corner with six pencils and a tin cup and an instrument to eke out a livelihood... There wasn't any protection for widowed mothers either. If a breadwinner died and there were five or six children, the courts had a fashion of adopting these children to five or six different families...

We had no protection in the field of wages either. There was no collection wage law on the statute books and there was no legal way to collect wages of employees. I thought the coal operators were the worst offenders. They oftentimes worked their people two weeks and frequently at the end of that period they would say there wasn't any money to meet the payroll, but if they worked another two weeks perhaps at the end of 30 days they could be paid. At the end of 30 days the company was usually bankrupt and busted...²⁵⁴

Now, because of the ISFL and its work, those people and more enjoyed protection under the law. The blind and widowed had pensions, as did the elderly, enabling them to live and raise their children in dignity. Workers could have the wages they earned ensured by the state without cost to them. They could assemble peacefully and speak freely to bargain for a better wage thanks to the Injunction Limitation Act. They were guaranteed one day rest in seven. And of course, they would be compensated if they were injured on the job or grew sick as a result of their work. None of these achievements, Soderstrom reminded, would have been possible without the ISFL:

We have actually changed the state from a very backward commonwealth into a very progressive one. Today Illinois is regarded as one of the leading states in the field of labor and social legislation. Glass Workers unions affiliated with the Illinois State Federation of Labor helped to bring about the enactment of this program of labor bills. So the next time someone asks you "what have your labor unions ever done?" do not question that person's lack of information but take him in hand and open his mind to the greatest power for good that the world's workers have ever known.²⁵⁵

This was the message that Soderstrom drove home to union men and women across the state. In speech after speech, Reub charged union men and women to proudly proclaim, whenever challenged, exactly what organized labor had done for them. As he told the Operating Engineers at a Chicago dinner that October:

May I request you, the next time someone asks you what labor unions have ever done, not to pity that person's lack of information but to take him hand in hand...compare the work day of 45 years ago with today. Show him the teamster who slept in the hayloft, too tired and weary to go home for a few hours rest. Show him the coalminers who labored a 14 and 16 hour work day...Show him the printer—my own organization—who worked a 12 and 14 hour day on morning papers...The same is true of the carpenter, the machinists, and even your own organization. The eight-hour day is a fact, and some of the organized trades are now discussing a seven or even a six-hour day so that the worker may enjoy to a greater degree the good things of life.

If the union's successful efforts in reducing the work day is not sufficient excuse for our existence, you can show him how the workers' agitation gave us our free school system, with its free school books. How we raised wages and established a vast chain of benefits; how we forced the employer to safeguard life and limb, how shop conditions have been bettered by men standing together and protecting each other from blacklisting.

Show him how the labor unions spend their dollars for labor laws that benefit the organized and unorganized alike. Show him how the unions were the first to start a fight and direct legislation against child labor and scores of other reforms. And more than all this combined, you can show him the effect of unionism on the

character of the men—how it develops independence and manhood, how it equips men to assert themselves instead of standing cowed and servile with cap in hand before the employer...Upward was the trend out of slavery and bondage until today we stand almost sixteen million strong with a representative in the President's cabinet and Governors and statesmen glad to say they once belonged to a trade union.²⁵⁶

“The Road to Peace”

Of all the types of safety that concerned Reub, none mattered more than the safety of the nation. In July of 1953 the Korean War had finally come to an end, and Americans began to realize that the struggle against Communism would not take the form of a new world war—not immediately, at least. Instead of an active, “hot” conflict like the one against Nazi Germany and imperial Japan, the struggle with Soviet Russia and its allies would be an indirect “cold” war waged through proxies. The main reason for the difference between this conflict and the last was the looming presence of the atomic bomb. As Reub wrote:

Through the media of motion picture reels on April 1, 1954, the public of the United States witnessed for the first time the horrible and terrific spectacle of the first hydrogen bomb explosion. The central fireball approximately three miles wide which speedily breaks into a deadly and terrific mushroom was but a catastrophic and tremendous warning of what will come unless the world decides to solve its problems at the bargaining table.²⁵⁷

America and her enemies needed to learn the language of compromise and accommodation, Soderstrom believed. And who could be a better teacher than organized labor, that democratic body which had through trial and tribulation perfected the skill of wringing rights for its people from an often unreasonable opponent through tough and persistent negotiation? This was the case Reuben had been making for years, and it was in no small part because of his writings and speeches linking American labor and international peace that the AFL Executive Board decided to send Reuben to represent the organization at the 69th Annual Convention of The Trades and Labor Congress of Canada. It was an unusual act; as ISFL Secretary Stanley Johnson later explained:

Usually fraternal delegates given out-of-country assignments are selected from International Unions. This is the first time that the officers of the American Federation of Labor have appointed a representative of the Illinois State Federation of Labor to serve in an international capacity. President Soderstrom was singled out and selected because of the great amount of work he has performed and the heavy responsibility which he has borne...²⁵⁸

Reuben's work and reputation made him an easy choice; he did not disappoint. That August, Reuben and his daughter Jeannie loaded up the family car and motored up to Regina, Saskatchewan, where the convention was to be held. They arrived the Sunday before and stayed as guests of the Canadian Congress before Reuben gave his address, entitled “The Road to Peace,” on the Convention's opening day. As Reuben approached the podium, he thanked the Canadian delegates and officials for their welcome and briefly recounted the long American-Canadian history of union collaboration before he came to heart of his speech—his roadmap for peace:

The labor movement of the United States is not only apprehensive of the uncertain economy which lies ahead but is also afraid of what might happen if the kind of tensions there are in the world today keep growing and atomic weapons and other instruments of destruction get stronger and deadlier. Our labor leaders as well as our diplomats and statesmen believe that one way to prevent the outbreak of small wars which could lead to big wars is through collective defense – through the United Nations. What I think the labor movement would like to see done is to have all civilized and peace-loving nations of the Earth get together and deal with the causes of

war. Arrange for peaceful settlements of disputes and raise the standard of life and labor throughout the world so as to eliminate huge, depressed populations with nothing to lose on whom aggressors, from either the right or left, can play...

The forces of reaction have been noticeably active and in the ascendency in the United States during the past year. Their political policy, thus far, is to do nothing – and in the event they are pressed hard, to do very little! This is definitely not the way to head off the danger of Marxism. Marxism is not the solution to industrial problems and unrest in a workable, free democracy such as ours. But reasonable social progress is a practical solution—and the American Federation of Labor includes in its hopes, aspirations and plans a lot of social progress! Intelligent, thoughtful, fighting trade unionism is for reasonable social progress because that is an acceptable answer to our problems and a sensible solution or answer to the threat of communism.

The capitalistic system of the United States is not a bad system, but it needs to be improved and perfected. Unions must become strong enough to compel employers and corporations to establish and improve our social welfare plans to better protect the worker and his family...Labor is opposed to the communistic scheme, to bring about the collapse of communism. That is why intelligent leaders of the A. F. of L. lambast and expose short-sighted business people and industrial overlords who do not subscribe to the labor movement's work of humanizing capitalism by eliminating poverty and abolishing human misery²⁵⁹

In one fell swoop, Reuben firmly established the union mission of “humanizing capital” as the greatest weapon in the West’s fight against communism. Equally as important, by naming the reactionary forces and their refusal to address the issues causing communism, he openly accused “politicians who support oppressive laws and who want to repeal the social gains of the last half century are playing into Soviet revolutionary hands.”²⁶⁰ Just as he had at the start of the year, Reuben called for ambitious –even audacious—solutions to big problems. He wanted to eliminate poverty, abolish misery, and raise the state of laborers not just in America or Canada, but around the globe. It was a compelling speech, breathtaking in its structure and simplicity, yet inspiring in its articulation.

A YEAR IN REVIEW

Despite all the strife and struggles of 1954, Reuben ended the year on a high note. His son, Carl, won re-election handily, with his 27,460 votes beating out both Republican challengers (former Sheriff Clayton Harbeck won 25,130 votes, Michael Signorella, 21,844).²⁶¹ While Republicans still controlled both houses of the Illinois General Assembly, the labor-friendly Democrats made significant gains. Nationally, Reuben’s friend and best ally in the US Senate, Paul Douglas, whipped his Republican opponent by more than 240,000 votes²⁶² The coming year looked increasingly hopeful, not to mention a validation of his ambition and optimism.

Still, Reuben took the success and subsequent cheers in stride. As Reuben told the Journeymen Barbers while accepting their Civic Achievement Award, “My aunt used to say that flattery was like perfume—something that should be sniffed and not swallowed.”²⁶³ Still, Reuben admitted to the chuckling crowd, he couldn’t help but enjoy the praise, at least a little, because of his human nature. He continued:

I think we are all human. We have our faults and we all need a check on ourselves of some kind. Every human being has his likes and dislikes and favoritisms because he is human. It is human failing. The employer is no exception. The employer requires a check on him the same as anyone else. If he didn’t have a check on him of some kind he would allow his likes and dislikes and prejudices to run away with his judgment at times, the same as would the employee. The labor union, therefore, is a very good check on the employee and the employer, and the intelligent employer knows it, and appreciates it, too...

I honestly believe it would be the ruination of most employers if they were permitted to have their own way altogether—and we propose to save them from that ruination by keeping a check on them through our labor unions, and also keeping a check on them through legislative enactment.²⁶⁴

There was no doubt that Reuben would be “keeping a check” on business for many years to come.

CHAPTER 44

1955

REUBEN AND THE MERGER OF THE AFL AND CIO

“The chief purpose of this shortest AFL convention, adoption of the 4-part merger resolution, was the main business of the second day...As Matthew Woll of the Photo Engravers finished reading the unity resolutions, Reuben Soderstrom, president of the Illinois AFL and secretary of the resolutions committee, moved the adoption of the report.”

-New Report of the 74th National AFL Convention, (add place & date) 1955

SILVER LION

Reuben couldn't take his eyes off the gavel. It was beautiful, of course; but then all of the 24 gavels he'd received presiding over the Illinois State Federation of Labor Convention were gorgeous, carefully-crafted works of art. They had come in all shapes and sizes, each with their own unique contours, curves, and quirks; yet he knew immediately that this one would hold a special place in his heart. It wasn't just the hammer's smooth lines, attractive dark-stained wood, or detailed design. It was the middle, wrapped in lustrous silver, commemorating his 25th anniversary as leader of the Illinois Federation. Inscribed upon the metal band was a tribute which read:

To Reuben G Soderstrom with appreciation for his 25 years of judicial and dedicated service as presiding officer of the Illinois State Federation of Labor Conventions. Presented by the Tri-City Federation of Labor at the 73rd Annual Convention, held in the State Armory, Rock Island, October 10-14, 1955.²⁶⁵

Holding it high for the assembled delegates to see, Tri-City Federation President John DeYoung took his opportunity as convention host and temporary chairman to speak for a moment about his memories of the man the gavel honored before he formally relinquished it to its proper owner:

I speak of a man who twenty-five years ago took over the reins of the labor movement in Illinois. I recollect distinctly, I sat with him in the lobby of the Leland Hotel that afternoon when the Executive Board chose him to follow John Walker...These 25 years have been remarkable in the progress of labor in the state of Illinois due to the huge membership, their loyalty, and competent leadership, particularly at the head of our state organization. The state has grown in prestige as to labor matters, political, legal, and otherwise, legislative achievements for labor, all through this leadership...

Words cannot be found to express what I want to do at this moment. We have a gavel for the man whose name I shall have to mention at the finish and not now, a gavel prepared particularly for this anniversary, the 25th anniversary...the gavel itself is one that represents the honor and respect of the entire labor movement of his state...It is a beautiful emblem that I know he will preserve for years to come, along with 24 other gavels in the past. I now present to you, to take over, your friend and my friend, Reuben Soderstrom!²⁶⁶

Upon hearing Reuben's name the assembly arose, offering an extended ovation as the man of the hour accepted his gavel and assumed the chair. Despite his 67 years, Soderstrom was still every inch the lion of labor, stout, pugnacious, and powerful. His full head of hair, bright flowing silver, still shook when he passionately spoke in praise of labor or denounced its enemies. In this moment, however, the rambunctious orator was stilled with humility. As he took to the podium, he reaffirmed the promise he made to the delegates when he first chaired the convention a quarter-century ago:

I want to express my thanks to the temporary chairman for this very attractive union-made gavel. While gavels are symbolic of authority, in labor conventions they are used merely for the purpose of tapping the announcement that a conclusion has been reached or that an issue has been settled. There will be no misuse of this gavel during this week of deliberations here in the city of Rock Island. In this convention, as in all of the great conventions in the past, every delegate will be treated fairly and impartially by your presiding officer. Every delegate has the right to be heard and every issue will be settled in a democratic fashion by a majority vote of the delegates in attendance.²⁶⁷

This pledge to democratic governance was one that Soderstrom took very seriously. Although he at times used his power to place ISFL support behind leaders and positions that were not popular, Reuben always took care to act within the limits of his authority. Moreover, Soderstrom had demonstrated the ability to separate his personal desires and agenda from those of the Federation, consistently subordinating the former to the sake of the latter. This was a large part of the reason why he had been able to survive for so long, particularly in a state so often characterized by the rise of strong men inevitably felled by revelations of greed and abuse. In a world filled with corruption, Soderstrom remained an honest man.

It was a trait that Reuben, and the nation, needed now more than ever. It was in 1955 that a Montgomery seamstress refused to surrender her seat because of the color of her skin, sparking a bus boycott that stirred some to protest and others to violence. It was the year that the United States first sent a Military Assistance Advisory Group to South Vietnam. It was the year that Disneyland opened, marking a new era of imagination and celebration of childhood innocence. In Illinois, it was the year that Cook County Chairman Richard J. Daley became the new Mayor of Chicago. And in the world of work, it was the year that the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), rivals since the latter's creation in 1935, finally, formally united.

REUNIFICATION

The Short Route

The impact of the reunification of the AFL and CIO, both real and imagined, cannot be overstated. For twenty years these two organizations had been at each other's throats, and not just on the national level. Everyday rank and file members of these two organizations frequently attacked one another, often in violent fashion. As future Illinois AFL-CIO President Bob Gibson, then a rank-and-file member of the CIO, later described in an interview:

Was there animosity? Oh hell yeah! I remember they got to shooting people's windows out at night (well, we didn't use real bullets). It was everybody. It was every dirty trick you could think of, shooting 'em or throw a can of paint on their front porch, something like that. Flat tires...kind of like at Halloween, things kids would do, grown men were doing.²⁶⁸

Much of this antagonism was fueled by conflicts over jurisdiction, fights to see which union would get to represent the workers at a given factory or business. Although they theoretically represented two different

spheres of work—the AFL was organized along craft lines, while the CIO organized by industry—by 1955 the distinction was largely academic. When workers at a plant decided to organize, more often than not they could choose between two nearly identical unions—one backed by the AFL and the other by the CIO. Rival unions would also frequently conduct “raids,” going in to factories that were already organized by the opposition and agitating for them to switch affiliation. “It was more jurisdictional questions,” Gibson explained. “These were men fighting over turf. Everybody thinks ‘this is our jurisdiction and we’ll settle it.’”²⁶⁹

This intra-labor squabbling was no small matter. It was not only widespread but largely fruitless, successful only in increasing animosity. As then-CIO lawyer Arthur Goldberg wrote in his history of the AFL-CIO merger:

During the two-year period, January 1, 1951, to December 31, 1952, there were 1,246 cases which could clearly fall within the definition of a raid....In all, 366,470 workers were involved. The most significant fact was that of these 366,470 workers the petitioning union was successful in defeating the recognized union in cases involving only 62,504 workers, or approximately 17 percent...Of these 62,000 workers who changed over from one federation to another, some 35,000 were taken by an AFL union from a CIO union, while the CIO unions were able, on their part, to capture 27,000 workers from the AFL. The net change in affiliation over this two-year period thus involved no more than 8,000 workers, or less than 2 percent of the total number of workers involved.²⁷⁰

This destructive cycle finally began to change in 1953, when for the first time both organizations signed a no-raiding agreement, essentially a cease-fire that allowed both parties to demonstrate good faith. A few short months after the agreement went into effect, a Unity Committee comprised of AFL President Meany, CIO President Reuther, their Secretary-Treasurers, and a few others met at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington D.C. By the end of their meeting, both presidents surprisingly announced their intention to create “a single trade union center...which will preserve the integrity of each affiliated national and international union.”²⁷¹ These words were quickly followed with decisive action. On February 5, 1955, the Unity Committee met again in Miami to decide on the mechanism and timeframe of the proposed merge. As Goldberg, who was present at the meeting, later recounted:

George Meany suggested that the basic issue to be solved at this meeting was whether to merge into a single trade-union center. This, Meany indicated, could be done either by the “short” way or the “long” way. By “short,” he explained, he meant bringing each affiliated union into the trade union center as-is, with its integrity protected, and with future union mergers to be worked out by voluntary means. The “long” way was to seek to settle all conflicts in advance of the merger. The reaction of all negotiators, both AFL and CIO, was immediate and unanimous. All desired the “short” way—merger now.²⁷²

The heady mix of hope and anxiety in the room must have been palpable. Everyone in attendance believed they were at a crossroads, a fragile pause in the decades of enmity that could itself end in a breath, and they dare not lose the moment. They hastily drafted a resolution that afternoon, and before 5pm that evening they had decided to conclude the merger by year’s end. They were committed to the cause, full speed ahead, leaving the details for later. For local leaders like Reub and those he represented, those details—and the devils contained therein—would prove problematic for years to come.

Reuben Rendezvous with History

The potential power of unified labor delighted its friends, terrified its enemies, and fascinated all. The famed labor journalist Victor Riesel wrote just days after the February announcement:

The just-wedded AFL and CIO will inevitably become the single most influential industrial and political force in the land within a few years. Even without the millions of additional members the merged labor federation will pick up in the organizing drives it will soon unleash in the south and southwest, it has great power. The coalition has over 16,000,000 members who will provide its national headquarters with \$7,200,000 annually, mostly for organizing work. At the same time, the new Council of Industrial Organization department will have an additional \$3,600,000 a year for its own budget and its own organizing campaigns. This means a total of almost \$11,000,000 as a yearly operational budget for the new organization...The joining of the AFL and CIO is not just the return of some unions to the fold. It is the beginning of a period in history when labor swaps the lunchbox for the briefcase.²⁷³

Anti-labor forces, meanwhile, decried the merger as a “labor monopoly.” According to the president of the National Association of Manufacturers (the parent group of the IMA):

Businessmen are concerned because it seems to them this move points to a speedup of tendencies toward monopolistic labor practices...I have found that businessmen believe labor unions, even without a merger, have become a potent force politically and economically. The belief is that the merger will increase the monopolistic potential.²⁷⁴

Business’s answer, predictably, was a return to the old injunction days, when businesses could use anti-trust laws to break up strikes. They also pushed for so-called “right to work” laws, new legislation built on the “open shop” acts of the 1920s, drafted to prevent unions from collecting dues in a union-represented shop. This was particularly problematic as such unions were legally bound to advocate for *all workers*, not just dues-paying members. These bills were designed to strip unions of funding while simultaneously robbing paying members of their benefits—after all, why would you pay to join the union if you could receive its protection for free?

For the moment, however, the barbs and threats of business failed to dampen the excitement of labor’s reunification, or slow its pace. Reuben greeted the news with unqualified joy. As he wrote in that year’s Illinois Department of Labor publication, the *Illinois Blue Book*:

The merger of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organization was the outstanding economic and industrial event of the year 1955...It is too early to attempt an appraisal of all the advantages and benefits that can, and will, be attained from this consolidation into one great National Federation of almost 16,000,000 members, with ten percent of them employed and functioning within the borders of Illinois. It will immediately strengthen the hand of labor in the field of negotiations and legislation for the benefit of the worker and the public.²⁷⁵

Much work remained, however. The February 5 resolution that sparked so many hopes and fears was a mere two sentences long.²⁷⁶ Subsequent negotiations, primarily by CIO General Counsel Arthur Goldberg and AFL Vice President (and Chicago son) Matthew Woll, had produced a more detailed agreement, followed by a draft constitution that was tentatively approved by the AFL Executive Council on May 3²⁷⁷. Yet one of the biggest tasks—determining what the actual policies of this new Federation would be—had yet to be addressed. Meany and Reuther knew that discussion over such details had the potential to derail the undertaking in its infancy; this was the very reason they had opted for the “short road.” Such policy positions would have to be approved by convention, not by Executive Committee. Approval from the close-knit council was one thing; drafting a proposal which could succeed at a convention, in contrast, was another matter altogether. While the leadership was eager for the merger, popular sentiment was still unclear. How could the council win the support of men who’d spent years shooting out each other’s windows? President Meany needed someone with experience, talent, and most importantly the respect of his peers. He knew just

whom to call: Reuben Soderstrom.

A week before the AFL Executive Council formally approved the new constitution, AFL President Meany and CIO President Walter Reuther each selected three of their most trusted men to craft the governing policies of the new Federation, which would be voted on by the entirety of the new body at the proposed merged AFL-CIO convention that December. Reuther picked his CIO Secretary-Treasurer and International Electric, Radio, and Machine Workers President James Carey, CIO VP and US Steelworkers President David McDonald, and CIO VP and President of the National Maritime Union Joseph Curran—arguably the most powerful members of the CIO leadership. Meany chose Matthew Woll, the AFL’s top lawyer, as chairman of the proposed committee. Next he appointed George Harrison, the President of the influential Brotherhood of Railway Clerks who had been a part of AFL-CIO reunification efforts as far back as 1936.²⁷⁸ When it came time to choose a third member, however, Meany didn’t pick another of his Vice Presidents, or one of the International Presidents who controlled the nations’ powerful unions. He chose ISFL President Reuben Soderstrom.

In terms of qualifications, Soderstrom’s selection made perfect sense. As a long-serving President of one of the largest state organizations in the AFL, Reuben had considerable experience in managing conventions and passing resolutions. Further, as former legislator and Secretary of the AFL Convention Committee on Resolutions, he had been drafting legislation and resolutions before the CIO even existed. He had spent years settling intra-labor disputes as a special envoy. Perhaps most importantly, Reuben was respected by the leadership of both the AFL and the CIO. Even Joe Germano, head of the Illinois CIO, described Soderstrom to his peers as “someone we can live with. Reub’s a nice guy. Believe me, his word is good.”²⁷⁹

Still, it was an unconventional choice. Simply put, state figures weren’t placed in these positions of authority. National appointments were almost always reserved for International Presidents, who had their own constituencies and bases of power. They were the ones with the authority to call industry-wide strikes, and often commanded considerable funds. State presidents, in contrast, typically managed through “soft power” and operated under comparably small budgets. Reuben, for his part, took his ISFL’s ability to run on modest means as a matter of pride, boasting that he hadn’t raised membership dues once in his quarter century of leadership.²⁸⁰ Likewise, in his 25 years as ISFL President, Soderstrom never once called for a strike; his role in this regard was to give support to those who were on strike and to encourage other unions in the state to do likewise. Conversely, when Reub viewed it in labor’s interest to refrain from striking, he couldn’t force his membership back to work; he could only encourage or discourage.

Despite these restrictions—or perhaps, because of them—Reuben had emerged as one of the nation’s most influential leaders of labor. He had more than quadrupled ISFL membership in his time at its helm, keeping them united even through labor’s darkest days.²⁸¹ While the wave of strikes that rocked the nation in the years after the Second World War resulted in new legislative restrictions for most of labor, Reuben had successfully held the line in Illinois, keeping his state largely strike-free. In return, he wrung crucial support from the state’s traditionally anti-labor governor, ultimately making Illinois practically the only major industrial state in which no anti-labor laws were enacted.²⁸² This ability to achieve unity without coercion—discipline without dictate—was exactly what Meany needed in this moment. And so on July 25, 1955, the AFL President sent notice to Soderstrom that he had picked him to help craft “declarations designed to reach an understanding as to common policy on those questions for the merged A.F. of L. and C.I.O.”²⁸³ Reuben jumped at the opportunity, immediately writing the labor President to accept and thank him for “including me... for honoring me with a place on this important Committee.”²⁸⁴ Woll, Meany’s right hand and a close associate of Reuben’s, greeted the choice with satisfaction. On August 1, he sent Reub a letter which read in part:

Dear friend Reub:

Last week, President Meany informed me that he had selected you, me, and George Harrison, President of the Brotherhood of Railway Clerks, as a committee to study policies heretofore declared by the A. F. of L. We are to meet with a like committee of the C.I.O. to consider and endeavor to come to an agreed report outlining policies that should govern the proposed Federation of Labor and which would meet with the approval of the merged Federation and its contemplated first Convention this December...I am requesting the research people at the A. F. of L. office and Chairmen of the several committees to prepare for us a statement on policies that have heretofore governed the A. F. of L. in such matters as housing, education, taxation, social security, community services, international labor relations, wages, hours, legislative and political action, etc., etc...²⁸⁵

Over the next several months, Reuben worked closely with Woll to prepare for the momentous meeting, exchanging letters on procedure, tactics, and the like. Finally, on Monday November 7, 1955, Reuben took the train from his Springfield offices to Chicago, staying there for the night before flying to New York for the historic meeting.²⁸⁶ In the days that followed, he worked with his CIO counterparts David McDonald, Joseph Curran, and James Carey to craft a comprehensive set of AFL-CIO policies that could be passed by a full convention that December. They discussed everything from public housing policy to proper tax rates to targeted wage and hour legislation, finding a present balance between their respective prior positions.²⁸⁷ Ultimately, they emerged with a set of documents breathtaking in scope and speed—the comprehensive policy positions of the brand-new AFL-CIO.

Bringing Unity to Illinois

When the AFL and CIO held their first joint convention in December that year in New York City, it was Reuben who was given the honor of making the motion to officially unite “these two great national organizations into one united federation on the national level.”²⁸⁸ As Reuben later described the momentous occasion in his report on the convention:

The atmosphere of the closing hours of the AFL convention was charged with a dramatic feeling that something new and extremely satisfactory was happening. Before closing President Meany himself announced the CIO’s vote. The more than 800 delegates broke out in cheers, whistles and foot stomping. And well they might. The merger is charged with terrific potential economic and political possibilities and all of them good for wage-earners.²⁸⁹

With the merger between the two national bodies complete, attention turned to the labor organizations of each state. Back home in Illinois, Reuben touted the benefits a merger would bring to all Illinois workers. The *Southern Illinoisan* led its coverage of Reub’s opening address the following morning with his vocal support for reunification:

Addressing the opening session of the 73rd annual convention of the federation today in the Armory here, Soderstrom said that in the political field, with the merger, “workers will have an enlarged opportunity to work together, in closer unity and more unitedly than ever before”...Soderstrom said the merger “will bring many advantages to wage-earners and to the public and to America itself.” He added that “this merger is full with terrific potential, economic and political possibilities and benefits.”²⁹⁰

Reub reiterated his call for a merger of the Illinois Federation and CIO later that week. “Labor should be working together in closer unity, and more unitedly than ever before,” he told the delegates. “That opportunity looms upon the horizon now that the merger between the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations is about to be consummated.”²⁹¹

Then, Soderstrom did something which had never done in the entirety of his presidency. Pausing for a moment, Reuben welcomed a representative of the CIO, once the ISFL's greatest rival, a group which had once called for Reuben's removal and the very dissolution of the ISFL itself. Though the presence of a CIO man at an Illinois Federation Convention was unprecedented, the embrace of a former rival was nothing new to the ISFL President, and he welcomed his guest with genuine warmth and reconciliation:

We are honored this afternoon with having a representative of the CIO on this platform. He has come here, he tells me, to extend the greetings of that great organization to the Illinois State Federation of Labor, and it gives me a great deal of pleasure to present to you Brother Pat Greathouse, the Regional Director of the CIO.²⁹²

Brother Pat took to the stage to applause, paying honor to the man his predecessor had once called a corrupt racketeer. While he acknowledged the differences of the two organizations, he echoed Reub's optimism that their common goals undermined any real obstacles to reunification, telling the audience:

We must band together. We must band together to build an organization, an organization designed to work, based upon issues, with other groups in the state of Illinois, farm groups and other groups, to bring about a liberalized program within the framework of both of the major political parties, so that we can build not only a labor movement that we are proud of, but that we can build legislation on the social front, and all of the other fronts that affect us directly and indirectly, at the local level, at the state level, and at the national level.²⁹³

Amidst all the action and optimism, Reuben felt certain the merger at the state level in Illinois would be a quick one. As he proudly proclaimed in the *Illinois Blue Book* that year:

This merger will increase the membership of the Illinois State Federation of Labor and will be completed on the state level by October, 1956. Numerical strength and elimination of rivalries will broaden the power and influence of the united Illinois labor movement.²⁹⁴

Unfortunately for both Reub and Illinois labor, this prediction would prove wildly over-confident. While the national merger was complete, the fight to reunify Illinois had just begun.

LEGISLATIVE GAINS

Compensation and Safety Wins

Soderstrom, for his part, had already put those words into action. For the first time, he invited Maurice McElligott and John Alesia, Secretary-Treasurer and Legislative Representative of the Illinois CIO, respectively, to join him at the bargaining table opposite the Illinois Manufacturers' Association to negotiate new Workmen's Compensation and Occupational Disease benefits. For years, this "agreed bills" process of negotiating benefits for sick and injured workers, conducted under the authority of the General Assembly, had been the responsibility of the ISFL, and Reuben had jealously guarded his organization's right to be the sole authority representing labor. But now, with the merger imminent, Reuben asked the CIO and the United Mine Workers (represented by Luther German) to join him.²⁹⁵ With labor thusly united, they made unprecedented gains for workers. Before the close of the 1955 General Assembly, the combined group had secured historic increases in Occupational Disease and Workman's Compensation benefits. As Reuben boasted:

An impressive number of beneficial measures helpful to working people were enacted into law—the most important of which was an increase of 18.2 percent in the benefits of the Occupational Disease and Workmen's Compensation Acts. This is the largest boost ever attained at one time in the history of this legislation.²⁹⁶

Soderstrom was ecstatic. In private correspondence, he referred to it as “the best news of the year,” bragging to the Secretary of the Illinois Council of Carpenters that:

The Illinois State Federation of Labor succeeded in twisting out of the representatives of the employer the largest increase in Occupational Disease and Workmen’s Compensation benefits ever secured at one time in Illinois, or, for that matter, any other State.²⁹⁷

Of course, labor unity wasn’t the only reason for the advances in compensation legislation. In typical fashion, Soderstrom had taken last year’s defeat and turned it to his advantage. Reactionary elements in 1953 had thwarted attempts by Reub and his son, State Representative Carl Soderstrom, to pass a bill that would have trained laborers in workplace safety and best practices. They instead sent the Soderstroms’ safety concerns to a committee for “further study,” a fate generally considered a political graveyard.

Reuben, however, took it as an opportunity. While his opponents dismissed and ignored the committee, Soderstrom remained actively involved, giving particular attention to their key findings and recommended courses of action. The commission, unsurprisingly, found that safe work environments and safety education programs could greatly reduce accidents, saving workers their health and employers their money. Reub then convinced Governor Stratton to give his blessing to the committee’s recommendations, ensuring that any and all legislation based on them would be personally tied to the Republican Governor’s office. Thus armed, Soderstrom argued that the savings business could expect to see if they implemented safety procedures should be directed to increased payouts in Workmen’s Compensation and Occupational Disease:

A commission created by the legislature two years ago to study educational methods designed to prevent industrial accidents and save lives has completed its work. The Governor of Illinois has placed his blessing upon the Commission’s recommendations. Labor has contended for some time that a general 25% reduction in accidents should result in a corresponding increase in benefits. It looks like this can be given to us now without much additional cost to the employer...over and above everything else we want a 25% boost in benefits.

Illinois manufacturers and their associates tried to protest, but to no avail. Reub had the Republican governor on his side; even after negotiation the IMA had no choice but to acquiesce to the biggest increase in Illinois history. Reuben saw this not just as a win for workers but as a vindication of the “agreed bill” approach to compensation legislation that he had forged:

The Illinois method of negotiating improvements in the Occupational Disease and Workmen’s Compensation laws is not only good procedure but is actually proper legislative procedure. In over forty years of experience no better arrangement has been found. It becomes a notable victory for the Illinois State Federation of Labor, the pioneer in this field, and also a very satisfactory achievement for the C.I.O. and all other labor groups who sat in the recent conference.²⁹⁸

Soderstrom didn’t stop there. With the Governor’s blessing in hand, Reub ensured the introduction of a host of safety bills, five in all, which would revolutionize workplace safety in Illinois. HB 1085 through 1089 called for the creation of a Division of Safety Inspections and Education, operating under the direction of the Illinois Department of Labor. They likewise instituted a Safety Education Commission, also IDOL directed, for the purpose of protecting workers exposed to hazardous working conditions.²⁹⁹ To fund all this, the bills called for \$120,000 in appropriation for ordinary and contingent expenses.³⁰⁰

All of this went far beyond the mere creation of the IDOL safety programs to which Reub’s Republican foes had so strenuously objected; they never could have imagined when they defeated Soderstrom’s bill two years

ago that it would result in anything close to this. Every time they tried to object, however, Reub used the commission's findings and the governor's support like a cudgel, beating down all opposition. They were powerless. The bills passed both the House and Senate, and by the time of the ISFL Convention IDOL, Director Cummins was proud to report to the delegates:

This session of legislation, I think, will be remembered particularly for its creation of the Division of Safety Inspection and Education in the Department of Labor which will greatly strengthen the administration of industrial safety laws in the State...I do not know what the working men and women in this State of Illinois would do if you did not have such men as Reub Soderstrom. I have watched him and Stan Johnson...when I see them down in Springfield in the legislature, running all over the building from the Senators to this one and that one, stopping bad legislation, legislation that is bad for men and women working for a living, I say again that I feel honored to know both of these gentlemen. I want to congratulate them on this 25th anniversary here, and I hope that Reub has a long and prosperous life and we have him for many years to come.³⁰¹

Legislative Losses

While Reub could claim several victories in the 1955 legislature, his son Carl wasn't as fortunate. Truly, the now-veteran legislator was making gains; in the 1955 session he was appointed Vice-Chairman of the Judiciary Committee and served as a member of the Committee on Education, the Liquor Control Committee, and the Industrial Affairs Committee.³⁰² His most important work, however, remained the crafting and introduction of labor legislation. That year, the younger Soderstrom introduced two bills that he felt to be of singular importance—a minimum wage bill for teachers and an hours bill for firefighters. The teachers' bill, introduced on March 16, sought to raise the minimum salary for full-time teachers to \$3,000 a year, regardless of service or experience, replacing the then-current minimum of \$1,200 to \$2,600 depending on teacher qualification.³⁰³ Two weeks later, he introduced HB 557, a bill that would shorten the work week of firemen across the state to 56 hours a week, eliminating the 70-84 hour workweek non-Chicago firefighters typically faced (Chicago already had the 56-hour limit in place).³⁰⁴

Opposition to both measures was as fierce as it was predictable. Opponents to the teachers' bill fought against it on fairness grounds, arguing that teachers with higher levels of education should receive higher starting salaries. Carl shot back that they were still free to do so, making front page news with his retort that "We don't interfere with schoolboards in fixing salary schedules. They can pay as much as they like."³⁰⁵ Opponents of the Firemen's bill, meanwhile, reflexively claimed the bill would force cities to lay off firefighters, the go-to argument against every labor bill.³⁰⁶ When the ridiculousness of this statement was explored, those against the bill made the more honest argument that the proposed act would force cities to either higher additional fire fighters or lower their protection coverage. Reub's hometown paper, the *Streator Daily Times*, explored the impact Carl's legislation would have on his city:

A bill to reduce the work week of downstate firemen...would cost the city of Streator \$11,700 annually if present fire department efficiency were maintained...Streator firemen now work approximately 72 hours weekly. The department is divided into two platoons, alternating 24 hours on duty and 24 hours off...According to Fire Chief William Uebler, three men would have to be added to the Streator department if the 56-hour bill were passed and present on-shift manpower maintained...if the efficiency of the department was weakened by having less firemen on-shift, it is probable that the Illinois Inspection Bureau would recommend a raise in insurance rates in Streator.³⁰⁷

The mayors of smaller downstate cities like Streator complained to Carl and his co-sponsors that the bill's mandate forced them into making an impossible choice: make drastic cuts to their budget to hire more firemen, or put their cities at increased risk. Of course, the basic fault of such reasoning was that these cities

were *already* at risk. No firefighter could be expected to be effective working 72 hour weeks, and the IIB had already warned cities that the failure to reduce hours would result in increased insurance rates. According to the *Daily Times*:

The Bureau two years ago advocated three more men for the local department, pointing out that a raise in rates could be expected if the recommendation were not complied with. Streator is now rated in class six for fire protection and a drop to seventh class would mean about a \$2 annual increase on every \$1,000 of fire insurance, Chief Uebler said.³⁰⁸

There was nothing unreasonable about reasonable hours, Carl asserted. Nor was this uncharted territory; as Reuben noted in his testimony before the House Municipalities Committee, Chicago firemen had already moved to a 56-hour week without incident.³⁰⁹

Still, Carl and his supporters and co-sponsors took pains to address their critics' concerns. He amended the teachers' bill to account for qualifications; a teacher with less than 120 semester hours of academic training would begin at \$2,700, while those with bachelor's or master's degrees would start at \$3,000 and \$3,200 respectively.³¹⁰ For cities concerned about the cost of firemen, he added language to his firemen's act authorizing cities to add a ½ percent sales tax and a public utility tax designed to benefit cities.³¹¹ With these corrections in place, Carl's bills soared through the House by near-unanimous margins—92 to 7 for the proposed Teacher's Minimum Pay Act and 94 to 11 for the Firemen's Hours Act.

Despite the overwhelming popularity of these bills, opposing forces found ways to quietly defeat them. The Senate failed to hear the teachers' bill before the end of session, leaving it to die when the session closed. The firemen's bill did make it through the Senate, but was then vetoed by the Governor, who opposed the very tax provisions Carl had included to win legislative support. The losses were deeply frustrating for Carl, who could barely believe that such fair, just, and obviously popular legislation could fail. Still, like his father, he refused to be cowed. As he told the crowd at the ISFL Conference later that year:

I have been through the mill down there (in Springfield) a little bit in the last six years. These labor bills, because they are our bills and because they are our bread and butter bills, they are fought every inch of the way. If you will pardon the expression, we have our nose rubbed in it all the way. They use every parliamentary trick which is legal that they can think of to get in your way and obstruct labor's program... (but) I pledge you all of my time, efforts and ability, whatever they may be, as long as I am permitted to serve in the General Assembly. And I want to promise you here and now, ladies and gentlemen, that I will not only vote for your bills, but I will cheerfully sponsor labor legislation as long as I am there!³¹²

PAYING TRIBUTE

Certainly, 1955 was an historic year for the life of labor. It also marked a milestone in Reuben's life. The 73rd Annual Illinois State Federation of Labor Conference was the 25th such event Soderstrom would preside over, an achievement those he represented were eager to celebrate. Secretary Johnson took to the stage early both to pay tribute to the man he'd come to know so well and to relate the congratulations and goodwill of others sent by telegram. Everyone from AFL Secretary Schnitzler to the President of the Jewish Trade Unions sent their warm regards, but none of the messages Stanley read touched Reub as deeply as the one he held to the end. Pulling the message from his coat pocket, Johnson told the audience:

Now here is one that I am sure you will like, the friendly and most homely note I think that we will receive because it comes from very close to the President's heart. There is a little fellow that he has in his family... a grandson called Reuben Soderstrom. He can dote a little about that. When this little fellow was hardly a week

old, I asked the President about the newest addition. He said, "He is a little two-fisted, howling, straight upstanding going-to-be labor leader, from the way he acts." And that was his grandson. Now here is the telegram addressed to the grandfather:

WE ARE ALL PULLING FOR YOU TO HAVE LOTS OF GOOD LUCK AND THE BEST AND MOST SUCCESSFUL CONVENTION EVER.

LOVE FROM

CARL VIRGINIA SISTER CARL JR. GINNY BOB JANE AND LITTLE REUBEN.³¹³

Johnson was followed by Reub's own son Carl, whose tribute to his father was especially personal and moving:

I wonder if you folks out there can imagine the feeling of humility that encompasses me as I stand before you here today...I have been trying to follow along here in my dad's footsteps, but I find that the gentlemen wears big shoes and takes big strides. I sometimes find that I rattle around like peas in a pod, perhaps, but I believe that I am getting so I can stay on his path.³¹⁴

One after another, speakers paid homage to the "smiling warrior." Earl McMahon, ISFL First Vice President and Secretary of the Chicago Building Trades, recounted his earliest remembrance of Reub, back when he was a young man who somehow succeeded in convincing the ISFL Executive Committee that they should hold their giant annual convention in his tiny hometown of Streator:

One of the spokesmen for the City of Streator was a short, stocky impressive sort of fellow who gave a dynamic address on why the convention should be held in Streator the following year. The officers at that time who listened to his impassioned address remarked, "Here is a man destined to go far and should reach great heights as a spokesman for labor." He concluded his remarks with a poem entitled "Streator on a Saturday Night." This recitation, given like a gifted elocutionist, brought down the house, and the speaker was given a rousing ovation...

During convention week this man worked far into the night helping to set the type for the proceedings so they would be available the next day, and in spite of his long hours or night work he never failed to be in attendance each day at the convention. Those who work with him recognize ability, not given to many men. It is a privilege to work with him. We are blessed with the greatest and most gifted President of all state federations of labor.³¹⁵

Of all the speeches given on Reuben's behalf, however, none was more eloquent than that of Father Donahue, the Catholic Priest who had long stood by Reuben's side both in the fight for labor rights and through Reub's personal moments of loss and crisis. The Father's speech proved to be one for the ages; as the *Streator Daily Times* wrote, "His Streator friends will read with genuine satisfaction and full assent the thought expressed in a tribute paid Mr. Soderstrom at the recent state convention of state federation by the Rev. Joseph L. Donahue (C.S.V.), long-time chaplain of the Chicago Building and Construction Trade Council."³¹⁶ Father Donahue's message, personal and passionate, began with the words of Israel's most storied prophet of exile:

In reading the good Book, you will find therein the Prophet Isaiah says: "Speak thou the truth of God to my people with power and courage. Harken not thou to the voice of those who would turn thee aside to the soft and easy ways. For I have set thee to battle for the poor and downtrodden and to withstand the mighty ones who oppress my people." Those heroic sentiments of the greatest, the boldest, the most uncompromising prophet of ancient Israel describe vividly and perfectly the whole life history of the great man who has been

your President for the past 25 years.

It would be gross presumption on my part to attempt a eulogy of Reub Soderstrom after organized labor has placed the stamp of approval upon his work and his character, and nothing would be further from Reub's desires than for me to do so. To some of us Reub is little less than a hero, for the name Reuben Soderstrom stands high on the honor roll of distinguished members of organized labor, who have advanced the cause of the worker, and represents to us achievement, and sterling honor, manhood and courage. It is to inspire and encourage others, and not to praise this illustrious son of organized labor, that these few words are spoken.

My association with the labor movement has brought me close to a great many other wonderful men, and I know that none of the others will be in the least jealous if I put my good friend Reub Soderstrom first of them all. For a good many years I have felt close to him. I want publicly to assert that I have learned much from Reub Soderstrom, who I consider perhaps the finest mind in the American Labor movement. He has been kind and sympathetic and understanding and generous. During these years of an active, energetic, vigorous life, through good report and ill, through calamity, slander and misrepresentation, he has gone up and down the length and breadth of this state to do battle for the poor, the downtrodden, to withstand the mighty ones who oppressed the workers . . .

He has never reckoned the cost of the service to which he has dedicated his life. He has never counted the odds arrayed against him. He has marched steadily forward with a heart that quailed not, with feet that faltered not, to serve the cause of the little people, who worked to live. And now, Reub, as a citizen of the state of Illinois and as a member of organized labor, I congratulate you heartily on 25 years of fruitful, unselfish, glorious service. I am sure that all present unite with me in hoping and praying that you may have health and strength and length of days to write new chapters of splendid achievement in the book of your illustrious career, and out beyond the bourne of space and time, our hopes still follow you.

When the blazing sun and all the gleaming stars are only burnt out cinders, wheeling their useless bulk through the infinitude of space, when the heavens shall be rolled up like an ancient parchment and time shall be no more, may you stand triumphant, crowned with honor and glory in the midst of the angels and saints of God, and may we all be there to celebrate that immortal jubilee with you. God keep you.³¹⁷

The ISFL transcripts make no note of Reub's reaction, only the crowd's applause and Soderstrom's message of thanks. Still, it's hard to imagine the silver lion not moved to tears by what had to be one of the most stirring tributes in the history of labor. Who would have known that the book of Reuben's illustrious career would continue for another 15 productive and fulfilling years?

CHAPTER EXCERPT

IN MEMORIAM

1955 Was a memorable year for Reuben in many respects. Sadly, one of these was the sheer number of friends he lost. By year's end Reub had buried several of labor's pioneers and luminaries. As he solemnly noted upon the celebration of his 25 years of service:

This silver anniversary of mine is tinged with both happiness and sadness. I am happy to have had the privilege to complete 25 busy, active years in your service and sad because none of the official family of 25 ago are with me here this morning.³¹⁸

On October 13, Luther German, former printer and current legislative representative of the United Mine Workers of Illinois, passed away in St. Louis. Reuben had known Luther as both a Brother Typographer and an ally in the halls of Springfield, working alongside to fight for the rights of working men and women. Less than two months later, former US Secretary of Labor and Illinois son Martin Durkin died. Although Soderstrom worked with Durkin during the latter's brief tenure in Washington, he always remembered Martin as the first and best Director of Labor in Illinois.

The greatest of these losses for Rueben, however, was unquestionably the death of his mentor, predecessor, and friend, John H. Walker. At news of his passing that year in Colorado, Reuben gave a stirring eulogy to the man he credited with forging Illinois labor's path:

Hundreds of union people throughout the nation in the A. F. of L. labor movement were shocked and shaken by the news of the death of Brother John H. Walker, former President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor...His eloquence, talents and abilities were used generously to strengthen the labor movement and to secure legislative enactments in the interest of wage-earners, and untold thousands of men, women and children were made happier because he lived. He was an honest, generous-hearted, stimulating and exciting personality. He has left all of us in labor many encouraging examples and many wonderful memories. As his name is flashed on the skyline of eternity today the membership of the Illinois State Federation of Labor mourns his loss and expresses the sincere hope that our Heavenly Father will extend eternal peace and rest to the soul of this great leader of men.³¹⁹

CHAPTER 45

1956

NO DEAL BETWEEN ISFL AND CIO

“Although some of us may show signs of wear since last year, Reub seems to grow younger with the years and the expanding requirements of his office. It is a work he loves, and he has won the affection of all of us by the example he sets. There is no trade union leader in the nation who is better liked than our own Reub Soderstrom.”

-William Lee, President, Chicago Federation of Labor

STREATOR ON SATURDAY NIGHT

“Bob! Get back here!” Carl Soderstrom, Sr., shouted after his young son as the latter ran haphazardly across the depot platform. Bob pretended not to hear, darting among the disembarking passengers in a fevered search for his grandfather, affectionately known as “Pom Pom.” “Carl! Ginny! Bob!” Carl Sr. called after his other children as they took off in pursuit. The race was on. Suddenly, a hand shot out from the evening snowfall, clutching the young Carl with such force that he nearly fell backwards.

Reuben Soderstrom, dressed in black tweed coat and hat, lifted and squeezed his grandson tight and laughed in the cold air, “Now, why were you in such a hurry to find me?”

“Saturday and payday!” Bob shouted almost in unison with his brother and sister, “Four o’clock and after. Everyone’s silent soul is filled with silent laughter!”

“Well, what a lovely poem,” Reub teased, recognizing the lines as his own. “And such passionate delivery! I guess you deserve a little something for that.” Reuben had scarcely pulled the dollar bills from his breast pocket before they were snatched by his grandkids, who then instantly ran off to buy candy inside the depot. “Don’t spend it all in one place!” Reuben reminded.

The scene that played out in the bitter January cold was a familiar one. “Whenever we saw Grandpa on a Saturday evening, if the kids came up to him and quoted the lines from his poem, he would give them a dollar,” Carl Jr. later remembered. “Over the years, that cost him a lot of bucks, or ‘green backs,’ as he called them.³²⁰” For Reuben, these moments were welcome distractions from the political fights that increasingly consumed his days. He would need more such diversions in the months to come, he thought to himself as he walked off the platform, discussing the current challenges in Springfield with his son.

MERGER PROBLEMS

Public Progress

At the start of 1956 the membership of the ISFL was seemingly on the verge of healing one of the deepest and longest-standing divisions within Illinois labor—the rift between the AFL’s State Federation and the CIO’s

Illinois Industrial Union Council. The national “reunification” of the AFL and CIO the previous year had infused workers across the state with a mix of excitement and expectation; reunification fever was in the air.

Yet this task—which had progressed so quickly on the national level—would prove much harder than Reuben or his CIO counterpart Joe Germano could have ever anticipated. The mechanics of reunification were no mystery to Reub; he had, quite literally, written the book. Shortly after the close of the first national AFL-CIO convention, President Meany personally asked Reuben for his help in managing the merger of the state and regional levels. He appointed the ISFL president to a special committee, headed by AFL Secretary-Treasurer Schnitzler, tasked with writing a new set of rules to govern the young organization’s state and local bodies.³²¹ The committee was set to meet at the end of January, ahead of the AFL-CIO’s Executive Council meeting that February in Miami.

By this point, Soderstrom’s efforts to unite his Illinois State Federation of Labor and the CIO’s Illinois Industrial Union Council were already well underway. On Tuesday, January 3, he, ISFL Secretary-Treasurer Stanley Johnson, and attorney Dan Carmell met with IIUC President Joe Germano, Secretary-Treasurer Maurice McElligot, Vice President Pat Greathouse, and General Counsel Abraham Brussell in Chicago to begin merger talks ahead of the IIUC’s Central Labor Union Conference.³²² As they optimistically stated in a joint press statement immediately following the affair, “tentative agreements were reached with respect to the future program and future organization.”³²³ Reub reaffirmed his belief that the two groups would be united before the year’s end, noting that “it would be advantageous for our two organizations to be a single strong unit before the next session of the state Legislature meets in 1957.”³²⁴ That weekend, Reuben gave an address at the Illinois IIUC’s Conference, touting the strength of the new organization would have. In his first speech to the 1,300 delegates who, all assumed, would soon refer to him as their President, Soderstrom issued a call to challenge the media’s traditional narrative about labor and its work:

While building up and strengthening the labor movement through mergers and organizing drives is fundamental, and putting on pressure in the legislative field for beneficial laws is a necessary union activity, these are not the things that are applauded by the employers or the commercial press. But there are many things which labor unionists do which can receive this type of applause and good publicity. When a union donates work or gives other contributions to local community welfare or charities, it should not keep it a secret. We should tell our friends, our neighbors, and the whole community about it.

Too much of the newspaper stories about labor is about controversial matters—strikes and fights! Only our own people hear about union members building a house for destitute people, or helping a local veteran’s organization build a new building, or wiring a nearby community ballpark. We should not only increase our community services but also advertise our interest and accomplishments in this field. This is news. This is the kind of news a newspaper will print if we make an effort to give such news to our local newspapers.³²⁵

The speech helped establish Reuben as a leader of labor as a whole, not just the AFL-affiliated unions he had led for so long. “It was my impression that your remarks were very well received by the CIO delegates,” Assistant Professor of Labor and Industrial Relations A. J. Wann wrote to Soderstrom after the speech. “I made a point of talking individually with six or eight delegates to ask them what they thought of your talk and the opinion was unanimous that you had made a most effective presentation.”³²⁶ President Germano likewise reinforced the idea that a merger was imminent. He opened the conference by proclaiming he expected this to be the last CIO Convention, telling those present “I can assure you that the AFL and the CIO in Illinois are going to achieve unity—as fast as humanly possible.”³²⁷ To all eyes, including those of the ISFL and Illinois CIO membership, it appeared that the Illinois merger would prove just as quick and smooth as its national counterparts had.

Private Differences

Behind the scenes, however, significant problems began to emerge. Some were political; the ISFL, for example, was supportive of Republican Governor Stratton, while the IIUC planned to support his Democratic opponent.³²⁸ The largest difference between the two organizations, however, was financial. As the two organizations began to open their books to one another, it became clear that the CIO was, bluntly, broke. Despite (and in part responsible for) this state of affairs, the IIUC had a substantially larger staff, including a Farmer' Union Liaison and a Community Services Director—positions and programs that had no counterpart in the AFL. Stanley Johnson, who would be responsible for the new organization's finances, immediately made it clear that he had no interest in using ISFL members' money “for a CIO project.”³²⁹

CIO chief Germano, however, believed these jobs to be vital. In an effort to check Johnson, he demanded half of the combined organization's officers be pulled from the ranks of the CIO. It was, from the Federation's perspective, an untenable request; ISFL members outnumbered their CIO counterparts by as many as four to one. On the basis of representational fairness alone, Reuben had no choice but to refuse. Germano likewise felt obligated to insist, fearing an AFL-dominated leadership would marginalize the CIO members he represented and dismantle the organization he'd helped build. What began as a staffing issue had by the end of January become a full-blown crisis.

Further complicating matters were the rules proposed by the AFL-CIO Executive Committee on State and Local Mergers. Although he was a member of the committee established to advise the AFL-CIO Executive Council on the issue, Reuben's participation had apparently been limited by his negotiations with the IIUC. Their resulting guidance was, in his view, wholly unacceptable. From the naming formula that would rechristen his beloved ISFL the “Illinois State Labor Council” to the insistence on a number of (costly) CIO programs, Soderstrom felt the committee's dictates “follow[ed] CIO thinking rather closely and consistently.”³³⁰ Frustrated, he dispatched his chief legal counsel Dan Carmell to the AFL-CIO's Executive Council's meeting in Miami to discuss the Illinois negotiations with Meany, along with a letter appealing to the president for help. Soderstrom's blunt and confidential assessment of the situation in Illinois was far different from the upbeat scenario presented to the public:

Friend Meany,

In our negotiations thus far to blue-print or architect the merger between the Illinois State Federation of Labor and the Illinois Industrial Union Council some interesting facts have unfolded.

First of all, the CIO on the Illinois State level has no money in its treasury. They are coming into the State partnership or merger empty handed. On the other hand, the financial assets of the Illinois State federation of Labor are close to a quarter of a million dollars.

Despite this difference in assets, the CIO representatives are insisting that their educational, community service, political action, and other programs adopted or reaffirmed by their last convention, be written into our new joint State Body Constitution. They have no official State newspaper either—or publication. They claim to have 188,000 members in Illinois. If their members are anything like our AFL membership, and I think they are, only about half of them will be paying per capita tax into their State Council.

There are easily four times that number of A. F. of L. people in Illinois. We have an official State publication known as the “Weekly News Letter”... We carry on sensible non-partisan political activity in cooperation with our State and Cook County Leagues for Political Education. Our State legislative and political work is successful—second to no other State in this country! The CIO has been in existence here since 1935, but so far

as I know, it has not succeeded in enacting any legislation in Illinois...Our own State Federation legislative, educational, political, accident prevention and affiliation programs have been far more successful in Illinois than that of the CIO, and I am a little disturbed about their insistence to establish and implement less effective proposals by writing them into our constitution in the state level.³³¹

Reuben was determined not to tinker with the successful financial, political, and organizational principles he'd spent over 25 years developing for the sake of accommodating what was, in his estimation, a penniless CIO with a history of failure. He felt confident he could bend the CIO to his will, but needed the current merger committee rules relaxed. He asked Meany:

I have been wondering how close we must follow the rules prepared by the new Executive Committee for State level mergers...Perhaps these rules can be amended by the Executive Council so that the long-established State Federation name and proven methods, which are less confusing and far more effective, can be included in our State Constitution, which will, of course, bind, guide, and control future actions and activities of the State AFL-CIO in Illinois.

I don't know the remedy, but it occurs to me that more leeway and flexibility can perhaps be attained in drafting acceptable state constitutions by allowing you, the national President of the AFL-CIO, to suspend the rules, when necessary, with respect to a new name and such other rule restrictions which are obviously distasteful and financially unfair to us or, for that matter, to either side. Could this power be given to you, and be included in the rules?...It is my hope that such unbending rules can be modified by the present meeting of the Executive Council, making them less rigid, thus creating a workable constitutional flexibility on the State level.³³²

While Reuben wanted intervention, he still sought to keep his request quiet for fear of even further entrenching the opposition. He stressed to the AFL-CIO President:

This is a confidential letter, and I know you will treat its contents sub-rosa. Our Illinois negotiations are still in the exploratory stage, and no bitterness or clashing has occurred, nor do I expect any insurmountable obstacles in creating a new organization, a new constitution, and in selecting a new name...A verbal picture of the Illinois situation can be unfolded to you by our chief legal counsel, Dan Carmell, who is in Miami Beach, Florida, and who is helping us draft our new state constitution.³³³

Clashing Personalities

Despite Soderstrom's request, there would be no decisive action on Meany's part, perhaps because he understood that this was in part a clash of personalities. The CIO's Joe Germano had long maintained publicly and in private conversation that he believed Soderstrom to be a partner he could work with and a president he could accept. The problem, from the CIO perspective, was ISFL Secretary Stanley Johnson. Bob Gibson, then a confidant of Germano, later described:

Stanley was an odd guy. He didn't have two different personalities, but he acted different it seemed to me around different people, and sometimes it was almost like bullying...I was a staff guy then but I wasn't privy to all the meetings that had gone on with the negotiation. I knew Joe Germano very well and he was telling me what his opinion was of why it wasn't working...he would say all the time "It's that damn Stanley Johnson! Reuben we can live with, Reub's a nice guy; believe me his word is good. That damn Stanley Johnson—you can't trust him!"³³⁴

Joe might have been willing to move off his demands if he believed his people would be protected and his

contributions respected. He was convinced, however, that the minute he surrendered control that Stanley would fire his staff and steamroll whatever he felt like through the leadership. Moreover, Stanley had told others that Reuben had privately assured him when he selected Johnson for Secretary-Treasurer in 1950 that he would step aside in five or six years.³³⁵ Germano could abide a President Soderstrom, but he bristled at the idea of a President Johnson.

Germano's reservations about Johnson may have been legitimate, but his approach to dealing with the ISFL Secretary-Treasurer only exacerbated the problem. The Illinois CIO chief's temper and excitability were well known. Again from Gibson:

He [Germano] was a real gregarious Italian with a hot temper. If you made him angry he never forgot it...His brother-in-law, John Alesia, who was the COPE Director of the Steel Workers, got along like brothers-in-law do...One time we went to lunch, there was an Italian restaurant right over there by the office...I would go over there for lunch and he [Joe] and John would get in the damnedest arguments, loud and waving their hands. They'd have to come over and tell them to settle down a little. Then Joe would call the waiter in the afternoon and apologize. He was a good guy.³³⁶

Joe, however, wasn't Stanley's main concern. He could deal with Germano's anger, but his CIO counterpart Maurice McElligott struggled with far deeper troubles—ones Johnson believed could imperil the joint organization. Maurice had long suffered from alcoholism. And though he was universally well-liked, McElligott's illness forced Johnson to call his fitness as Secretary-Treasurer into question.³³⁷

Still, Reub continued to wear a brave and optimistic face in public. He focused attention on the groups' shared goals and principles in a series of interviews and essays, writing in the *Illinois Labor Bulletin* that May:

The Illinois State Federation of Labor is completing plans to join with the C.I.O. State Industrial Union Council to enable the wage-earners on the State level to build a more dynamic economy and a better world. Its purpose will be to abolish slavery, misery and suffering, intolerance and crime in a united drive to attain that radiant and better life which all Americans, including wage earners, are destined to enjoy.³³⁸

Then came a devastating blow. On Monday, September 24, ISFL General Counsel Dan Carmell was indicted in Davenport, Iowa, for violating the Mann Act, a federal anti-prostitution law. Carmell, himself a former assistant attorney general under Governor Henry Horner, disputed the charge brought by Mrs. Ethel Darlene Fenn Cameron, 19, that he brought the Davenport native to Chicago for the purpose of "prostitution and debauchery."³³⁹ "I completely deny any and every allegation by this woman," he told reporters as he flew to Iowa to post bail.³⁴⁰ Still, the allegation that the married father of two had met Cameron, then a minor, for sex during a labor convention in 1955 continued to plague him.³⁴¹ Carmell was removed from the list of speakers at that year's ISFL convention, and he withdrew from the merger negotiation to focus full-time on his legal defense. Meanwhile, newspapers around the state reported the sensational story of the labor attorney accused of "white slavery."³⁴²

Reuben never made a public comment concerning the charges, nor did he leave behind any private correspondence on the matter. Still, the revelations concerning his friend and long-serving ally in the ISFL must have been devastating. Since Olander's passing Dan Carmell had become Reub's longest-serving advisor; he was the one Soderstrom sent in his name when issues of major importance—like the merger—were involved.

This, then, was the situation Reuben faced as the negotiations progressed: a close ally tainted by scandal, a second-in-command the CIO did not trust (and was eager to replace), a temperamental counterpart, and an

unwell bookkeeper overseeing a broke organization. The road ahead, so bright at the year's beginning, now appeared very dark indeed.

REUBEN RESISTS POLITICAL ALIGNMENT

Restoring Neutrality

While there were many obstacles to uniting the AFL and CIO in Illinois, Soderstrom believed there were tremendous benefits as well. Mine and factory owners, he argued, had famously played the two camps off one another for years at the bargaining table, negotiating sweetheart deals in exchange for recognition of one group's union over the other. Anti-labor politicians and associations had similarly taken advantage of this division in Springfield. Governor Green even used it to nominate a coal merchant as State Director of Labor, convincing the CIO to endorse the appointment as an alternative to a "Federation Man." A host of labor bills on issues of salary, safety, and compensation were likewise lost over the years, with the upstart CIO opposing ISFL legislation or endorsing weaker alternatives in the hopes of claiming victory or currying favor. Uniting labor would end this exploitation of petty rivalry, Reuben promised, asserting that through merging "workers will have an enlarged opportunity to work together, in closer unity and more unitedly than ever before."³⁴³

Almost as bad in Reuben's eyes were the rival political endorsements. The CIO had exclusively endorsed Democrats since its inception; by now the organization was largely viewed as an arm of the Democratic Party. Illinois CIO chief Germano even served as a delegate to the Illinois Democratic Convention.³⁴⁴ This one-sided support, Reuben believed, violated Gompers's "elect our friends" policy and left politicians of both parties less responsive to labor's needs. Already, too many Springfield Republicans believed they could do nothing to gain labor's vote while Democrats believed they could do nothing to lose it. Soderstrom, himself a former Republican official, had fought hard against this perception. He continued to support pro-labor Republicans in the primaries, with his Joint Labor Legislative Board endorsing a slew of Republican candidates for the General Assembly (including 14 "good to very good" and four "excellent to outstanding" ratings).³⁴⁵ Many, like Rep. John King, took out large ads in their local papers touting ISFL support.³⁴⁶ Reuben's own son Carl ran as a pro-labor Republican with great success; that year Carl easily won re-nomination on the top of his party's district ticket, beating rivals Clayton Harbeck and Mike Signorella by 3,333 votes and 11,053 votes, respectively.³⁴⁷

Reuben was also a vocal supporter of Governor William Stratton and Attorney General Latham Castle, both Republicans. In January of that year he presented the governor with a ceremonial plaque honoring Stratton for his firm opposition to anti-labor and "right to work" legislation, an event which IDOL Director Cummins put on the cover of the *Illinois Labor Bulletin*.³⁴⁸ Soderstrom likewise spoke highly of Attorney General Castle, particularly after his work on behalf of the 1955 Ford-UAW contract, which guaranteed a Ford employee 60 to 65 percent of his normal pay during a layoff in addition to standard unemployment benefits, up to 26 weeks a year. Reuben saw the deal as precedent setting, telling the press that the Ford-CIO deal was "bound to draw the attention of thoughtful people in Illinois to doing something similar in leading industries. We in the AFL are happy over the potential possibilities."³⁴⁹ The Illinois Manufacturers' Association, expectedly, was as horrified as Reub was happy, claiming:

Under existing unemployment compensation laws, many workers find the temptation to seek benefits unjustly and remain unnecessarily unemployed is practically irresistible. With the substantial supplementary benefits which this plan apparently contemplates, this temptation to remain unemployed and not seek work elsewhere would be greatly aggravated, and the army of unnecessarily unemployed would be materially increased.³⁵⁰

The IMA lobbied the governor and attorney general to issue an opinion that such industry payments would

disqualify laid-off workers from receiving state unemployment benefits, effectively killing the agreement.

Soderstrom would have none of that. Working with Joe Germano (since this was a CIO contract), Reuben arranged for top-level meetings with Stratton and Castle to advocate for the UAW agreement.³⁵¹ As a result, the attorney general issued an opinion in favor of allowing workers to legally collect both state unemployment compensation and payments from supplemental jobless benefit plans, giving the green light to both Ford and General Motors (who had also signed on to the agreement) to implement the new contract in Illinois.

IMA Executive Vice President James Donnelly was furious, charging “The Attorney General of Illinois has obviously followed the dictates of the CIO.”³⁵² He vowed to take “every possible legal step to prevent this ruling from becoming effective,” and soon two Illinois firms sought an injunction against the payments. Sangamon County Circuit Court Judge DeWitt Crow denied the motion, however, ruling that the companies had no standing.³⁵³ The only companies that did—Ford and GM—had no intention of court challenges, removing any further impediment.

Convention Fight Over Stratton Endorsement

To Reuben, supporting Republican politicians who advanced labor’s legislation—or at least opposed anti-labor legislation—was of paramount importance, and one of his top goals in the reunification of the AFL and CIO in Illinois was what he viewed as a restoration of political balance and influence. That January he sent Secretary Stanley Johnson to the CIO meeting to reinforce both the importance and effect of a true “elect our friends” policy:

This is one state where labor is free, where there is no anti-labor legislation. This didn’t come about through one political party. Under both parties in the state we have made progress. We must give credit where credit is due. We must look into the record of the legislators and the governor and other state officials. We should support candidates who have demonstrated they are thinking of us.³⁵⁴

The message was clear: support the politician, not the party. Reuben went even further in his ISFL convention address that year, giving and extended endorsement for four pro-labor candidates:

There are four outstanding candidates—two Republicans and two Democrats—who have always been on our side in many highly controversial situations. They are the Honorable Latham Castle, Attorney General of Illinois, who recently ruled that Supplemental Unemployment Benefits could be given to wage earners without any deduction from their Social Security Unemployment Benefits. Then, too, we have the Honorable William G. Stratton, Governor of Illinois, who has signed a large number of labor bills for us, and who has assured us, again and again, that there will be no anti-union or oppressive legislation enacted as long as he is the Governor of this great State!

Then we have the Honorable Richard Stengel, who served eight years in the Illinois House of Representatives and voted for all our labor bills during that time. He is now the candidate for the United States Senate, and he will continue to stand with us after he arrives in Washington D.C., when the November election is over. Then, last but not least, we have the Honorable Adlai E. Stevenson, former Governor of Illinois, and a candidate for the Presidency of the United States—a real friend of labor!³⁵⁵

The pairing of two Democrats with two Republicans was no coincidence. In choosing to speak on these candidates, Reub was again reinforcing the bipartisan ideal of union support. The endorsements were the highlight of the speech. The *Southern Illinoisan* headlined its front-page coverage of the convention “State Labor Leader Backs Adlai, Stratton,” while the *Mt. Vernon Register* titled its story “Soderstrom Praises Adlai

and Stratton.³⁵⁶ Reuben's hometown paper quoted Reuben at length as he continued:

These four—Castle, Stratton, Stengel and Stevenson—have done everything that labor asked them to do...While I am not telling you how to vote or whom to support in the November election, these four candidates are certainly entitled to favorable consideration from all of us.³⁵⁷

Reuben's attempt at bipartisan support soon faced pushback. Surprisingly, it came not from the CIO but from his own Federation delegates. The ISFL convention had begun as a very bipartisan affair, with friendly politicians from both sides on both the state and national level making their way to the Springfield event to speak to labor. This illustrious list included such prominent Republicans as US Secretary of Labor James Mitchel, who was held in high regard by many in labor. In his address, Mitchel highlighted the nation's record employment and wage levels, boasting to the audience that under President Eisenhower, American workers possessed "the highest purchasing power and greatest well-being in our history."³⁵⁸

Governor Stratton also capitalized on the economic boom. In his address, the Illinois leader highlighted the all-time peak in industrial employment in Illinois—more than four million working men and women. He told the crowd:

Our prosperity was earned by us. One of its causes has been the harmonious relationship which has prevailed between labor and management. I am firmly convinced in the absence of a mutual understanding and whole-hearted cooperation which we have over the years, provided, the economy of our state could not have advanced to its record breaking levels, either in the standard of living or in the level of employment. The improvements which have been made in the lives of not only working men and women but of all people as well, are the direct product of the efforts of organized labor and of its forward-looking leadership. You can well be proud of your organization and its achievements. Through your support, we can say we have better schools, and better working conditions. Illinois workers are better off today than ever before in the history of the state.³⁵⁹

Not all in attendance were convinced by Stratton's words. Despite his record and Reub's endorsement, many wanted labor to go on the record in support of Democratic gubernatorial candidate Richard Austin. While they conceded that Stratton had not worsened labor's situation in Illinois, they wanted more, and were swayed by Austin's Tuesday night convention warning that "I think you would be making a bad bargain to back the Republican state administration on the basis of a half-promise, half-threat that if you back Stratton, no anti-labor legislation will be passed."³⁶⁰ It was no rump faction; the movement, headed by Earl G. Quinn of the Brotherhood of Railway and Steamship Clerks and William Black of the Machinists Lodge, claimed to have the support of 75% of the delegates behind them.³⁶¹ When they sought to win an endorsement of Austin on the floor, Soderstrom's executive board intervened, with Reuben asserting that any floor vote on the matter "would have trouble because the Federation constitution entrusts the executive board with exclusive jurisdiction over state candidates."³⁶²

Ultimately, Reuben was able to break the impasse by re-wording Stratton's endorsement to include a favorable reference to Austin, which Quinn praised as "just, fair and fast treatment."³⁶³ Still, the fight underscored just how difficult it was becoming to maintain unity even within the Federation, let alone in union with the CIO.

Fighting For Labor's Right to Lobby

While Reuben fought to keep labor from being captured by forces on his far left, he also had to contend with radically conservative voices in the media that increasingly sought to silence labor's voice in the political arena altogether. Soon after the national AFL and CIO united, they formed a new political arm, the Committee on

Political Education, COPE, to make their influence felt in the 1956 election. No longer distracted by intra-labor strife, the new political body embarked on an ambitious agenda with confidence and tenacity. As labor historian Joseph Rayback writes:

C.O.P.E. activity throughout the spring and early summer of 1956 was more vigorous than that usually revealed by labor's earlier political agencies. In addition to normal activities, C.O.P.E. directors and supporters scheduled scores of regional and union conferences to build up enthusiasm for the coming campaign...Meanwhile, C.O.P.E. engaged in one of the most vigorous political campaigns in labor history on behalf of candidates favorable to labor. Its greatest effort, occasioned by a knowledge that only five out of eight union members were voters, were used to secure a high registration.³⁶⁴

These efforts were music to Reuben's ears. For years he had tried to increase labor turnout at the polls in Illinois, believing elections were the single best way to make labor's influence felt. He dramatically increased his efforts in 1956; in the weeks leading up to the primary elections Reuben turned his *Weekly Newsletter* into a voter information publication. He provided primary election calendars and apportionment maps. He published the Joint Labor Legislative Board Recommendations for every race and party. Perhaps most impressively, he crafted a 12-page voting record of all Illinois legislators, listing how each incumbent legislator voted on every issue important to labor.³⁶⁵ Week after week, he placed ads in the paper to drive laborers to the polls. He placed special emphasis on registration, calling it a "citizen's duty" and repeatedly reminding his readers "It's our American Privilege to REGISTER and VOTE."³⁶⁶ He repeated these efforts in October and November, ranking state officials' voting records on labor legislation and asking workers "Have YOU Registered to vote?"³⁶⁷

Not all were as excited as Soderstrom to see such a strong labor presence at the voting booth. Increased efforts by the AFL-CIO prompted new national anti-labor legislation, this time sponsored by Democratic Senator Carl Curtis of Nebraska and future Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater of Arizona. Fearful of labor influence, these men introduced a bill that made it a crime for union officials to contribute to political parties or committees in any way, shape, or form. As labor columnist Victor Riesel wrote at the time:

While the White House is quietly trying to contact some of labor's political leaders, there's an influential bloc of Republicans which would rather jail them than woo them...Down in Florida, I saw AFL-CIO president George Meany almost chew his traditional cigar in half when he talked of the Curtis-Goldwater bill. Meany said this would wipe out the labor movement and he had no intention of sitting by and letting this get any place in the Senate...Curtis couldn't have hit the unions harder. Here I want to steal a line from Sam Goldwyn. Once while discussing the H-bomb, Goldwyn said, "We got to be careful of that thing, there's dynamite in it." Watch this fight blow high.³⁶⁸

Reuben didn't waste time striking back at such efforts, which he viewed as fundamentally anti-democratic and un-American. At speaking engagements that year, Soderstrom began to articulate a theory of labor's role in American politics, providing a theoretical and rhetorical framework for other labor leaders to follow. His speech to the Carpenters' Union that September took the issue head on, making perhaps his most complete argument. After listing the all the recent legislative accomplishments of labor in Illinois, he said:

There are some things, however, that are becoming quite certain. One of them is that labor unions have a right to participate in politics. More harm than good would come from denying labor leaders and their members the right to become articulate in political campaigns. Whether labor unions are right or wrong in politics, it is still a good thing for the country that they do have the right to participate in campaigns. Labor unions politically active will counterbalance the political activity of the business community. As a matter of fact, neither business nor labor can be legislated into political inactivity . . .

Labor union leaders sometimes irritate the public and the public press. Labor leaders sometimes claim more political power than they have. Labor leaders sometimes claim more control over their membership, politically, than they have. Our conservative enemies agree labor leaders have this power and that they bear watching because of it. These conservative enemies will say that the average union member is being coerced into political activity which he does not want and that he ought to be delivered from such coercion. As a matter of fact, and actually, no trade unionist can be coerced politically. He is a free man when he enters the polling booth. When he follows his leaders it is because he agrees with them.

Of course, I am aware that your ballot is your own to do with as you please and you have but to satisfy your own judgment and your own conscience. It is not my intention this morning to tell you what to do, or how to vote on election day—but as your legislative representative I have a right to report to you just who, in public life, has been friendly to the labor movement, to labor legislation, and to labor's great cause.³⁶⁹

Stratton and his Attorney General won re-election. Nationally, labor made similar advances, with 159 House and 15 Senate labor-backed legislators winning their races.³⁷⁰ Labor was also able to stop the Curtis-Goldwater bill, killing it in committee. However, this proved to be only the first of a growing number of attempts to silence labor; Reuben would find his work far from finished.

“Together We Can Go Forward!”

While Soderstrom was pleased with the legislative achievements he had achieved with respect to workers specifically, he was prouder still of the crucial role labor had played in advancing the national conscience and human welfare as a whole. What began as a fight for decent pay and better hours had by 1956 blossomed into a movement that sought to better life for everyone. Again from his speech to the Carpenters:

In its early days of struggle labor was limited in its objectives to the most immediate and pressing of human needs. Its efforts, however, resulted in straightening out conditions so deplorable and so oppressive and so unjust and so undemocratic one finds it very difficult today to believe that it could have actually existed and have been defended by the powers-that-were in those early days. Even then, the trade union movement or the trade unions devoted their efforts not only to improve conditions of their own members but towards the greater welfare of the people as a whole...Labor has sort of grown up.³⁷¹

This “grown up” labor had begotten benefits so fundamental to the American experience that the United States of 1950 would have been unrecognizable without them. Individual public welfare laws and programs were now so numerous and comprehensive that they weaved a vast web, ensuring everyone could live a life of opportunity and dignity. And at the center of that web in Illinois—and in many respects the nation—was Reuben.

Soderstrom had spent the past 38 years crafting and passing each one of those bills, spinning each of those threads. Typically, these efforts began as attempts to address wrongs he'd personally experienced. His family's bankruptcy and the childhood he lost paying off their debt in the blacksmith's shop and Streator's glass factories spurred him to outlaw child labor. His father's destitution and early death was the birth of his fight for old age pensions. The injunctions placed on him without trial or jury, preventing him even from traveling across town to care for his elderly mother, compelled him to bring an end to such judicial abuse.

He likewise sought to share the benefits he'd enjoyed. It was no accident that the very first bill Reuben ever passed, an act providing free books to schoolchildren, mirrored what he considered his first and greatest gift—the books he'd received from Johnny Williams, Arthur Shay, and the Streator public library.³⁷² Fond

memories of Sundays spent with his father, a Swedish Lutheran preacher, served as inspiration for Reub's "one day's rest in seven" bill. In truth, the origin of nearly every bill Reuben ever sought or sponsored can be found in the experiences and privations of his own life.

What made these accomplishments so impressive, however, was not just the story that spawned them but their breathtaking scope and universal application. Reuben didn't just seek to protect children in situations like his or limit the abuses they suffered; he sought to end child labor in all its pernicious forms. While Reub's father could always rely on his son's income and was never at risk of being sent to a state home, the compassion he awakened in Reuben compelled him to advocate for all who yearned for dignity in the final years of their lives. The bigotry Reuben experienced as the son of a Swedish immigrant drove him to repeatedly push for legislation outlawing all discrimination based on race, color or creed. Reuben never looked simply to right the wrong he suffered; he sought to eradicate its cause.

By 1956 this approach to reform had resulted in a series of acts that formed the foundation of labor's legacy—a rich legislative tapestry that protected not only union laborers, not only working men and women, but all Americans. Now that labor stood united, Soderstrom declared, it would be their duty to further that legacy, to continue to act as a force of positive change in the world:

The American labor movement has a long tradition in the field of human welfare activities...American trade unions have not been limited to hours and working conditions. We all know what the unions have done to eliminate the sweatshop and child labor.

Now with labor united we hope to do even more in the field of human welfare. We are making plans to increase our participation in the effort to eliminate such evils as juvenile delinquency, racial and religious discrimination, the evils of crime, and the evils of disease. There are literally hundreds of instances, receiving very little publicity, in which unions are giving equipment to hospitals, books to libraries, in which union members are giving their labor to constructing and repairing buildings for community programs and humanitarian projects. There is plenty of evidence everywhere that the labor movement meant what it said in that great merger convention in New York City, when it created the slogan, 'What is good for America is good for the members of the AFL-CIO.

We want to abolish poverty, misery and suffering, intolerance and crime and to wipe out entirely man's inhumanity to man, and establish a permanent peace and prosperity everywhere in America, and everywhere in the world. We want to abolish all wrongs, all industrial injustices, all oppression, and make our people secure from poverty, hardships and want, the ancient enemies of the human race. This is also the goal of the CIO. Together we can go forward!¹³⁷³

This beautiful sentiment, however, cut both ways. Labor could not truly move forward without unity, and despite their merger on the national level, the Illinois AFL and CIO had yet to come to terms. The greatest battle for the soul of labor in Illinois was yet to come.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

LABOR, REUBEN, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

The Illinois Manufacturers' Association despised the Ford-CIO compromise. IMA spokesman James Donnelly called the supplemental unemployment benefit plans in particular an "invitation to idleness."³⁷⁴ Statements like these are perfect illustrations of the assumptions anti-labor forces often made about American workers. The IMA's opposition to unemployment benefits rested on the belief that laborers only worked because they absolutely had to. If unemployment was bearable, manufacturers warned, workers would quit their jobs, because they valued idleness above all else. No matter how high the wage or how meager the benefit, if laborers could live without working, the IMA held, they would do so.

This view betrayed the underlying contempt too many manufacturers held for those who worked for a living. To the IMA and their allies, the indolent and emotional American worker stood in stark contrast to the rational, motivated industrialist—a breed so trustworthy they required no legal check yet so economically sensitive that the slightest tax increase could drive them into the arms of a more "business friendly" state. Many industrialists agreed that they, unlike their workers, were uniquely motivated to seek a richer and fuller life, to achieve the greatest extent of their ability. It was the owner, and emphatically not the worker, who stood for the "American Dream."

Rueben, of course, held a very different opinion as to what working Americans dreamed of. He understood that for most laborers, work wasn't about a simple paycheck; it was about dignity. "Wage earners would much prefer employment to unemployment checks, helpful as these benefits are," he said.³⁷⁵ In providing for their families, he maintained, workers draw a satisfaction and sense of fulfillment that no unemployment relief could match.

Moreover, Soderstrom held, those who labored for a living did not simply want to survive or maintain their present circumstance. They sought to thrive, to better themselves, their families, and their communities just as much—if not more so—than the wealthy:

American wage earners want to make some progress each year towards a better life...They want better homes in which to live. They want better schools for their children, they want better health and health programs for their families. They want a higher minimum wage for their less fortunate and exploited brothers and sisters. They want more and better opportunities to earn a decent livelihood without having to leave their home communities, uproot their families and sometimes travel hundreds of miles, with cap in hand, in blind supplication, seeking jobs that do not exist.³⁷⁶

To such red-blooded Americans, government wasn't just a dispenser of benefits but a guardian of rights, ensuring that those with money and power didn't use their influence to unfair advantage:

[American wage earners] have a right to demand the kind of a government that will make it possible for them to make progress...They want a fair deal from their government and an equal break in their relations with the employer, without vindictive intervention of a hostile Taft-Hartley law or fake state "right to work" law in denial of their rights as free and equal citizens of this great Republic. They want a more powerful, more secure, more prosperous America, exercising leadership in a non-partisan and responsible manner as the foremost of the great free nations of the world!³⁷⁷

Working America wasn't opposed to the American Dream; they were the living embodiment of it. That men like Donnelly could not see this—let alone imagine that workers possessed the same desires and ethics as those for whom they labored—was the reason why it was so important for laborers to organize and advocate for their rights. Organized labor's purpose, Reuben proudly proclaimed, was and always would be to fight to make the American Dream a reality for everyone:

These pressing needs, these legitimate desires, these just demands constitute the heart of the program of the American Federation of Labor. We, in the labor movement, must work together and help each other to bring about its fulfillment.³⁷⁸

CHAPTER 46

1957

SODERSTROM HOLDS FIRM WITH ILLINOIS LEGISLATURE, CIO

“That which the world calls the movement of labor is not a new institution; it runs through history. 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, for shelter, for better clothes and better shelter; hunger for home, hunger for love, hunger for freedom, hunger for the development and enjoyment of the highest and best surroundings, for life and labor.”

-Reuben Soderstrom, Testimony before the Illinois House of Representatives, 1957

THE SUMMER OF DISCONTENT

“The legislative program is not a two-man show, Reub!”³⁷⁹

Robert Johnston was through negotiating. It wasn't just the oppressive August heat or the tiny, sweaty conference room they'd been packed in for hours. It wasn't even the stress of the calendar, with less than a month to go before their planned joint merger conference. After two years, three constitutional drafts, and twenty rounds, the Regional Director of the United Auto Workers (UAW) simply couldn't take any more. He wasn't alone; as the 21st meeting of the Illinois State Merger Committee wore on, Johnston and his CIO compatriots, clearly exasperated, refused to speak another word of compromise. They had wrung support from their board, he bemoaned, only by promising there would be no further concessions. CIO President Joe Germano chimed in, nearly shouting at President Soderstrom and his Secretary-Treasurer Stanley Johnson:

I've quarreled with my own Board, and presented the last draft with the idea that not one word would be changed. Our Executive Board was very unhappy with the draft, but we set our foot down and said we wanted the merger...We don't see how we can go any further...We can't go back to our Executive Board or to Convention and propose anything other than the latest draft which we tentatively agreed on!³⁸⁰

But Joe wasn't the only official who had to answer to his board. Just four days earlier Reub and Stanley had brought the draft to their own executives, who were just as dubious of it as Germano's men. They balked at the idea of creating the office of Executive Vice-President especially for the CIO, and their insistence on replacing the short, traditional ISFL *Weekly Newsletter* with yet another attempt at their own failed, full-blown (and expensive) CIO newspaper. They deeply resented being asked by the broke upstart organization to take on what they saw as unnecessary full-time staff and the CIO's "rule by committee" approach to governance. As ISFL Vice President and former Secretary-Treasurer Earl McMahon put it, "I don't know why these [CIO] people with no money feel they can tell us that this is what we will have to take!"³⁸¹

The ISFL executive board's greatest concern, however, was the question of how to handle the politics of Springfield. For the board, this struck at the heart of the Federation. According to the ISFL constitution, "remedial and beneficial labor legislation is the aim, purpose, and objective of the Illinois State Federation of

Labor.”³⁸² The ISFL had been wildly successful in this pursuit, as Reuben described in his Labor Day message the year before:

The Illinois State Federation of Labor is the wage earners’ organization in the legislative field. It is the most active and most successful State Federation in America...It is about time that the general public as well as all the Central Bodies and labor unions faced the fact that legislative accomplishments do not come by chance or by accident. They occur because the State Federation is on the job.³⁸³

Since the organization’s inception, this job had been the sacred duty of the President and his Secretary-Treasurer, who dedicated themselves each legislative session to advancing labor’s agenda. For decades, Reuben had been a fixture in the balconies of the Illinois House and Senate, watching every debate and tracking every vote. He had worked the assembly floors and capitol halls for 27 years, negotiating and building relationships with legislators, governors, and even the agents of the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association. As former legislator, Soderstrom had proven extremely adroit, almost single-handedly building and defending a legacy that “produced a rich legislative harvest for our membership, and our families, and for the State and the Nation.”³⁸⁴

Now, however, the CIO wanted to replace this with a “legislative committee.” On the surface, the change sounded innocuous; Germano maintained “we’re not trying to take away from the activities of the President and the Secretary-Treasurer in Springfield. The President and the Executive Board would run the show.”³⁸⁵ As the negotiations continued, however, it became increasingly clear that they intended the (presumably CIO-dominated) Committee, not Soderstrom, to have ultimate control. In the words of Regional Director Johnston:

The Legislative Committee would be the group which implements the program in Springfield. The legislative program is not a two-man show. The two officers can’t violate the program and strategy established by the Legislative Committee...The Legislative Committee will set out the policy, strategy, etc...it will also be on the scene to assist in carrying out the program.³⁸⁶

Reub and Stanley immediately tore apart this idea. The president and his Secretary-Treasurer needed flexibility, Johnson stressed, and couldn’t be constantly checking in with some part-time, far-flung committee. Johnston shot back that they would simply force the committee to stay in Springfield full-time during the session. How could that work, Soderstrom pressed, when most of the people with the experience to serve on this Committee had full-time jobs of their own outside of Springfield? Germano answered that if someone without the ability to be in Springfield, like himself, were elected to the Committee, he would appoint his own representative to sit in his place. Robert agreed, adding “If I were on the committee I would appoint my own legislative representative to sit on the committee. He would be responsible to *me* first.”³⁸⁷

That’s when Reuben struck. Everyone with even a cursory understanding of the political process knew full well that no committee run by proxy could ever be knowledgeable, effective, or timely enough to be taken seriously in Springfield. Political negotiations depended on trust, which in turn rested on authority. If Reuben’s every move had to be challenged or approved by committee, nothing would ever get accomplished in a legislative session. Anyone with doubts about that had only to look at these very talks for an instructive example of what negotiation by committee looked like! As for oversight, the constitution already empowered the executive board to formulate the details of the legislative program.

Reuben knew his wasn’t about workers’ best interests. This was about control; about the power of individual committee members to shape policy and prevent any deals they deemed distasteful to their own constituency, even at the expense of labor as a whole. Soderstrom was willing to compromise. He could accept a legislative

committee, even if he found it redundant, but he must have the authority to stop personal agendas from getting in the way of workers' needs. In Springfield, labor would speak with only one voice.

The CIO, however, was in no mood for concessions. "We reviewed the new proposals," said United Packinghouse Workers President and CIO negotiator Charles Hayes. "Our Executive Board rejected them and approved the third draft. We can't go beyond that."³⁸⁸ Bob Johnston agreed, telling Reub, "It would be useless for us at this time to discuss changing specific language when there are fundamental issues involved." And with that they marched out of the meeting, refusing to hear another word. The message was clear—the CIO would not stomach the ISFL's "two man show" in Springfield. If the ISFL wanted unity, it would be on the terms of the third draft, or there would be no merger.

Soderstrom was furious. He stormed out of the hall straight into a crowd of waiting reporters. When an investigator for the *Daily News* asked for an update, Reub, filled with anger, said exactly what was on his mind. The next day CIO officials woke up to public reports that they had walked away from the negotiating table. It wasn't long before ISFL attorney Lester Asher received a call from his CIO counterpart, Abe Brussell, complaining:

The CIO is irritated because...these press releases violated the agreement that no statements were to be issued unless in writing and signed by Soderstrom and Germano. Soderstrom had in the past violated this agreement, but had promised not to do so again. The statements...particularly irritated them and put the CIO Merger Committee in a bad light.³⁸⁹

The CIO Committee, Brussell continued, had held a meeting and decided to reaffirm their refusal to accept or even negotiate on any of the ISFL's proposed changes. The talks, he said, were dead.

The stakes couldn't be any higher. The national AFL and CIO had merged over a year ago, and national President George Meany was fast losing patience. He didn't care about details or disagreements surrounding the merger, only that it get done. In an uncharacteristically cold letter, Meany bluntly told Soderstrom that if the Illinois Federation and CIO failed to merge by the year's end, he was authorized and willing to revoke the charters of both the Illinois CIO and ISFL and create a new, merged organization—presumably one without Reuben as president.³⁹⁰ Germano, who would resign his presidency in any event, knew full well that Soderstrom had far more to lose, and seemed ready to carry this game of brinkmanship to the bitter end. Reub was at a dangerous crossroads: should he surrender legislative control to an ineffectual committee, putting his entire legacy in jeopardy? Or would he risk the dissolution of the very organization he'd spent 27 years working so hard to build? Either way, his life's work hung in the balance.

LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

Rep. Carl Soderstrom Helps Firemen and Teachers

The start of 1957 held little hint of the worries to come, however. As the 70th session of the Illinois General Assembly got underway, Reuben and his son Carl were far more immediately concerned with pushing forward on labor's agenda than they were with the merger. For Carl, this effort began with unfinished business—passing the Firemen's Hours Bill that the governor had killed two years earlier. Carl re-introduced the previously defeated legislation, which would limit the number of hours a fireman could be worked to 56; at present, many smaller cities, including Streator, were forcing their poor protectors to work as many as 84 hours per week. Despite a heavily Republican legislature (38 Republicans to 20 Democrats in the Senate, 94 to 83 in the House) the political landscape had shifted in his favor since the last session.³⁹¹ As his hometown paper noted:

When Stratton vetoed the bill affecting cities over 12,000 population two years ago, he said local authorities should make the decision because their circumstances varied. Then the 1955 Legislature gave cities the authority to set up a one-half cent city sales tax. When the lawmakers were debating the last 56-hour week proposal, cities did not have this authority.³⁹²

Carl's bill sailed through its House committee hearing, with only one vote against it.³⁹³ A few weeks later it scored another crushing victory, passing the full House by a vote of 146 to 1.³⁹⁴ It subsequently sailed through the Senate and was signed by the Governor on June 7, 1957, making the bill one of the most popular pieces of legislation that session.³⁹⁵ While most of its effect wouldn't be felt until after the 1960 census, firemen across the state could now look forward to the end of the unrelenting 24-hour on, 24-hour off schedules that had run them ragged. The bill also brought new jobs, with the cities of Carbondale, Marion, Murphysboro and Herrin all making plans to expand their firefighting forces.³⁹⁶ Even Carl's Streator hired two new firemen in the wake of the new law.³⁹⁷

Carl also went to work on a new version of his Teachers' Minimum Wage Bill. Like before, Carl sought to replace the existing graduated standards, which set different starting wages anywhere from \$1,200 to \$2,600 depending on level of education, with a flat minimum. This time, however, he made an even more audacious proposal, calling for a new flat rate of \$3,600, a full 20% more than the increase he'd called for the year before.³⁹⁸ As with his Firemen's Bill, Carl was able to secure an overwhelming number of votes for his measure; it passed the House by a vote of 112 to 11.³⁹⁹ Powerful interests in the Senate, however, defeated the measure in the educational committee, ensuring that no Senator would be seen voting against better pay for teachers.

Undaunted, the younger Soderstrom teamed with fellow pro-labor Republican Sen. Crisenberry to again present a modified bill. While it kept the graduated system in place, it significantly closed the pay gap; under the new system non-degreed teachers would start at \$3,200 (as much as a 167% increase) while those with a bachelor's degree would start at \$3,400. Crisenberry's bill passed the Senate, marking another major success for Soderstrom. From Chester to West Frankfort to Royalton, teachers across Illinois could now look forward to reasonable salaries, especially in grade schools.⁴⁰⁰

Carl's legislative victories helped to solidify his standing as a powerful pro-labor politician. A glowing profile in his hometown paper detailed his accomplishments on the eve of his re-election announcement:

Representative Soderstrom is serving his fourth term in the General Assembly and holds the responsible position of vice chairman of the powerful House Committee on Judiciary, a committee made up of attorney members of the House. He is also a member of three other important committees, namely Appropriations, Education and Executive. In the last session of the legislature he gave special attention to the needs of former soldiers, sportsmen, educators, wage-earners, business people, farmers, and to the numerous highway and other problems of concern to the citizenry of the 38th Representative District.⁴⁰¹

The Minimum Wage and the Rise of the IFRA

While Carl worked on better minimum wages for teachers, his father was busy fighting for a minimum wage for all. The last few years had been unquestionably good for laborers in Illinois. A new study released that January showed that factory workers had attained the average rate of \$2.00 per hour. As Reub noted with some satisfaction in a speech before the Central Labor Conference that year:

To me there is a good deal of encouragement in the government's announcement...A lot of reactionaries who

used to argue against \$1 an hour wages as “too high” and “inflationary” are going to take off again with a new propaganda blast. First of all, the \$2 average is good so far as it goes, but as workers’ families know pretty well, \$2 an hour can go pretty fast—as a matter of fact even a \$2 wage brings an annual income less than that recommended by the Bureau of Labor Statistics for minimum decency levels for a typical American family of four. Secondly, the low wage philosophers ought to remember that families without decent incomes can’t buy the products of American factories and farms.⁴⁰²

While much of the national focus was on the national average, Reuben remained concerned about those who struggled most. As Soderstrom noted in his Central Labor speech, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics had found that \$2.00 per hour was not enough to raise a family. While in 1957 there was no firm consensus as to what the “poverty line” actually was (the Eisenhower Administration had for years revised down the Congressional figures, which themselves hadn’t been properly updated since 1949), there was an established federal minimum wage of \$1.00 per hour.⁴⁰³ This wage, however, only applied to workers employed in industries engaged in interstate commerce, leaving more than 200,000 Illinois workers completely unprotected (compared to the 50,000 that were covered by the federal standard).⁴⁰⁴ In the absence of a universal national minimum, states such as Rhode Island and Massachusetts had passed their own state wage laws.⁴⁰⁵ Reuben was convinced that Illinois should do likewise. In the last General Assembly he had overseen the introduction of two bills establishing a minimum wage of 75 cents an hour (with different exemptions), only to see them both fail in the closing week of the legislature.⁴⁰⁶

This time he returned to Springfield twice as determined. He had both bills re-introduced (with his son as a co-sponsor to both).⁴⁰⁷ This time, however, he had two additional advantages. First was the introduction of a third bill setting an even higher rate of 90 cents the following week, giving Reuben the opportunity to present his option as a “moderate” alternative.⁴⁰⁸ Second was the full weight and support of the governor’s office. Gov. Stratton, already supportive of the previous legislation, had this time—at Reub’s request—fully adopted one of the two measures, with the press now referring to it as “Governor Stratton’s minimum wage proposal.”⁴⁰⁹ Now, to oppose the bill meant not only going against Illinois workers; it meant defying the Republican administration.

Despite all this support and pressure, the bill failed to receive its first formal hearing before the nefarious House Committee on Industry and Labor Relations until March 27. Reuben and CIO legislative operative John Alesia both gave testimony in support of the bill. Although their arguments were reasoned and strong, they faced a wily opponent in Joseph Meek. After failing to unseat Paul Douglas in the 1954 Senate race, the former editor of the *Illinois Journal of Commerce* and President of the American Association of Retail Executives had reinvented himself in 1957 by founding the Illinois Federation of Retail Associations (IFRA), a new organization he hoped would rival both Reub’s ISFL and the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association as a power player in Illinois policy and politics. Meek claimed that allowing any minimum wage would threaten small business and force them to fire workers. Despite Meek’s best efforts and what Reub referred to as “the usual turmoil” of delays and quorum calls, the Committee favorably reported out both minimum wage bills on April 3.⁴¹⁰

Though Soderstrom had prevailed in the House, he faced a now all-too familiar set of dirty tricks in the Senate, particularly in the Committee on Industrial Affairs. In a scheme Soderstrom described as a “committee shell game,” Chairman Senator Scott first cancelled and then shifted the location of the bill’s hearing in violation of Senate rules in an effort to exclude all supportive testimony. As Soderstrom detailed:

It was announced by Chairman Scott that his Industrial Affairs Committee would meet in Room M-1 immediately following the meeting to be held by the Public Welfare Committee. Labor representatives, who wanted to testify for the Minimum Wage Bill, sat through the hearing of the Public Welfare Committee

waiting. However, when this group adjourned there was no sign of Chairman Scott and his Industrial Affairs Committee Members.

A wee bit puzzled and a little suspicious that labor representatives were not wanted at the Industrial Affairs Committee session, the two major officers of the Illinois State Federation of Labor walked out of Room M-1 and opened the door of the committee room next door, and lo and behold, there were Chairman Scott and his Industrial Affairs Committee in session. All the heads of the Illinois Retail Federation and Illinois Manufacturers' Association down to the not-so-prominent reactionaries who serve these anti-union combines. Their numbers were accentuated by the fact that there was not a single labor representative present.⁴¹¹

This was a new low, even by Illinois Senate standards. By excluding labor testimony, Meek, Scott, and the rest hoped not only to persuade any undecided Senators but to provide cover when the governor and the press inevitably demanded to know why one of his bills had been refuted by his own party—a huge political embarrassment. If there was no testimony in support of the measure on the record, blame could reasonably fall on the administration, not the scheming Senate. Reuben swiftly took to the pages of his *Weekly Newsletter* to shine light on the tactics:

The vanishing committee shell game is a new piece of legislative skullduggery...Causing committee meetings to disappear, or to hide them, is a violation of the rules, and it is to be hoped that the practice will not be repeated. Chairman Scott performed a great disservice to the Governor who favored the proposal; to (Republican) Majority Leader John Lewis who sponsored the bill; and to the representatives of labor who were seeking an opportunity to properly testify for the measure.⁴¹²

Despite his anger, there was little Reuben could do. Meek and his new Retail Federation, it seemed, had won this round; Soderstrom would have to wait for the rematch he so desperately craved.

Anti-Picketing Legislation

Although Soderstrom suffered setbacks in his legislative agenda, he was still able to check his opponents' maneuvers, defeating several anti-labor bills. Chief among these was the Anti-Picketing Bill, a Chamber of Commerce-backed piece of legislation that Reub described as "a union-busting, strike-breaking bill which is designed to prohibit picketing."⁴¹³ Introduced by Representative Widmer, the proposed legislation sought to undo Reuben's signature achievement by amending his 1926 Injunction Limitation Act, allowing courts to issue injunctions against unions peacefully picketing outside businesses in an attempt to organize their workers.

Reuben believed the bill to be clearly unconstitutional, acting in direct violation of the US Supreme Court Swing Case ruling that picketing was a constitutionally protected form of free speech—a case Soderstrom himself successfully had pushed from Illinois to the nation's highest court. Still, he feared its passage could do serious damage to labor in Illinois if it was allowed to stay in place during a prolonged and costly court challenge.

Reuben wasted no time. He knew that the mainstream press, with its penchant for sensationalism and love of labor corruption stories, would likely embrace the measure. Widmer himself played into the media bias, describing his legislation as "not an anti-labor bill but an anti-racketeering bill" that would stop unscrupulous unions unwanted by workers, breathlessly telling the press "small businessmen are the helpless prey of labor unions."⁴¹⁴ While acknowledging the reality of corruption, Reub responded by challenging the narrative:

The statement is made and published and editorialized by the daily press of widespread abuses of

picketing...remember, newspapers today are not newspapers at all. They are commercial institutions and their claim that organizational picketing is widespread is absolutely false. An occasional abuse has occurred. So do occasional abuses in government, banking, medical, and business practices. Labor flatly opposes legislation designed to destroy legitimate functions of any group because of an abuse. The cure should not be permitted to kill the patient.⁴¹⁵

Reub wrote to the governor to gain his support, telling him, “Undoubtedly you will be called upon by some members of the General Assembly for an opinion with respect to your attitude relative to House Bill No. 702. I sincerely trust you will find it consistent and agreeable to support the very definite decisions of the United States Supreme Court.”⁴¹⁶ He likewise published a call-to-arms to all labor secretaries and delegates, asking them to “Please write a nice letter immediately to your three State Representatives urging them to vote against this oppressive measure...The right to picket peacefully is as essential as the right to strike. Both of these activities at odd times may hurt wage earners more than anyone else, but still these rights must never be surrendered because human freedom itself depends on their retention.”⁴¹⁷

Still, as the bill’s vote in the House Committee on Industry and Labor Relations neared, it remained uncertain whether Soderstrom would succeed. The Illinois Chamber of Commerce had lavished support on the bill, spending massive sums on promotional material to sway wavering legislators. Reub didn’t take any chances; he called on every labor representative he could find to pack the room, and organized more than a half dozen attorneys to testify on labor’s behalf. Reuben spearheaded the charge with a stirring speech, testifying with characteristic flair:

HB No. 702 is designed to circumvent the constitutional rights of free press and free speech with respect to wage-earners. It does not apply to all citizens. It does not apply to members of the Chambers of Commerce—

At the mention of the reviled organization, the crowd burst into deafening boos, nearly drowning out a very satisfied Reuben. Undaunted, he pressed forward, the room growing rowdier with each mention of their enemy’s name.

It only applies to working people and is an attempt to place wage-earners in a subordinate position...The Illinois Chamber of Commerce has been active, campaigning for this bill. The Chamber of Commerce has caused some literature to be placed on the desk of each lawmaker in the Illinois House of Representatives. This literature includes a pamphlet which contains editorials and newspaper articles which have been published in support of HB No. 702. In other words—the newspapers have been exercising their rights of free press and free speech abundantly and at the same time advocating the denial of these rights to working people!

With that the crowd erupted in applause in a raucous show of support. Reub continued, outlining the legislative and legal precedents for his case, from the creation of his injunction-limitation act over 30 years earlier to the Supreme Court’s reaffirmation of labor’s rights in the *Swing* case. Then, with typical rhetorical ease he moved to the heart of his attack:

It seems strange that in a democratic republic such as the United States, the question “What are the rights of wage-earners?” should arise or even be discussed. Yet in the provisions of HB No. 702 and in order to comprehend fully the conditions created when a labor injunction is issued, it is necessary to emphasize these rights and elucidate them. The wage-earners’ rights are identical with their rights as citizens. Being a wage-earner neither decreases, increases, or in any other manner modifies or changes his citizen rights...Any action or legislation which interferes with these rights is un-American, as well as contrary to the Constitution...

Injunctions could be issued under HB No. 702 which would restrain workmen from peacefully picketing or

inducting others to do that which otherwise has been deemed lawful to do; restrain working people from peacefully communicating information; from peaceful assembling; from enjoying the rights of association; from the enjoyment of free locomotion; from the right to quit work and pay strike benefits; from the right to free speech and free press. Any attempt on the part of workmen enjoined from the exercise of these fundamental and constitutional rights would be held to be in contempt and subject to punishment according to the judge's conscience.

The labor injunction is the weapon of industrial tyrants. It's the weapon of autocrats because violation of it permits no trial by jury. The judge demands obedience; failure to obey is construed to be contempt of court. A violator of an injunction can be fined and jailed. There is no trial. There is no appeal...And I say to you, my friends, that there never was a tyrant on the face of the earth but what he could find some judge or some court willing to cloak tyranny in the forms of law and legality. Pass legislation like HB No. 702 and the court becomes the tool of industrial oppressors. It no longer can administer equal justice. HB No. 702 should not be permitted to advance out of the hearing stage.⁴¹⁸

Reub got his wish. The anti-picketing bill was turned down by the House committee by a vote of 26 to 15.

Undeterred, Representative Widmer vowed to have the whole House reject the disapproval and bring the measure to the House floor.⁴¹⁹ It was the audience, he whined, that had doomed the measure. He cited Representative Marion Burk's testimony that "the members of this committee will vote against their own conscience because they have been intimidated by labor."⁴²⁰ Widmer echoed the charge, claiming legislators "were under pressure to vote against the bill because of mass booing by union representatives who attended the hearing."⁴²¹

Widmer's second round against Reub failed even more miserably than his first. Reporter Raymond Coffey described the scene:

The House galleries were filled with opponents and supporters of the bill as the vote was taken on Widmer's motion, and the hour and a half debate was punctuated several times with cheers and boos...Widmer charged that such "racket picketing" tends to "eliminate many small businesses that cannot withstand the pressure" of picketing...He and other supporters of the bill made several references to the current U.S. Senate Rackets Committee investigation of Dave Beck and the Teamsters Union... Rep. G. William Horsley (R. Springfield) said the bill was sponsored "by the Chamber of Commerce" and would make it possible for employers to forever avoid picketing of their establishments by firing enough workers to prevent a union from ever representing a majority...Rep. Carl Soderstrom (R. Streator), a son of Illinois Federation of Labor President Reuben G. Soderstrom, said the bill would 'revive union busting by injunction.'⁴²²

The vote was overwhelming; 28 Republicans joined nearly all the Democrats to defeat Widmer's second attempt by 104-64. The vote was so commanding that it doomed not only the anti-picketing bill but all other anti-labor legislation for the year as well, including a new, vicious "right to work" bill.⁴²³ By the close of the legislative session Reub proclaimed relief as well as victory, telling the labor faithful:

The end of the 1957 session of the Illinois General Assembly was welcomed with a sigh of relief. It came on June 30 and with emotions, tempers, and feelings returning to normal, the windup was as soothing as a cool breeze after a terrifically hot day. Six months of excitement, clashing and tension experienced by lawmakers, legislative representatives, and individual citizens interested in the actions of the legislative branch of our State government faded away into an atmosphere of tolerance and friendship when the sine die adjournment arrived.⁴²⁴

THE ILLINOIS AFL-CIO MERGER

Lester Asher Replaces Dan Carmell

Just as the legislative session was closing, a prickly nest of new problems opened up with respect to the pending merger of the Illinois Federation and the CIO's Illinois Industrial Union Council. The two groups had spent all of 1956 and the first half of 1957 moving steadily—if slowly—towards crafting a final, agreed constitution ahead of their respective September conventions. They had managed to find acceptable compromises on many of the issues on which they had initially differed. The ISFL, for its part, had agreed in principle to continue the community service and farm worker outreach of the CIO (though they still disagreed on salaries). They also agreed to the CIO Committee system, allowing for the creation of a number of constitutional committees to oversee labor policy and approach on various issues. The CIO similarly accepted a minority position in the Executive Board, with 10 ISFL Vice Presidents to the CIO's 7. Most importantly, both sides had engineered a compromise concerning the merged organization's leadership; Reuben Soderstrom and Stanley Johnson would become President and Secretary-Treasurer of the new organization, while a new position—Executive Vice President—would be created and given to CIO Secretary-Treasurer Maurice McElligott.

Professionally, there was progress. Personal reconciliation, in contrast, remained more mixed. Although the Executive Vice President position had helped the CIO swallow Stanley's role as Secretary-Treasurer, it didn't make them any more trustful of him. Johnson furthered the problem, according to multiple CIO sources, by making repeated inflammatory and condescending remarks in meetings and in written correspondence. Most within the Industrial Union Council believed Stanley viewed the merger as, at best, a bitter pill he was forced to swallow.

Additional personalities further complicated the personal dynamic. CIO Vice President Robert Johnston of the UAW proved increasingly abrasive. Existing minutes and meeting summaries portray a man acting as more of an instigator than a negotiator, more interested in getting his way than in getting to a solution. No meeting participants made more threats, issued more ultimatums, or heard more of their own voices in these meetings than Johnston. He seemed to find the entire notion of merging highly disagreeable.

Charles Hayes was another CIO participant that argued hard, though for far more affirmative reasons. The pioneer organizer of the Packinghouse Workers was one of the most important voices in the Illinois civil rights movement. A future founder of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, Hayes was already helping raise funds for Martin Luther King Jr.'s efforts in the South; in these meetings his primary goal was ensuring that civil rights continue to receive the same attention in the merged organization they had in the CIO. In this he had the full and vocal backing of IIUC President Germano, who insisted that the Illinois labor constitution, like its national counterpart, contain a civil rights clause calling for nondiscrimination. He also wanted language forbidding Klu Klux Klan members from holding union posts.⁴²⁵

Unquestionably, the biggest personal upset the merger committee faced in 1957 was the loss of its longtime general counsel Dan Carmell. In 1956, the 58-year-old Carmell had been charged with transporting a 19-year-old Iowa woman to Chicago for "immoral purposes."⁴²⁶ In late January of 1957 the married father of two pleaded innocent before an Iowa Judge, posted a \$5,000 bond and succeeded in having his trial moved to Chicago, all the while attempting to continue in his work. Still, Carmell appeared to fall into a deep depression as his court date neared.⁴²⁷ The night before his trial was to begin, he sat with his wife, Mildred, watching TV as they did every Sunday evening. When their evening shows finished, Dan calmly got up and announced he was going to bed; Mildred went to the bathroom. Instead of preparing for bed, however, he quietly walked into the bedroom, opened up the window of their 15th story South Side apartment, and took a

fateful step into the night air, plunging to his death in the early morning of June 3, 1957.⁴²⁸

The news hit Reuben like a punch to the gut. Of all the potential outcomes, this was one he had never foreseen. Carmell had spent years by his side. Outside of Victor Olander, no single person had earned Reub's confidence the way Carmell had. He was the man Soderstrom picked to argue the Swing case before the U.S. Supreme Court, the man Reuben chose to act as the ISFL's top attorney. As he had done too many times in recent years, he took to the pages of the *ISFL Weekly Newsletter* to eulogize his former companion:

The Illinois State Federation of Labor and the entire Illinois labor movement has lost one of the most practical and brilliant legal minds developed in the last quarter of a century. His passing leaves a void in the ranks of those who stand resolutely for the rights of wage earners and their unions...Dan Carmell was a man whose intellect and logic were used by dozens of unions for the benefit of the membership. His contacts in the legal, political, and union circles were legion...

We did not desert him when he was beset with difficulties. We felt confident that when his day in court ended, vindication would have been the order. We have wondered if his position and influence in union activities made him subject to harassment...We are dismayed by his tragic end. We cherish the memory of his accomplishments. We cast a mantle of forgiveness over his weaknesses...To his family, we extend our heartfelt sympathy. To them, our associates and ourselves, we only know that final judgement has been reserved to and is now in the hands of the Supreme Ruler of us all.⁴²⁹

As Reuben alluded to in his obituary, there was (and remains) some suspicion that the charges, if not false, were at least uncovered or brought to court by anti-labor forces seeking to discredit Carmell and disrupt the ISFL. Like many in labor, Reuben believed that outside influence was possible, if not probable.

Carmell's death put the Illinois Federation into a scramble. Attorney Lester Asher was bought in to replace Carmell in the merger negotiations. While his late entry put him and the ISFL at a clear disadvantage, Asher proved himself a quick and competent study. He also brought some valuable experience of his own, having helped write the constitution of the AFL Packing House Workers and CIO Meat Cutters after their merger in the summer of 1956. The experience left him with a clear suspicion of the CIO; as he told the ISFL Executive Board, "We found that unless everything was expressed clearly, they had interpretations contrary to our thinking. With the CIO, we could not deal with our usual good faith."⁴³⁰

This, then, was the dynamic at play as the ISFL and IIUC entered the summer of 1957: two Presidents, Soderstrom and Germano, who were eager to find a solution but flanked by lieutenants, Johnson and Johnston, who were resistant to change and suspicious of each other. There was an alcoholic and mostly absent Secretary-Treasurer that the CIO insisted on placing in a top post even if it had to be invented for him, and a new attorney whose prior experience with the CIO had taught him to get every detail in writing, leaving nothing to chance. Before these men lay the vast existential task of defining the meaning and mission of the new Illinois State Federation of Labor and Congress of International Organizations. How broad would its new scope be? What purpose would it serve? In such tender negotiations as these, the mix of conflicting ideals and contrasting personalities would prove toxic.

Irreconcilable Differences

By July of that year attorneys Lester Asher and Abe Brussell had completed a third draft of the constitution that all parties felt came close to meeting both groups' (begrudging) approval. Reuben even moved the 1957 ISFL conference from Peoria to Chicago in anticipation of a joint conference, telling the delegates:

The Chicago Federation of Labor has consented to be our hosts for the 1957 Convention in Chicago. It will be held at the only available time and place suitable for a joint convention of the AFL-CIO State Bodies. The Hilton Hotel has guaranteed 2,000 rooms for the use of the delegates, with special reduced rates. The Grand Ballroom is large enough, with the adjoining foyer, to seat all delegates—assembly style. Everything will be under one roof during the convention time.⁴³¹

Still, a final agreement proved elusive. By late summer two seemingly irreconcilable differences became clear. First and foremost was the question of scope—what was the purpose of the Illinois AFL-CIO? To Reuben and his ISFL members, the duty of a state-level labor body was to establish and implement a legislative program. Collective bargaining was handled by either local or national and international unions, depending on the nature and size of the dispute. The state body played no role in either calling for a strike or negotiating terms. Likewise, community and civil rights issues were within the purview of the relevant central labor body, not the state organization. While the state body could speak or assist on other matters, the primary function of the organization had to be legislative activity.⁴³²

The CIO, on the other hand, insisted on a “broadening philosophy” of the state-level body. They insisted on language allowing the Illinois AFL-CIO to intervene in collective bargaining within the state.⁴³³ Most importantly, they demanded a co-equal emphasis on all labor concerns and programs. As Robert Johnston told the ISFL:

I certainly could not sell the interpretation that the legislative program is 99% or even the primary function of the organization. I see all the other programs just as important parts of the over-all program and I must have it clear that Community Services, Civil Rights, Political Education and Farm Labor are just as important.⁴³⁴

This question of whether legislative activity would be *a duty* or *the primary* duty of the Illinois AFL-CIO was a crucial difference, one which played a critical role in the question of funding and staffing. If state legislation was the primary purpose of the organization, then it would make sense for the president and his secretary-treasurer to personally oversee the implementation of labor’s legislative agenda. Conversely, if such legislation was only one of a number of equally important goals, then the president would be derelict in dedicating so much time to Springfield, and would have to rely on a committee and staff to act largely in his stead.

This dispute was closely tied to leadership. As ISFL President, Soderstrom had broad authority with regard to those issues that fell within his purview. He was given great discretion to accomplish the goals established by the executive board. The Illinois CIO, in stark contrast to both the ISFL and its own national counterpart, had adopted a de-centralized model of leadership. This was partly out of necessity; the early Industrial Council had been unable to pay its president, forcing the executive (who was typically otherwise employed) to rely on others. This had over time created a very limited presidency; in the words of ISFL Vice President John Kinsella:

Their outlook is entirely different to ours. With them the President is just incidental. All he does is preside at conventions and board meetings. Usually he has another full-time job. They have a different idea than we do.⁴³⁵

Authority within the Illinois CIO instead fell to the committees, constitutionally-mandated bodies that formulated and enforced policies. While far less effective, this system had spread power broadly, investing control in a number of individuals and institutions that felt threatened by the idea of a strong presidency. They fiercely argued not only for the preservation of the committee system but against any presidential power over it. As ISFL attorney Asher noted with alarm, “Constitutional committees are very dangerous. Much of [the Illinois CIO’s] wording has been taken from the AFL-CIO Constitution, but they have left out much that clarifies President Meany’s powers.”⁴³⁶

These conflicts over the proposed organization's scope and leadership came to a head in the fight over how the politics of Springfield were to be handled. Reuben was open to the idea of a legislative committee, but he was insistent that he continue to operate as he had—with him and his Secretary-Treasurer personally overseeing the agenda. The reason, he bluntly said, was simple: the CIO approach didn't work. "It's usually a month before [the CIO legislative committee members] appear in Springfield, and at that time most of our bills have been introduced," he told the executive board in a meeting that August. "They do not believe in continual attendance during the session, which we have found to be the only successful program to follow."⁴³⁷

The CIO—particularly Robert Johnston—made elaborate and forceful protests. He demanded not only that a legislative committee be written into the Constitution, but that such a committee be given ultimate authority. He rejected any draft that stipulated the president "shall have supervision" over the committee, and likewise refused to give the president the authority to remove members.⁴³⁸ After a particularly contentious meeting that August, it became clear that neither organization was willing to budge. The CIO broke off negotiations, with Johnston stating "It would be useless for us at this time to discuss changing specific language when there are fundamental issues involved."⁴³⁹ After some half-hearted attempts to revive talks, CIO attorney Abe Brussell called his ISFL counterpart to inform him that, "At this time no further meetings between our respective groups is feasible."⁴⁴⁰

Soderstrom had no choice but to announce that the State AFL-CIO merger would not occur as scheduled. As the *Mt. Vernon Register-News* reported on August 29:

Reuben Soderstrom, AFL president in Illinois, said Wednesday his organization still planned to hold its own convention and hoped it would turn into a merger convention. Soderstrom said a disagreement occurred 10 days ago over the draft of a constitution and the other organization broke off negotiations. However, he described the disagreement as minor and natural considering it involved "two organizations that have been trying to destroy each other for 20 years." Soderstrom added that since nationwide units of the two labor organizations had been united, state merger was inevitable. Both the AFL and CIO state organizations will submit their views of the opposing constitutional drafts to George Meany, AFL-CIO national president, for a judgment.⁴⁴¹

President Meany, however, did not view the disagreement as minor, nor did he see a merger as inevitable. The AFL-CIO was in clearly uncharted territory; the national body had issued a deadline of December 5, 1957, and many viewed his ability to complete this task as the first important test of his authority. While it was not clear to anyone what would happen if the merger failed to occur by then, Meany wrote to Reub making sure he understood what could occur: the AFL-CIO President curtly told Soderstrom that, if necessary, he had the authority to strip both groups of their charters, effectively burning the entire house down, in order to rebuild a more compliant organization.⁴⁴² To assist in negotiations, Meany sent Regional Director of Organizational Work Eugene Moats and Special Assistant Peter McGavin to sit down and meet with both groups in advance of their Chicago conventions.

Reuben understood the stakes. The third draft, which did not empower Soderstrom, was the last agreed draft written before talks broke down. The simplest solution for Moats and McGavin would have been to recommend Meany force the ISFL to accept the merger on that draft or face dissolution. To prevent this, Soderstrom told his executive board, the Illinois Federation had to get to Meany's minders first.⁴⁴³ When Moats and McGavin arrived for a joint Illinois AFL-CIO meeting at the Conrad Hilton Hotel on September 3, Soderstrom was there waiting for them, answering their questions and assuring them that the ISFL was willing to do what was necessary for unity. In return, Soderstrom secured commitments from McGavin that "the Illinois State Federation of Labor will not be forced to change its legislative program of work. I'm not

here to put on any rush act.”⁴⁴⁴

When the CIO did arrive, Reuben let them do all the talking, confident that Robert Johnston’s confrontational manner would work to his advantage. While Germano and Hayes did make some points, it was Johnston who took center stage, attacking the ISFL and contradicting his own president in the process. As soon as Germano finished telling Meany’s special assistant that he had “No thought on our part to take power from officers and give it to committees...we want to strengthen Reub’s hand,” Johnston cut in, telling McGavin:

The Auto Workers will not merge to concentrate legislative work in two people. Illinois is pinpointed for right to work legislation! The Committee on Legislation is very important. No two can run it. You need a strategy and policy planning committee. You need top people assisting in the full sense of the word. Any misstep in this field could bring disaster. We insist that reliable top-notch people be on this committee with both feet in the planning and strategy stages...Our Board would now insist on this, even with the third draft.⁴⁴⁵

Ignoring Johnston, Reuben turned to McGavin and said, “I have a commitment from the governor that he will veto any right-to-work bill. The CIO brought in three new leaders who had to be brought up to date.”⁴⁴⁶

With two sentences, Soderstrom eviscerated Johnston’s case. There was no need for committees full of “top-notch men” running around if they didn’t even know what was going on. McGavin had heard enough. True to his word, he did not recommend a merger based on the third draft. Negotiations would continue.

While it was a tactical victory, Reuben knew that he was still on borrowed time. He needed to find meaningful compromise that both his ISFL and the CIO could accept. Patience was wearing thin all around; in the year to come, he would have to turn this gang of adversaries into a single team, overcoming personal, professional, and political differences to fight labor’s battles together. It was a task he was ready for. As he told the delegates gathered in the Grand Ballroom of the Conrad Hilton Hotel:

Lack of unity in the labor movement is, of course, a great hazard to working people. It is a hazard in the political field and also in the legislative field. In this day and age, it is definitely a great hazard in the economic field. Unity of state federations, and city central bodies, would be the greatest step forward ever taken by organized labor in Illinois. For twenty years we have failed to fully co-operate with each other because of this existing organic division. In fact, there were times when raiding and other menacing activities were actually designed to harass and destroy each other. All of that is history—and by uniting our labor movement, from top to bottom, it would conceivably make such antagonistic incidents definitely a thing of the past. Our natural union instincts and common sense tells us we ought to be united and working together in closer unity and more unitedly than ever before, to improve the hours, wages, and working conditions of every shop, every trade, every factory and industry in this great State!⁴⁴⁷

Reuben was speaking for unity and clearly standing his ground to be the single, unifying voice for labor in the state of Illinois.

CHAPTER 47

1958

SUCCESS! THE ILLINOIS AFL-CIO IS BORN

“I can promise you this, that the officers of the State Federation of Labor and the officers of the new united Federation intend to go forward in the future just as we have in the past towards building a better day and a better world for the working people of this state and of this nation. We do not intend to step back a single inch. We intend to go forward.”

-Reuben Soderstrom, First Annual ISFL-CIO convention, 1958

A STANDARD-BEARER FOR LABOR

Taking a break from the intractable merger negotiations, Soderstrom joined the rest of Chicago in January of 1958 to welcome President Dwight D. Eisenhower. It was a grand affair, eagerly hosted by a city that held a special place in the president’s history—the place where he narrowly defeated the rabidly anti-labor Robert Taft to first become the Republican standard-bearer in the 1952 election.

Now, five and a half years later, the second-term president was returning to the scene of his political birth to pay tribute—and beg funds for the coming congressional election. The main event was a gala fundraiser dinner in the International Amphitheatre’s Donovan Hall, with over 5,100 anticipated guests from across the state willing to pay the \$100-a-plate fee to attend. The speaker’s table, a grand dais set against a sea of American flags, faced the masses so as to elevate not only Eisenhower but his honored guests, the top 50 leaders and power-brokers in the state that the president sought to court. It was a night designed for the president to meet his makers; whom he chose to sit with him spoke volumes.

While most of the names on the list—the usual “who’s who” of state and national dignitaries—sparked little interest, one name in particular stood out. Reuben Soderstrom, President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, was asked alongside Chicago Federation President Bill Lee to join Eisenhower on the dais. Several newspapers including *The Chicago American*, the *Bloomington Pantagraph*, and Reuben’s hometown *Streator Times Daily Press* drew special attention to Soderstrom’s attendance, highlighting the historic invitation of a labor leader to sit at a Republican president’s table. Soderstrom and Lee took care to note that their acceptance did not entail their support of Eisenhower or his policies. “I was invited and I accepted,” he told the press. “I presume I was invited as a representative of organized labor in Chicago and not from any partisan consideration. After all, Mr. Eisenhower is everybody’s president. No, I’m not paying for my ticket.”⁴⁴⁸

The message was clear: Soderstrom and Lee’s attendance was a sign of the growing power of labor. Eisenhower and the Republicans needed labor support, and Reuben’s invitation was a play for it. Perhaps the strongest evidence for this came from labor’s enemies, who strongly denounced Soderstrom’s elevation. Joseph Meek, President of the Illinois Retail Merchants Association, labeled the president’s welcome of Reuben “a crude attempt to woo labor,” bitterly complaining that “Farmers are not recognized. Nor is retailing. Nor is business except insofar as those who are prominent in raising money are concerned. The rest are political leaders.”⁴⁴⁹

Meek wasn't entirely wrong; the Eisenhower invitation underlined just how powerful labor's leadership had become, especially in Illinois, and the events of 1958 would only serve to strengthen it. It was the year that the Illinois Federation and CIO, bitter rivals for over 20 years, finally reunited, bringing over 1.2 million souls under Reuben's direct protection. It was a year of electoral success, with politicians of both parties in desperate search of labor's blessing. It was a year of legislative accomplishment, with Reuben securing substantial gains in a special session of the General Assembly.

Such success carried risk, however. Power invites corruption, and the biggest fear of many—within organized labor as well as without—was that the legitimate gains unions had made would be perverted to serve the powerful instead of the working men and women for whom such protections were intended. Nationally, US Senate committee investigations had uncovered systemic corruption in organized labor, particularly among the Teamsters and their President Dave Beck. Locally, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, now three years into his first term, had already built a network of political, administrative, and commercial alliances that many believed effectively institutionalized corruption. In the words of historian Thomas Dyja:

In Chicago, where the average alderman answered to fewer than a quarter of the residents his counterpart in New York did, politics had always been service-oriented: patch my alley, help me get a liquor license; retail, as opposed to the wholesale sort concerned with policy and ideas...But the word retail implies one has a choice, and Daley was eliminating choices for the people of Chicago. Under him, the Machine no longer made any pretense of helping "regular guys" work the system; the Machine was the system, and its purpose was to rake in money, create jobs, and keep blacks in their place yet still voting Democratic. Big business, labor, the Mob, and the Machine had always been connected...but now they met openly at construction sites.⁴⁵⁰

All of this gave ready ammunition to manufacturing and emerging merchant interests intent on rolling back labor rights under the guise of fighting "racketeer unionism." Illinois labor may have been mighty in the moment, but it was one legislative session and a "little Taft-Hartley" away from losing it all.

As the Illinois AFL-CIO merger approached, union leaders recognized they needed to select a president of unimpeachable character to helm the new organization. The moment called for someone whose reputation could counter the charge of corruption, who could credibly claim that he sought power not for himself but those he served. It also required a man of legislative skill, experience, and tact—someone who could simultaneously play the hardball of Illinois politics and heal the rifts that had divided organized labor.

On these counts, Reuben was a clear favorite. His career served as a study in avoiding personal gain. Despite multiple offers and opportunities, Soderstrom elected to live simply in his hometown of Streator, eschewing the riches and fineries that defined the lives of so many in power. His years as a legislator and labor lobbyist had also imbued him with a keen understanding of the politics of Springfield, as well as an uncanny ability to bring disparate and even antagonistic forces together in common cause. Cagey and persistent, the labor leader rarely hewed a straight line, wearing down the opposition through stubbornness and strength of will. "I never get ulcers," he often joked, "but I give a lot of 'em."⁴⁵¹

The leader of this combined labor juggernaut would need more than just ethics and experience, however. The post also required someone with inexhaustible energy, who could move labor forward without sacrificing the gains it had made. The potential president would also be taking on new roles and responsibilities, making adaptability and a fresh approach an urgent necessity. While few would state so publicly, many wondered if Reuben, aged 70, was truly capable of being that man. Every newspaper account that described Soderstrom in 1958 led with his age, even if that was the only detail other than his title it provided.⁴⁵² While most assumed Reuben would take the reins initially, few seemed to believe he would be there for long.

Consequently, one of the biggest points of contention in the negotiations leading up to the merger was the question of succession, and as 1958 began it remained the largest unanswered question. If Soderstrom wanted to be taken seriously, he had to prove that he was not only seasoned but spritely, ready to go the full fifteen rounds against any and all comers. Reuben took the challenge with relish, enthusiastically proclaiming upon his ascension that he would be relentless in his pursuit of labor rights, taking the fight directly to labor's foes, whomever and wherever they may be:

We are going to increase our political activity in the hope of defeating every enemy of labor which Illinois has in the United States Congress, every enemy of labor that we have in the General Assembly of Illinois, in every county board of supervisors, in the city councils of the municipalities throughout this great state...Forward together, united and determined to wipe out every wrong, to wipe out every injustice, to wipe out every tyranny, and to hasten the day when all of our people, including working people, can enjoy a perfect triumph of the brotherhood of all mankind.⁴⁵³

Reuben's words proved prophetic; he may have led a distinguished career to date, but some of his biggest fights were yet to come.

REUB AND SON, A POWERFUL ALLIANCE

Tackle Recession and Special Sessions

1958 did not begin well for Reub. His failure to complete the merger of his Federation and the CIO in Illinois by the end of 1957 had earned a firm rebuke from AFL-CIO President George Meany, who threatened in a letter that February to revoke the charters of both state organizations if they failed to resolve their differences quickly.⁴⁵⁴ To ensure this was accomplished, Meany dispatched AFL-CIO Vice Presidents William McFetridge and David McDonald, respectively Presidents of the (formerly AFL) Building Service Employees and (formerly CIO) United Steelworkers. Reuben took the hint; he was on a short leash and even shorter clock. He would have to end the standoff before the year's end.

As 1958 unfolded, however, national events quickly overtook talks about the merger. The spring of 1958 brought with it a brutal recession—the worst seen since the Great Depression. A sudden spurt of declining demand rocked the national economy, costing nearly 7% of the US labor force their jobs. Americans of all stripes did their part to fight the economic threat. Some business owners hosted parties and sell-a-thons to spur purchases, while others offered bonuses on the condition that all the money be spent. In Kankakee, Illinois (where Reuben's mother and sister Olga lived) the local Chamber of Commerce even held a mock execution of "Old Man Gloom" in an act of forced optimism.⁴⁵⁵ The AFL-CIO, meanwhile, eschewed theatre for policy, releasing an economic plan calling for an expansion of public works, extension of the minimum wage to retail workers, and an increase in the personal income tax exemption, old age benefits, and the amount and duration of unemployment compensation payments.⁴⁵⁶

Many Illinois businessmen sought to turn the nation's fear to their advantage. In late April, the Illinois Chamber of Commerce rounded up a gang of 37 state businessmen and sent them to Washington DC to lobby for stricter labor laws. Pitching their proposals as attempts to "curb the monopolistic powers of labor unions," the group met with the Illinois congressional delegation to argue for a host of new prohibitions on labor activities.⁴⁵⁷ Reuben pushed back hard against such efforts, charging that merchants needed to tend to their own house before throwing any stones. Any blame for the merchants' woes, Reub asserted, belonged at the feet of discount chains, who were themselves the natural product of the retailers' own gross price inflation. These merchants were the real racketeers, not the unions, and if any new prohibitions were to be passed they

should be hung on their necks alone:

Abusive practices of dishonest merchants indicate the need for criminal penalties to punish those who victimize their customers. It isn't any wonder that discount establishments, and business houses who merchandise the necessities of life wholesale, are thriving and doing a land-office business. Many Main Street merchants do more business during the Christmas season than they do the rest of the year. Many thoughtful working people wonder why after Christmas and January sales feature the same goods at prices one-third off and sometimes at half-price. This practice is obvious evidence that the unwary pre-holiday shopper was the victim of legalized pocket picking by the suave Main Street con-man...The Association of Retail Merchants, and the Illinois State Chamber of Commerce, whose members frequently slug customers with extortion mark-ups, are guilty of racket practices, if not actual thievery, and perhaps the labor movement will one day think up a few reprisals and legislative retaliations.⁴⁵⁸

The Chamber's efforts in DC fell flat; the House Labor Committee declined to hold a hearing on the group's concerns.⁴⁵⁹

In Springfield, meanwhile, Soderstrom was working with the governor's office to enact state relief. That summer Governor Stratton called a special session of the Illinois legislature to deal with the economic situation. He introduced two policies: a temporary extension of unemployment benefits from 26 to 39 weeks and an extra 15 million dollars for poor relief. The Illinois Manufacturers' Association, Illinois Chamber of Commerce and Illinois Retail Marketers Association all predictably fought the measures, labeling them in the press as an "attempt to convert to general relief money accumulated by employer payments as an insurance fund."⁴⁶⁰ State legislators, however, had little stomach for opposing relief aid in the midst of an economic crisis. Discussion in Springfield quickly shifted from whether to pass the governor's proposed increases to whether the increases he proposed would be adequate.

In the end Reuben scored a crushing victory; the increase and extension passed by a vote of 167 – 0 in the House and 46-4 in the Senate.⁴⁶¹ Rather than taking a victory lap, Soderstrom used the vote as fuel for the coming election, telling his readership in the *Weekly Newsletter* "We are truly saddened by the apparent lack of regard and concern for the unemployed displayed by those few who voted against this very mild proposal of help for those out of work. We ask our membership in those districts where the legislators showed little regard for the welfare of workers to take note."⁴⁶² The fact that three of the four Senators weren't up for re-election that year didn't matter; Reuben was able to channel anger as leverage in their home district House races. One of the four districts flipped in the coming election, while the other remained in pro-labor hands.⁴⁶³

Electoral Wins for Carl Soderstrom and Labor

The Special Session fight of 1958 underscored Reuben's greatest strength—he was the Grey Eminence of Illinois politics, working behind the scenes to secure votes and craft legislation. It was a position he had cultivated in part through a series of tactful endorsements. He had faithfully followed AFL founder Samuel Gompers's nonpartisan policy of "electing our friends and defeating our enemies," endorsing incumbents, regardless of party, who had not worked to undermine labor, even when a challenger promised more. It was a strategy that Reub had taken all the way to the governor's race, beating back strong partisan sentiment within his ISFL to give labor's endorsement to the Republican Governor Stratton. This approach not only helped ensure Reuben had influence in Republican administrations, but also increased ISFL influence within the Democratic Party. While Democrats in other states believed they could take labor's vote for granted, Illinois politicians knew they had to work for Reuben's support. Soderstrom's nonpartisan reputation and his popularity among union voters combined to give his endorsements incredible weight.

The 1958 election was a prime example of just how influential and coveted that endorsement was. Politicians from both sides of the aisle clamored to win his support, and loudly proclaimed it once won. Republican representative Peter Miller listed Reuben first among all the endorsements he received, placing Soderstrom's praise before any mention of the Chicago Bar Association, the Civic Federation, or Meek's Illinois Retail Merchants Association.⁴⁶⁴ Powerful politician and Democratic leader Paul Powell also proudly touted Soderstrom's support⁴⁶⁵ No candidate, however, made better use of Reuben's endorsement than James Monroe, Democratic candidate for President in the 47th District (East St. Louis). In the course of his campaign Monroe twice took out giant ads in the *Atlon Evening Telegraph* titled "Illinois Federation of Labor President has HIGH COMMENDATION for James O. Monroe."⁴⁶⁶ With his ad buy Monroe chose to republish, in full, the letter Reuben had written to the incumbent, followed by an official statement of ISFL support. Only after all this did Monroe mention the support he had from other organizations. The Senator considered Reuben's endorsement so central to his electoral prospects that he made this his election eve ad, publishing it the day before both the primary and general elections.

There was one pro-labor politician, however, who required no support from Reuben to carry the day—his son, Carl Soderstrom, Republican Representative for the 38th district. Once again, the Republican establishment party announced they would only select two candidates for the two Republican seats in their district, assuring Carl a place in the coming Assembly.⁴⁶⁷ It was welcome news to the younger Soderstrom, who just a few years prior had faced a party willing to risk losing the seat to the Democrats for the chance to defeat him.

1958 proved to be a successful election year for working men and women across the board. Illinois followed the national trend towards labor-supported politicians; four union-friendly Democrats gained seats in the Illinois Senate, while a string of conservative losses in the lower chamber put the House back under the control of the Democrats and their labor-friendly leader Paul Powell. It was a ringing win for organized labor.

Judicial Amendment

One of the most important campaigns Reuben waged in the elections of 1958 was not against a candidate at all, but against a proposed "Judicial Reform" amendment to the Illinois constitution. Soderstrom was deeply opposed to the change, which sought to end the election of judges and eliminate the local fee-based funding of judicial offices. Reformers believed these changes would result in better courts for less money. "Fees will go to the state instead of to the Justice of the Peace," wrote one supporter in the *Chicago Daily Herald*. "The fee system by which the JP is paid only if he finds you guilty will be ended at long last... Those JPs who are honest and competent will undoubtedly be appointed to continue to serve as salaried magistrates."⁴⁶⁸ Support for the proposed amendment crossed traditional party and ideological lines; Republican Governor Stratton lent his endorsement "unequivocally and completely," while Chicago Mayor Daley said he was "personally and officially" behind the effort.⁴⁶⁹ Even the CIO campaigned to drum up votes for the amendment. In the words of *Southern Illinoisan* reporter O.T. Banton, "[Illinois CIO President Joe] Germano has been vigorous in his backing of judicial reform, and has had speakers working all over the state, showing a sound color film and urging support of the amendment."⁴⁷⁰

Reuben, however, did not see these changes as reforms, instead calling them "a fake and a step toward judicial autocracy."⁴⁷¹ He agreed that the problems many of the "reformers" highlighted were real. To address these issues, Soderstrom called for the General Assembly to pass a state law abolishing the fee system, and supported "stricter supervision with higher standards with respect to judicial qualifications—decent salaries for magistrates and justices."⁴⁷² He was deeply opposed, however, to making judges unaccountable through elections and the abolishment of local rule. He smelled an effort by those wielding judicial authority to consolidate and protect their power and positions. As he wrote in a sweeping essay that July in the heat of the

debate:

[The State Bar Association is] working to eliminate all opposition for incumbent judges...They want judges to run against their record, or against their shadow. Their idea was definitely to freeze judges into their jobs permanently. The procedure is foreign to labor's concept of American government...If they succeed in eventually freezing circuit judges into their jobs permanently, it means that justices of the peace will be also life-long appointees. The people, at any rate, would never have a chance to elect or oust them.⁴⁷³

While his argument was sound, Reuben's position put him in a lonely corner. He was up against the Bar, the media, and politicians of every stripe. Unsurprisingly, the long odds simply led Soderstrom to punch even harder. At that year's annual Central Labor Union conference, he railed against the amendment, declaring:

There was no miscalled "Right-to-Work" referendum in Illinois on Election Day, November 4, but there was something just as bad, or perhaps even worse, in the miscalled "Judicial Reform." Both of these proposals were sweetened up and made attractive with seductive phony names. Neither proposal was the Real McCoy!⁴⁷⁴

This attack was more than some in the audience could bear. Albert A. Krzywonos, Sub-District Director of the United Steelworkers of America in Illinois, and an active supporter of the amendment, wrote to Reuben in the wake of the conference to voice his protest, lamenting:

Reuben, what happened to you! Did your oratory carry you away—far away, or did you lose all sense of proportion. How can you compare the two issues and even put the 'Judicial Reform' issue far above the "Right-to-Work?"

You said, "every enemy of labor, big business, etc...were busy day and night trying to popularize this step towards judicial autocracy."

Well, what about the United Steelworkers of America, my organization; what about the whole C.I.O.? We were busy day and night popularizing this issue; are we branded as enemies of labor?

What do you think? Your (sic) talking so authoritatively about the judicial reform as if you knew it all, and knew it pontifically and infallibly. But if you were caught in the squeeze of the road traps of the squeeze of garnishment as our working people are and if you were to wait years for settlement of cases of if you thought about the unfairness of the election of supreme justices on Illinois you would not talk like you did.

Do you think that all of us who thought differently than you were fooled. Maybe, you, who took the opposite position, were fooled.

You say, "appropriate legislation is the real answer." Well, you were a spokesman for a group of people long ago. Why didn't you advocate that long ago?

But above all, you scandalize me and surprise me with your comparisons placing the judicial reform as something worse than right-to-work.

Don't let that beautiful oratory of yours carry you away!⁴⁷⁵

This posed a serious challenge for Reuben. Such a letter likely represented the sentiment not only of Krzywonos, or even the CIO leadership, but a broad swath of ordinary laborers. If Reub's response was too apologetic or vacillating, it would make him appear weak; if, on the other hand, he answered in a tone too

callous or indignant, he risked alienating his audience and poisoning the ISFL-CIO relationship at this most fragile moment. True to form, Soderstrom's reply was a pitch-perfect combination of firmness and respectfulness, and highlighted the tact that strengthened and humanized him at the same time:

Friend Krzywonos:

On some governmental matters the old Illinois State Federation of Labor supported the principle of local self-government. This was particularly true with respect to police systems and the judicial branch of our government.

Our policy was to definitely oppose a mobile police force—that is to say, wage-earners did not want Sangamon County police to patrol Will County, nor Will County patrolmen to police Sangamon County. Each locality should be permitted to police itself as it suits itself to be policed.

Through a bitter experience in the past with injunction judges labor generally believed also in local self-government with respect to the judiciary. The mis-called "Judicial Reform" eliminated the County Judge as such. It proposes several adjacent counties for him.

It also provided that upper court judges could be shifted around to anywhere in the State were their services were most needed. This violates the principle of local self-government because conceivably it could bring down-state judges into the Cook County circuits and Cook County judges into down- state areas, and thus develop a mobile judiciary.

This would happen, no doubt, in controversial labor cases in which home Judges would like to duck hot issues and it seems to me that all labor should be wary of this type of violation of the principle of local self-government.

In my address I merely adhered to the old traditional policies of the Illinois State Federation of Labor. With the CIO definitely in the picture there should of course be informal conferences between all representatives of the united labor movement relative to issues and policies. An exchange of views I think would be helpful. A few questions could be asked and a better understanding undoubtedly result in every-one interested helping each other...

No one is busier than the President of a State Organization when the General Assembly is in session. However, I trust you will come to Springfield sometime soon and pay my office a visit. I would like nothing better than to sit down with you and let you know just what the so-called "Judicial Reform" advocates were really trying to accomplish. You haven't heard but very little about their objectives.

Trusting that you are well and with kindest personal regards and every good wish, I am

Your friend,

R. G. Soderstrom President⁴⁷⁶

In the end, Reuben carried the day. The proposed Amendment was not approved by the voters, leaving judges accountable to the people. Perhaps even more importantly, Reuben had managed to keep the AFL-CIO coalition together on a very contentious issue, maintaining his organization's position while showing respect to those who passionately disagreed. It would not be the last time.

MERGE!

Coming to Terms

The Judicial Amendment fight was just one small (if important) example of the myriad number of fights and issues that faced the Illinois State Federation of Labor and the Illinois CIO in their seemingly interminable struggle to reunite. For the past three years, the two organizations had been arguing over the details of the merger, with heavy doses of mistrust on both sides. Many in the ISFL viewed the CIO almost as a virus or parasite, an opportunistic and dangerous infection threatening to overtake its host from the inside, injecting it with an overly broad and activist agenda that would take them too far from their core mandate and too close to the Democratic Party. The CIO, meanwhile, suspiciously saw the ISFL as a sort of undead monster—moribund and rotten, a relic from another era. While their points of contention were framed in legitimate arguments and dispassionate language, their utter failure to reach basic agreements after all these years spoke to a visceral animosity that made progress almost impossible.

This apparent intractability was made all the more remarkable by the fact that the two leaders, Reuben Soderstrom and Joe Germano, were both genuinely motivated to unify and willing to compromise. Minutes of the negotiations between the two groups clearly and repeatedly show Reub and Joe downplaying differences and searching for concessions acceptable to both sides. Neither was there a question about the presidency; from the very beginning it had assumed on both sides that Reuben would assume the presidency while Joe would accept a role as one of the organization's vice presidents. Deep and divisive fights over leadership, however, did arise around the question of who would assume the No. 2 spot. Typically, a labor organization's top two positions were held by the President and Secretary-Treasurer, respectively. In the national AFL-CIO merger, AFL President Meany and Secretary-Treasurer William Schnitzler both went on to hold those posts in the new organization, and Reuben's Secretary-Treasurer Stanley Johnson assumed that he would be given that position in the ISFL-CIO. The CIO, however, rebelled against the selection of Johnson, claiming he had treated them with dismissiveness and contempt throughout the merger process. The issue had been a (if not the) major reason why the CIO had pulled out of the planned merger in 1957, refusing to negotiate until after their respective conventions.

While Reuben had been able to convince an investigative team sent by George Meany in October of 1957 that the ISFL was continuing to negotiate in good faith and deserved some latitude (all state mergers were to have been completed by the end of 1957), he knew that his time was fast running out. When Meany sent AFL-CIO vice-presidents William McFetridge and David McDonald in the late summer of 1958 to resolve the standoff once and for all, Reuben knew to play ball. "Whatever George Meany decides, we're going to say, 'Amen, thy will be done.'" Soderstrom said. "There will be no quarrel from us. We're willing to let Meany tell us what to do and we'll do whatever he tells us."⁴⁷⁷

Of course, this was on some level a clever act. By the time of McFetridge's arrival nearly all the details concerning the merger had been basically settled. There were to be 19 officials in the new organization, 12 from the ISFL and 7 from the CIO. All assets would be pooled, with no staff changes contemplated. The new organization's headquarters would be maintained in the Federation's present offices in Chicago and Springfield. The constitution would expressly forbid affiliation with unions controlled by "communists, fascists, the Ku Klux Klan, or persons who have violated policies and codes of the AFL-CIO ethical practices act," and would create committees on civil rights, community services, farm labor, legislation, and political education.⁴⁷⁸

Only three real questions remained. The first had to do with money.⁴⁷⁹ Stanley Johnson was vigorously opposed to spending money on CIO programs, specifically those focused on community services and farm

workers. Joe Germano, however, was insistent that funding for these programs continue at current levels in the new organization. Soderstrom was genuinely conflicted on the issue; while he wanted to maintain his organization's financial standing and took pride in its low dues—which had not been raised once since Reuben became President—he saw value in such activities. He took particular interest in the person heading the Community Services program, a young man from Granite City by the name of Bob Gibson, in whom Reub saw great potential. McFetridge's presence would give Soderstrom the cover he needed to sell the continuance of these programs to his own board, who were far more skeptical.

The second argument had to do with the new organization's mandate and Reuben's autonomy to deal with legislative matters in Springfield. Soderstrom was intent on preserving the prerogative that the new organization's primary mission was to affect state legislation, and he was absolute in his desire to maintain his free hand in such matters. Other issues, such as civil rights and community service, were important—and Reuben had already agreed to the creation of constitutional committees to address these matters—but he would not let any labor organization he led get distracted or confused as to their highest purpose. He likewise refused to relinquish his power over legislation to a (frankly ineffectual) committee like the one the CIO currently maintained under the US Steelworkers' Legislative Director John Alesia.

Reuben had no doubt he could wrest these concessions from the CIO under the weight of the McFetridge-led talks. Most importantly, he had to neutralize Robert Johnston, the CIO vice-president most intent on confusing the organization's mandate and limiting his authority. Reub intended to cede to the creation of Committees on Political Education and Legislation for the purposes of advisement, provided he was given clear constitutional authority over such a committee. Not only did the national AFL-CIO constitution grant Meany such authority, the majority of CIO negotiators—including Joe Germano himself—appeared willing to agree with Reub on the issue. Given all this, Soderstrom knew Johnston would be unable to mount a defense in the face of the AFL-CIO President's emissaries. He was proved correct; as the *Weekly Newsletter* reported at the negotiation's completion:

From the services of (McFetridge and McDonald) evolved a clear-cut policy that the State legislation was still to be the main function of the newly-merged State Body. There would be no question that the President of the newly-merged State Body was to be in charge of activities and direct the affairs of the organization.⁴⁸⁰

More problematic was the question who would assume the position of Secretary-Treasurer: in other words, who was Reuben's successor? For the majority of the negotiation process, the CIO had been willing to accept Stanley Johnson in that role, provided the position of Executive Vice President be created and added to the executive leadership. Meeting minutes appear to indicate that all involved viewed this new role as the "number three" post in the leadership, and that would be filled by then CIO Secretary-Treasurer Maurice McElligott.

After the talks broke down in the end of 1957, however, this compromise fell apart. Johnson had earned the irrevocable anger of the CIO, and they flatly refused to join any organization in which he was Secretary-Treasurer. Moreover, he'd lost Reuben's confidence as well. Though he remained publicly supportive, Soderstrom acknowledged privately that he no longer viewed Johnson as an appropriate successor.⁴⁸¹ However, he also knew there was no viable alternative, at least in the moment. Even if Johnson was deeply flawed, Maurice, plagued by the alcoholism that would soon end his life, was not a suitable second. Even if McElligott was untroubled, abandoning Stanley for a CIO man would likely send the already profoundly skeptical ISFL into full-fledged revolt. For months the question hung heavy around Reuben's neck—who would he choose as his successor?

The answer, ultimately, was deceptively simple: no one. Instead, Reuben redefined the role of Executive Vice

President as the no. 2 role in leadership, and offered Johnson the Executive VP role instead. In a situation with no good options, it was a clever move. Johnson and the ISFL could still credibly claim the number two position, saving face, and gave the originally ill-defined office a clear purpose. As the final agreement outlined, “The President could assign duties to the newly-created office of Executive Vice-President, which in his estimation would best enable the new State Body to function effectively.”⁴⁸² The CIO, meanwhile, would hold the more established position, giving them an eventual legitimate claim to the presidency post-merger. Confusion, in this case, worked to everyone’s advantage, allowing all parties to walk back from the brink. As long as Reuben remained unquestionably in charge, the CIO would fall in line—for the moment.

Finally, on Saturday, August 9, 1958, the ISFL and Illinois CIO agreed to terms. McFetridge made the announcement, proudly touting the “complete understanding” that had been reached. Both groups would meet separately in Peoria on October 6 to vote on the merger and new constitution, immediately followed by the first ever convention of the Illinois Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations. McFetridge proudly proclaimed that “More than 2½ years of negotiations ended in the tentative merger today of Illinois’ central organizations of the AFL and CIO into one giant body...The merger will give us unanimity of thought and action. It will bring our thinking together on legislative, political and organizational matters.”⁴⁸³ Joe Germano told reporters the new organization would prove “the most powerful organized group of people in the world, working for the best interests of all people.”⁴⁸⁴ Supporters of labor likewise offered messages of congratulations. As U.S. Senator Paul Douglas told the reunited organization that October, “This is an event for which I have long waited. For now that you are united, you can spend your energies in organizing the still unorganized and taking manfully your rightful places as responsible and concerned citizens of our great society.”⁴⁸⁵

Still, many—particularly within the ISFL—were less than pleased with the deal. Such dissatisfaction came into full public view at the ISFL convention that October. “A reluctant unity characterized the new organization,” reported the *Decatur Daily Review*. With its last official breath, the old Illinois State Federation of Labor “approved the agreement with something less than enthusiasm...A spokesman said the dissent volume at the federation meeting almost matched that of approval.”⁴⁸⁶ “If we don’t agree here on merging, the national AFL-CIO will force us into a shotgun wedding,” another glum ISFL delegate told the *Decatur* journalist, “so we have to go along with the project.”⁴⁸⁷ Even Reuben himself seemed muted; as the *Edwardsville Intelligencer* noted:

The long-delayed merger was completed late Monday, but not without signs of dissatisfaction on the part of the larger state Federation. The ISFL approved the merger agreement in a voice vote in which many “no’s” could be heard, although only one iron worker identified himself and asked the record show his opposition. ISFL President R.G. Soderstrom, who also becomes head of the merged labor movement, said of the apparent half-hearted approval of the merger by the ISFL: “It doesn’t matter if they didn’t vote heartily; it has to be.”⁴⁸⁸

A New Leader for a New Age

While the press made hay of ISFL-CIO drama, it also found itself enamored with unified labor’s new leader, Reuben Soderstrom. Reporters and editors across the state told Soderstrom’s improbable journey from child laborer to one of most powerful men in Illinois with renewed interest. Again from the *Decatur Daily Review*:

Reuben G. Soderstrom, a glassblower at 12, became today at 70 the first president of a merged Illinois labor organization representing 1,200,000 workers...In his career as labor leader and state representative he served in the General Assembly for 16 years. Soderstrom guided into law most of the labor legislation now on the books in Illinois...Soderstrom is a Minnesotan, born in Wright County, but he came to Streator at 12 to live with an aunt. He first was a bottle blower in a Streator glass factory, but then turned to the printing trade. In 1910, he

did what he calls “a magnificent act”—he joined Streator Local 8, International Typographical Union. He still belongs. A Republican, he was elected to the first of his eight terms in the General Assembly in 1918.⁴⁸⁹

Reuben’s hometown paper gave a glowing account of Streator’s favorite son, writing:

Soderstrom, now president of the AFL state group, as head of the merged organizations will become one of the most important labor figures in the Midwest. A former Times-Press linotype operator, and a state representative of the 39th senatorial district for many terms, Soderstrom became president of the state federation in 1930, and has since served in that capacity. His son, Carl W. Soderstrom is now serving in the legislature in the seat occupied for so many years by his father.⁴⁹⁰

By the start of the first annual ISFL-CIO convention Reuben was full of bounding energy. This was a great moment for labor, and Soderstrom had emerged from the interminable talks with his authority not only preserved, but enhanced. Soderstrom called the reunification of organized labor in Illinois “the greatest step ever taken by the state’s working people.”⁴⁹¹ He knew there were many obstacles ahead, particularly with regards to healing the animosity that had built between members of the ISFL and CIO. Years prior, Soderstrom had described it as a near-religious struggle:

The labor union, its philosophy at least, is almost a religion. Perhaps it might be apropos to use this illustration, of all the hatreds that show the savage brutality of man I think that religious hatred is the worst. And of all the religious hatred, the hatred between two branches of the same faith is always the most bitter. Now, if this federation of labor is to be split in two permanently, I say to you it will create the same feeling of bitterness between unskilled worker and the skilled workers that is to be found in the religious war when two branches of the same faith start quarreling.⁴⁹²

Now after more than 20 years of separation these two rival faiths were again in communion under Reub’s pontificate. With a massive audience of 1,900 AFL delegates and 800 CIO delegates in attendance, President Soderstrom bid farewell to the existing federation by ushering in a new and exciting era. Humbly accepting the Presidency amid thunderous applause, he promised to all in attendance:

The Illinois State Federation of Labor and the Industrial Union Council of Illinois, united, becomes the largest group of people in this state. To be selected as its first President is, indeed, a great privilege, and I regard it as a very high honor. Lack of unity in the labor movement is a great hazard to working people. It is a hazard in the legislative field, and definitely a great hazard in the economic field. The unity attained here this morning is the greatest step forward ever taken by working people in this State. For more than twenty years we failed to fully cooperate with each other. In fact, there were times when raiding and other menacing activities were designed to harass and destroy each other.

All of that is history and belongs in the past. From here on out we are united. We are going to work together to help each other to secure better wages, better hours, better working conditions in every craft, in every plant, in every factory, in every industry throughout this great State... The aims and purposes and objectives of the united labor movement are to make life more bearable for all of our working people, including working people. We have, in Illinois, the happiest and freest and most enlightened wage earners in America, and we want to keep it that way....Now in a spirit of friendliness and gratefulness and in a spirit of deep humility I want to accept the responsibility of the presidency on the State level of this merged organization...In this connection I desire to make this further pledge—with respect to my own faithfulness to the fundamental principles and to the highest aspiration of labor and the labor movement—I want to here voluntarily pledge to you, and through you to the men of labor, and the women of toil, and to the children, too, who are to take our places as they grow, that there will be neither a wrongful nor 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 am permitted to remain your President.⁴⁹³

It was a new age, and the energetic, 70-year-old Reuben stood ready to lead it.

CHAPTER 48

1959

REUBEN DEFEATS ANTI-PICKETING EFFORTS

“The heart of American labor is sound and strong, and may I say the American working people have shown a finer sense of statesmanship than the people who sit around in country clubs and on golf courses, and are always critical of the benefits labor receives. I have been in public office long enough to know that what is good for labor is good for Illinois.”

-Reuben Soderstrom, First Annual ISFL-CIO convention, 1958

AN ACTIVE FAMILY IN STREATOR

It was a “zestful event,” according to the local press. Months of harsh Midwestern winter had briefly relented, and the residents of Streator wasted no time taking advantage of the late February sunshine by touring the new springtime store fronts. It was no meager occasion; ever since L. Frank Baum (the clever salesman who later authored the fantastical *Wizard of Oz*) first transformed the practice at the turn of the century, the reveal of elaborate and expansive window dressings had become a fanciful affair, a heady mix of celebration and show for every local community. Reuben’s home was no exception, and the bustling town which inspired “Streator on Saturday Night” marked the mercantile holiday in style. As the *Streator Times-Press* reported:

Lured to the downtown area by the promise of a glimpse into Spring, men, women, and children literally thronged the streets Friday evening for the unveiling of the store windows. Each window reflected an artisanship, in which a touch of Hollywood atmosphere gave a colorful tone to the opening of a week-long salute to the gay season, anxiously anticipated by all. Mother Nature co-operated by providing a lovely spring-like Friday afternoon and a clear, brisk evening which stimulated shoppers to get to town early in anticipation of a preview of spring finery as well as new ideas for home furnishings and interior and exterior decorating. Merchants added floral displays to their window trims which provided that extra special touch which whets the viewers’ appetites for the sparkling new and lovely merchandise which is always associated with springtime and Easter. Store interiors were equally inviting and many took the opportunity to study the lovely wares with the idea of planning Spring wardrobes as well as additions to the home. Potential car-buyers were also in the viewing group. Streator merchants are to be congratulated for their effort to grapple with the winter blues and to provide that mental mood for the “Swing into Spring.”⁴⁹⁴

Reuben joined the boisterous crowd, shaking hands and enjoying the storefront art with his daughter Jeannie, the Merriners, Carl and Virginia, and the whole mess of grandkids, Carl Jr, Ginny, Bob, Jane and Bill. It was a happy time. Jeannie, who began her teaching career in a one-room county schoolhouse, had risen to a position of prominence in the Streator school system. After more than a decade teaching at the Grant and Garfield elementary schools and serving as art supervisor for the entire elementary system, she had accepted a post as girls’ counselor and teacher of social studies at the Streator Township High School.⁴⁹⁵ Already possessing a Master of Arts, she had begun to pursue a second Masters in Counseling.⁴⁹⁶ All the while, “Sister” (as the family called her) had become Reuben’s homemaker and constant companion, helping to fill the

loneliness he'd felt since his wife's death.

It was in this role that Jeannie accompanied her father to the reception held in honor of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip at the Conrad Hilton on July 6 of that year. After a “proud, tumultuous” visit to Chicago’s “lusty metropolis” with over a half-million cheering fans and spectators lining the streets, the royal couple retreated to a private state dinner with 1,400 hand-picked guests, including Reub.⁴⁹⁷ They were a dynamic couple, the Queen “radiant in a stunning evening gown and wearing a diamond tiara” and the Prince “a glamour boy—tall, trim, blond and handsome.”⁴⁹⁸ As the dinner wound to a close, the Prince—who had earned a reputation as a “sponge for information, especially on details of technical operations,” took Reuben aside and spoke with him at length, a conversation that did not go unnoticed by the press. As the labor leader left the dining hall, reporters crowded around him, clamoring to know what the two had talked about. Reub, however, refused to give comment, keeping the details of their conversation private.⁴⁹⁹

Reub’s son Carl Sr., continued serving as a Representative in Illinois’s 39th district. He was the recognized voice for labor in the House, a Republican respected on both sides of the aisle. Reuben’s grandson, Carl Jr., now a High School junior, also proved a font of pride and promise, earning high honors that year for his academic achievements in addition to working late shifts at the A&P grocery store.⁵⁰⁰ 17-year-old Carl also shared his grandfather’s affinity for boxing, delighting in their trips to the local Armory, which Reub had financed as a legislator, to watch the Golden Gloves amid the fans’ heavy cigar smoke. Together that summer the Soderstrom men thrilled at the exploits of Swedish boxer Ingemar Johansson, the famed “Hammer of Thor,” as he took on heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson in the fight of a lifetime. The three huddled in Reub’s living room with rapt attention, ears pealed to the radio as Johansson, after spending the first two rounds in retreat, drilled Patterson with a short, powerful right to the chin, sending the 5-1 favorite to the ground for the first of six times as Ingemar took the title in a stunning upset victory. The Soderstroms celebrated with cheers and a feast of sardines; as Carl Jr. later described, “It was like the Vikings had invaded America!”⁵⁰¹

Reuben’s mother, the family matriarch Anna Soderstrom, had been in declining health for the last several years, living with Reuben’s sister Olga in Kankakee. Recently, Olga had placed her mother in the care of Mrs. Hermling, who ran a local nursing home capable of providing proper support for the now invalid Anna. Despite receiving excellent treatment, their mother’s health continued to deteriorate. To make matters worse, the Soderstroms faced increasing legal troubles regarding her care. In early 1958 the Illinois Department of Public Health tried to withhold licensing from Mrs. Hermling until she completed a series of home upgrades, but refused to confirm whether the expensive work would in fact secure a license. Reuben went to the department’s director on her behalf, writing in part:

Mrs. Hermling...has consulted with contractors but is waiting for assurances from the State Department that the license will be issued to her when the work is done...Please know I drop over to Kankakee every Sunday afternoon to visit with my Mother. She is 92 years of age and her doctors have informed me that she could not have survived this long if it wasn't for the devoted care given her by Mrs. Hermling and provided for her by the attendants in this nursing home...Mrs. Hermling is a high-grade person and her nursing home is giving eminent satisfaction to both the patients and those who are concerned about her patients. I am addressing this letter to you in the hope you will find it agreeable and consistent to issue Mrs. Hermling with a license when the alterations and improvements which are contemplated are complete.⁵⁰²

Even more troubling were the problems Reuben faced with the Internal Revenue Service. Reub assumed the full cost of care for his mother—\$250 per month for housing, medicines and doctor bills—and it wasn’t long before the IRS began harassing him over the expense. Year after year they issued audits of Soderstrom’s finances, with one agent after another checking his returns (“they must not have trusted their own agents,”

Reub joked to his sister).⁵⁰³ After five years of this, Reuben had learned to endure the constant mistrust and suspicion, carefully keeping receipts for every dollar. With a modest income and modest home, he had nothing to hide.

CORRUPTION, CONVENTION AND LEGISLATION

Protecting Labor's Image

The withering government scrutiny directed at Reuben likely had to do with a now widespread suspicion of labor leaders like himself, who were relentlessly portrayed in the media as racketeers. The Senate Select Committee on Improper Activities in Labor and Management (commonly known as the McClellan Committee) had recently uncovered real corruption that only served to further this narrative, giving cover to labor's enemies and forcing even its friends to keep their distance. At the Illinois AFL-CIO convention that year, Soderstrom ally and U.S. Senator Paul Douglas spoke at length about how labor must purge corruption from its ranks. He admonished the crowd:

We of organized labor have got to clean house. Don't let the Becks, Hoffas and Glimcos wrap the flag of decent unionism around them and drag you down to destruction...There has been a mistaken attitude expressed by some unionists that, so long as this kind of leadership gets good contracts from employers, it is of little concern what kind of ethics the leaders have—they're all right if they can "bring home the bacon." That kind of an attitude already has hurt the cause of labor, and if persisted in can hurt a lot more.⁵⁰⁴

Of course, the Senator also denounced efforts to attack unions that simply used such scandals for cover, warning "In the guise of fighting corruption, non-union forces in the country are making a drive against unions in general." Still, the papers the following morning focused on the Senator's "tough talk" with headlines like "Unions Must Eliminate Hoodlums."⁵⁰⁵

Even the delegates themselves made removing the stain of corruption a focal point of the convention. During the week-long meeting that September, the Illinois AFL-CIO voted to request that the national Executive Council make any readmission of the Teamsters, Bakery and Confectionery Workers, or the Laundry Cleaning and Dye House Workers—unions that had all been expelled for corrupt practices in 1957—contingent upon proof of an end to their "corrupt influences."⁵⁰⁶ The tenor of the entire conference was subdued. Reuben described it as a "working conference," with money normally spent on dinners and entertainment instead going to striking steelworkers.⁵⁰⁷ These efforts won some positive press; columnist O.T. Banton praised Illinois unions' work, writing "the Teamsters Union will not be invited back into the fold of the AFL-CIO until it cleans house of its bad leadership, if the national labor convention follows the advice of the Illinois membership."⁵⁰⁸ Still, none of these actions challenged the idea that organized labor was rife with corruption and in desperate need of reform.

That, however, was exactly the fight Reub was eager to wage. While he detested corruption in any form, he was fed up with the intense focus on labor's sins, paired with a blind eye towards corrupt practices in business. In a series of speeches throughout the state that year, Soderstrom pounded the press for their unfair and unbalanced coverage. By the time of the convention, the formidable orator had refined this call to near perfection, declaring to the delegates, press, and public alike in his presidential address:

I wish to say a word about the criticism leveled at organized labor. A good deal has been said in the public press about what is wrong in the world of labor. Corruption in the labor-management field has been dramatized with unions receiving most of the bad newspaper publicity. For every crook in the labor world, there is at least one crooked employer. The public press has deliberately exposed the corruption in some unions but have at the

same time shielded the employer whose money and tampering with labor officials caused the corruption.

On this occasion, I wish to say a word to the whole wide world about what is right in the activities of our unions. I want to emphasize what decent, honorable, dedicated men of labor are doing day and night, week after week and months on end for their members, for their fellow citizens, for these United States and the cause of freedom throughout a dangerously troubled world.

One admirable feature about the labor movement is the fact that it has provided for tens of thousands of inarticulate wage-earners an agency in which to pound out policies and programs for human betterment. Unions have made the word “Democracy” mean something worthwhile. They have made citizenship and the use of the ballot in our country a badge of honor; their teachings have made the right to petition for reform, for a better day, and a better world not only a public function but a public duty which must not be disregarded. Labor unions of Illinois have pooled their efforts through the State AFL-CIO and have used their combined strength in the legislative halls in pursuit of the general welfare of both the organized and unorganized alike...

...In our legislative halls, the labor movement has attained an enormous prestige. It has taken the lead in securing laws beneficial to all of our citizens—such as pensions for the blind, pensions for widowed mothers and orphans, assistance for the aged, for the injured in industry, for the unemployed. It has supported health benefits for retired people, eight-hour laws, public housing and slum clearance, aid to education, civil rights for all, and dozens of other progressive measures and objectives.

That’s why on this occasion wage-earners should all be proud to be a part of this great movement of labor. By displaying pride and loyalty to ourselves it will attract others to us who will become pro-labor. All men and women of good will are needed on our side. We want those who believe in liberty, world peace and the Great Ruler above to become pro-labor and join with us in establishing equality, peace on earth and a perfect triumph of the Brotherhood of all mankind.

There may be a few things wrong with organized labor but there are a million things that are right and we must not let newspapers or any other enemy of labor interfere with the progress the labor movement can make in the future – progress which really should surpass the advancement we have made in days gone by!⁵⁰⁹

Reuben’s message was clear: unions didn’t need to hide or hang their heads in shame; labor should hold its head high! He had little time for those who sought to attack hard-working men and women, and even less respect for those who did so using what he considered to be unearned gains. As he wrote in his *Weekly Newsletter* that year:

To read the statements of the Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers you’d think that American workingmen and women have been riding the gravy train through “soft” wage boosts for the past twenty years while the investor has been starving. But how about this “gravy train?” *Barrons*, the financial interests’ Bible, is currently boasting that if you had followed its advice and invested \$51,000 on certain stocks in 1925, this is how you would have profited: Your \$51,000 would now be worth \$381,000 for a gain of more than 600 percent. Your average annual income for the entire 34 years would have been more than \$8,000 for a total of \$262,000. And your 1958 income would have been \$13,729. All without having to lift a finger!⁵¹⁰

These wealthy manufacturers and financiers could never understand labor, Soderstrom continued, because they failed to understand that unionism was not fundamentally about money or wages; it was about dignity:

Research students who sought to learn why workers joined a union often found that the desire to get higher

wages and shorter hours sometimes was secondary to the worker's desire for recognition, for what is called status. Over two decades ago, the organizers of the United Auto Workers Union soon learned that the resentment engendered by the oppressiveness of the supervision and close surveillance which was exercised at a certain plant at that time was more conducive to joining the union than expectation of wage increases. Another persuasive reason why workers joined a union was protection against favoritism by management. Through the union they knew they would get a square deal, that their seniority would be protected and that they would not have to worry when they went to work whether they would have a job because the employer wanted a younger man or a friend for the job...⁵¹¹

Increased wages and benefits, while important, were only means to an end. Those unable to understand this, Soderstrom maintained, failed to grasp the meaning of organized labor. It was the pursuit of recognition, community, and fairness—the pursuit of dignity—that gave unionism its essential character and mission.

Anti-Picketing, Round Two

Anti-union forces, however, continued their march. The National Association of Manufacturers and its allies made gains in Washington with the passage of the Landrum-Griffin Act. This bill, ostensibly created to lessen coercion of union members by, among other things, requiring secret elections of labor officials, was laced with poison pills meant to tie-up labor. According to Senator Douglas, a “coalition of Republicans and Southern Democrats who want to keep unions from becoming strong in the South and the plains states” had forced into the bill provisions “aimed at the weak and struggling unions, and at the legitimate activities of stronger unions.”⁵¹² While the worst of these, Douglas claimed, were largely limited and/or modified by Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy's conference committee, Reuben was far from pleased with the outcome. As he told the Carpenters at their annual conference:

In Washington, D.C. on the national level, labor was hurt badly and much bad legislation has been enacted. 156 Democrats in Congress voted for the Griffin-Landrum Bill and 147 Republicans voted for this anti-union legislation. What labor believed to be the most liberal Congress in 23 years has turned out to be the most reactionary . . . I don't know what is wrong in Washington. Perhaps the lobbying was poorly handled. At any rate, I know that the same type of anti-union legislation was introduced in the General Assembly of Illinois and we met the situation by presenting constitutional arguments.⁵¹³

The legislation to which Reuben was referring was actually a series of eight bills introduced by the Illinois Manufacturers' Association, Illinois State Chamber of Commerce, Illinois Retailers Association, and more. These proposed acts called for a wide range of anti-labor measures, from the creation of a “Little McClellan Commission” to forced union litigation facilitation to the reduction in compulsory school age.⁵¹⁴ Without a doubt, however, the worst of these was the anti-picketing bill.

Originally introduced in the 1957 General Assembly, the offensive effort to outlaw peaceful organizational picketing first met ignominious defeat in a rowdy series of hearings orchestrated by Reuben, who defeated it both in committee and in the broader House. Soderstrom assumed that he'd seen the last of the bill after such a humiliating loss, and for most of the 1959 legislative session the proposed act remained far from sight. That May, however, representative Widmer (the bill's author) worked closely with the Illinois Chamber of Commerce to coordinate a slick media-savvy re-introduction of the bill in the General Assembly. On May 9, Widmer re-introduced his bill with less than two months to go in the session; the following day, news stories began to appear describing a grassroots campaign headed by the 84-organization strong “Inter-Organization Council for Anti-Racket Picketing Legislation.” This group clamored to bypass the normal legislative process, claiming there was no time to get bogged down in committee. In a meeting orchestrated by the State Chamber of Commerce at the Galesburg Hotel Custer on Thursday, May 14, the organization called on

businessmen across the state to “contact their representatives and to be present in Springfield Tuesday May 19” when Widmer planned to enter a motion in the full House to fast-track the bill out of the Industry and Labor Relations Committee and on to a general vote⁵¹⁵ The plan was to pack the galleries in a show of force that would intimidate their opponents and demonstrate broad support.

This image of a wide-ranging, grassroots campaign was mostly smoke and mirrors. The 84 organizations that Widmer touted were almost all local chapters of the Illinois State Chamber of Commerce—the same organization that had arranged the hotel meeting and bankrolled the blitz—along with the usual short list of labor enemies. Reuben wasted no time mounting a counter-campaign, talking to the press and denouncing Widmer’s House Bill 1202 as tyrannical legislation:

Oppressive and restrictive laws have no place in the United States. Ours is a constitutional democracy and our basic document binds and guides and controls our laws and protects our citizens. This is not true in communistic or dictatorship autocracies. Peaceful picketing is denied in East Berlin, Hungary and Russia...

House Bill 1202 is definitely an anti-labor bill. It is designed to clothe tyranny in the forms of law and legality. Peaceful picketing is legal, constitutional, and an established form of free speech. It is a proper exercise of American liberty, freedom and equality. This is the position of the Supreme Court of the United States.⁵¹⁶

Soderstrom wasn’t about to let Widmer get his way. He worked the representatives with his trademark mix of charm and threat, reminding them that the last election “clearly demonstrated that kicking labor in the teeth does not pay off in votes. There are fewer enemies of labor in the Illinois General Assembly today than there were before the General Election of 1958.”⁵¹⁷ When Widmer made his motion the following Tuesday, his son Carl led the fight from the floor, calling the bill “the product of reactionary elements in the Republican Party... ‘racket picketing’ is a phrase dreamed up by an advertising man.” If you outlaw peaceful picketing, he warned, then you “might as well outlaw the whole labor movement.” When his comments met with jeers from the Chamber of Commerce men packing the room, Carl took them head on, shaking his head in mock surprise and responding with a pitch-perfect mixture of shame and anger that “it shocks me to see so many so willing to try to take this right away from a great segment of society.”⁵¹⁸ Widmer’s motion failed by a vote of 84-79.

It was a victory, but a narrow one, and the toughest battle was yet to come. While the House had refused to fast-track the bill, the Committee still had to rule on the measure itself, and Reuben was far from certain about the outcome. As he wrote to friend and ally Representative Warren Wood:

The test vote on H.B. No. 1202 indicates it can be stopped on the House floor. The proponents were ten votes short last Tuesday, May 19, and that margin will be greater when, and if, the House members are called upon to vote again directly upon the bill itself. However, the Labor and Industrial Relations Committee is about evenly divided. Labor may, or may not, succeed in defeating this proposal at the hearing on the afternoon of May 26.⁵¹⁹

Reuben knew how to count votes, and he realized that he was at the end of his influence. As it stood, he couldn’t secure a majority of the full committee. The wily Soderstrom, however, had a trick up his sleeve. He knew that he didn’t need a majority of the committee on his side; he simply required a majority of the members *present*. That’s where Wood, a member of the Republican leadership, came in. Wood and several of his colleagues didn’t want an open vote on the House floor any more than Reuben; many Republicans still hailed from labor-friendly districts, and such a vote would force them to act against the majority of their party (and face the Chamber’s wrath) or vote against the working men and women who put them into office. Reuben pressed his advantage, telling Wood:

Because you displayed concern about the utterly unjustifiable Chamber of Commerce procedure of putting yourself and all other Republicans in the embarrassing position of fighting to weaken the Bill of Rights, it occurred to me that a suggestion might be helpful. One solution would be to prevail upon at least two leading Republican members of the Committee on Industry and Labor Relations to stay away from the hearing. I think it should be the two *ex-officio* members. This would kill H.B. No. 1202 in Committee. If this does not occur, then of course, it will come out for another House floor roll call. I don't think it can pass the House and I don't think such frenzied anti-union conduct will do the Republicans any good. It couldn't do the Republican Party anything but harm even if it was enacted.

This is a *sub-rosa* suggestion from one friend to another. It seems a shame that political rejects, like Joe Meek and his ilk, should be permitted to continue to crucify the great party of Abraham Lincoln by shoving its legislative leaders into meaningless conflicts with wage-earners.⁵²⁰

Such backroom “*sub-rosa* suggestions” were Reuben’s specialty. Soderstrom wasn’t shy about the fact that it was his understanding of the legislature’s procedure as well as the men and women who occupied it that made him so effective. In the words of Lieutenant Governor John W. Chapman, spoken to the delegates of the 1959 Illinois AFL-CIO Convention:

Let me tell you how your president operates. He calls me from time to time, along with many others he calls upon. We exchange a few words of friendly greeting, a word or two about the weather, and some more on how busy the legislature is. Then he will tell me in that friendly way of his that he has a little problem. He is sure he can work the problem out if I will just refrain from calling a certain bill for a short while. He makes you feel you are doing him a real favor, when actually what he asks you, you are only too glad to do in order to help facilitate the legislative process. I assure him I will try to postpone the calling of the bill, and usually I find that in a few weeks he and his associates have worked out a satisfactory understanding with those who are either opposing a bill they are for, or are supporting a bill they are against. He has performed a service for labor; he has performed a service for the legislature; and he has performed a service for the public.⁵²¹

Although Soderstrom had done all he could to prepare the field in his favor, the battle itself was a long, tough slog. For over five hours, officials on both sides gave testimony and took questions from committee members. Widmer brought in a bevy of experts from the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association, the Illinois State Chamber of Commerce, and the Illinois Retail Merchants Association. Their testimonies were uniformly long on hyperbole and short on facts. Thomas Meek, failed politician and founder of the IRMA, lamented that small businesses were forced to pay tribute to union organizers who “use fear as a weapon.”⁵²² The State Chamber trotted out Carl Eckhardt, a service station operator in Morton Grove, who testified that he’d been picketed for three years because he refused to sign a union contract.⁵²³ The most inflammatory remarks came from Widmer himself, who charged that labor had had two years to “clean their own skirts” and failed. “Nothing has been done about it. In fact, racket picketing has become even more detrimental.”⁵²⁴

Reuben again led the forces against the bill. In answer to Widmer’s assault he defiantly pointed to a detailed list of AFL-CIO actions taken to curb corruption, including the expulsion of the Teamsters, the Laundry Workers, the Bakers, and the Longshoremen’s unions, contemptuously replying “I submit that is housecleaning.”⁵²⁵ He accused his opponents of making a direct attack on the freedom of the Illinois worker, testifying that:

The members of the Illinois Chamber of Commerce in their trusts and in their combinations and seventy-eight other interlocking financial institutions, have declared war upon the wage earners of Illinois in an effort to drive back and kill the spirit of freedom which flames in the hearts and minds of the working people of this great

state. We want to continue to speak for the poor and the needy, for a better minimum wage, for better housing, and for racial equality. It seems to me that House Bill 1202 would interfere with our right to do so. It interferes with our civil liberties, as well as our constitutional guarantees and is therefore a thoroughly bad bill. It ought to be defeated.⁵²⁶

Soderstrom continued, warning that the passage of such legislation could “touch off a wave of wildcat sit down and slowdown strikes” and would “disturb the splendid relations between labor and management.”⁵²⁷ As for the poor, put-upon Carl Eckhardt, Reuben’s attorney Lester Asher revealed in his testimony that the Master-in-Chancery had found that the service station operator had repeatedly threatened his employees, promising retaliation if they joined a union.⁵²⁸ In the end Reuben and his allies defeated the bill by a vote of 22-18, with a crucial six Republicans absent or abstaining from the vote.⁵²⁹

While Soderstrom won decisively in the General Assembly, he took a beating for his efforts in the press. News coverage of the session was notoriously one-sided; many papers gave detailed accounts of Eckhardt’s testimony, for example, but few of them reported the findings of intimidation. The *Alton Telegraph* editorial board came out in favor of a renewed push for Widmer’s law just days after its defeat, declaring “The strength behind (the anti-picketing bill) is growing from session to session.”⁵³⁰ The *Chicago Sun*, meanwhile, ran an editorial accusing President Soderstrom of “pulling a Hoffa,” i.e. threatening a statewide strike. Executive Vice President Stanley Johnson defended Reub against the ridiculous charge, noting that in 78 years the state federation had *never* called a strike, nor encouraged any affiliate to engage in strike action. Johnson went on to write:

Anyone active in civic, labor, education and welfare work in Illinois, knows the attributes and dedication to the ideals of America which the man has lived during his lifetime. Certainly he is recognized as a fighter with courage when volatile criticism circled about him in the midst of controversy. But no one has ever charged him with a lack of integrity. A leader worthy of the name is always a lonely target. The writer will place President Soderstrom alongside any newspaperman and legislator of this state and “Reub” will not suffer by comparison.⁵³¹

While they had little effect on the immediate outcome, the mischaracterization and slander that Soderstrom endured in the press over the anti-picketing fight was indicative of the larger struggle unions faced in the popular media, and only further confirmed Reuben’s conviction that organized labor had to view the press as potentially as hostile as the organizations representing manufacturing and retail interests. He concluded in his Labor Day address that year, “We must not let biased newspapers or any other enemy of labor interfere with the progress the labor movement can make in the future—progress which really should surpass the advancement we have made in days gone by.”⁵³²

REUBEN’S MOTHER DIES AT AGE 94

With the burden of the 1959 legislative season finally behind him, Reuben began to prepare for the year’s end with the usual lightness that typically affected him after a rough session. Together with his daughter he departed on their customary summer trip to Duluth, Minnesota, both to visit the home of his youth and to escape the Illinois hay fever season. On the drive up (and it was always a drive, as Reuben refused to fly on a vacation) he would practice his convention speech with Sister, who would help him refine the rhetorical details.⁵³³ It was a ritual he treasured, a certainty that kept him sane during the long days in Springfield.

After the convention that September, Reuben was given a special assignment. AFL-CIO President Meany wanted to hold a Nationwide State Organization Meeting at the start of 1960 to discuss “methods for strengthening the existing cooperation between the national AFL-CIO and its central bodies...(and) explore

areas and techniques for expansion of our mutual efforts.”⁵³⁴ It would be a massive and inherently complicated affair, with presidents and secretaries of state and central bodies across the nation descending on the AFL-CIO’s Washington, D.C. headquarters. Meany immediately called upon Soderstrom, the most respected of all state organization presidents, to help him plan and prepare for it. That first week of December, Reuben left for Washington, handing off his normal duties and planned appearances to his Executive Vice President Stanley Johnston.⁵³⁵

The day after he arrived, however, Reuben received sad news: his mother, Anna Soderstrom, had passed in the night at the age of 94. Reuben was heartbroken; upon returning to Illinois he quickly made his way to Kankakee to grieve with the family. Father Donahue raced to Reuben’s side, giving him spiritual support and comfort. Once more, Reuben took up his pen to write the obituary of a loved one, a family member who had meant the world to him:

The beloved Mother of President Reuben G. Soderstrom passed away on Saturday, December 5, 1959.

Mrs. Anna G. Soderstrom was active in community and civic affairs in the city of Streator, Illinois, until she became ill at the age of 89. Her particular interest was in the American Legion Auxiliary – Leslie G. Wood, Post 217. Her interest and devotion in helping people and her community were continued up until the time when illness prevented her active participation. For the past five years she had been confined to either her home or the hospital. She lived ninety-four years.

Her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren can well be proud of this great woman who devoted herself to her family and the needs of others for three-quarters of a century. The Soderstrom family was blessed in enjoying and being guided by such an example of family and community life as embodied in Mrs. Soderstrom for so many years. We know that her children and all of her family will have the blow of her passing softened by the remembrance of such a dedicated Mother, Grandmother, and Great-Grandmother.⁵³⁶

Letters of sympathy and support quickly came in from all corners. The handwritten note from Mr. Aaron Aronin, Field Direct of the Jewish Labor Committee, was a fine example:

Dear Rube:

I read about the passing of your beloved mother. While she lived a long, wonderful life, I know how difficult it is for even adult children to understand and accept this act of God. God blessed her with wonderful children and grandchildren. I know from Stan that you were always a most devoted son. My sympathy to all the bereaved.

In fraternity,
Archie⁵³⁷

After losing so many that were so dear to him—baby brother Alexander, his father, his infant son Robert, brothers Lafe and Paul, and his dear wife Jeanne—Reuben now said goodbye to his mother.

Despite this loss, by year’s end, Reuben was looking not behind but forward. There was much left to accomplish, and the successes he’d already wrought filled him with the unbounded optimism that defined both him and the age he occupied. He truly believed in the possibility of industrial peace, and he remained committed to seeing it through in his lifetime. As he wrote in his remarks for the University of Illinois Industrial Relations Institute Central Body Conference that December:

The legislative role of labor in Illinois, in a word, is to build a land without oppression, a land without tyrannical legislation, a land without greedy industrial overlords, a land radiant and resplendent—a perfect triumph of the brotherhood of all mankind. Through organized labor that day will come, and I pray to the Great Ruler Above that it will come in our time.⁵³⁸



Top: Reuben Soderstrom and family at a testimonial dinner held in his honor by the Jewish Labor Committee in recognition of his work “establishing equality of all people” **Bottom:** Reuben is presented with an “Award of Merit” by JLC officer Morris Bialis as AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer William Schnitzler, center, looks on





Reuben with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Illinois AFL-CIO Convention, 1965



Reuben delivering a speech, 1954



Reuben with son Carl, 1957

Reuben Soderstrom with Illinois AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Bob Gibson (left) and Executive Vice President Stanley Johnson (right), 1964



Reuben gaveling in the 1966 Illinois AFL-CIO convention



Reuben leads President Lyndon Johnson to the Illinois AFL-CIO Convention stage, 1964



Reuben Soderstrom, 1967



Reuben's grandson, Carl Soderstrom, Jr., M.D., speaks at the statue unveiling during Reuben G. Soderstrom day in Streator, Illinois, on September 2, 2012

ERA VIII

1960-1970

CIVIL RIGHTS

IN THIS ERA

Reuben fights for civil rights. In 1961, he helps pass the Illinois Fair Employment Practices Act. In 1964, he welcomes the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to the state for the Illinois Rally for Civil Rights. The following year, he invites Dr. King to deliver the keynote address at the Illinois AFL-CIO annual convention. At Soderstrom's invitation, the Rev. Dr. Ralph Abernathy speaks at the convention in 1963 and again in 1969.

Soderstrom advances labor education. In 1962, he celebrates the dedication of the new Labor and Industrial Relations Building at the University of Illinois. In 1966, he is appointed to the Faculty of Labor of the Lincoln Academy of Illinois. In 1968, he is honored by the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations and the University of Illinois for his lifelong contributions to education.

Reuben's national influence expands. In 1962, he brings AFL-CIO President George Meany to Illinois to address the state's annual labor convention. In 1963, he is invited to the White House and given a personal tour by President Kennedy. He is called to the White House again in 1964 by President Johnson; later that year, the President of the United States travels to Illinois to speak at Soderstrom's annual convention.

Reuben maintains control over an increasingly fractious labor movement. In 1963, he nominates Robert Gibson to the post of Illinois AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer. He defends against challenges to his leadership in 1967 and 1968. He addresses racial tensions between the labor and civil rights movements. In 1969, an argument over hiring discrimination leads to a violent confrontation on the stage of the Illinois AFL-CIO annual convention.

Soderstrom confronts his own mortality. In 1967, his daughter, Jeanne, dies. In 1969, he is sent to the Mayo Clinic for abdominal surgery. In 1970, he suffers a stroke. Later that year he is named President Emeritus of the Illinois AFL-CIO.

“As I look back over the 70 years of labor history, when I think of the hours of toil that have been lessened, the wages that have been increased, and the working conditions that have been improved; when I think of the holidays and vacations with pay, pensions, group insurance and social benefits; when I think of the accidents that have been prevented and the lives that have been saved; when I think of the sum total of human misery that has been avoided and the happiness extended to millions of workers, I search my mind for words to describe the debt that we owe to the pioneers of the Illinois movement of labor—those who dared to dream of the future, while others were content to merely curse the darkness.”

-Reuben Soderstrom, Illinois AFL-CIO presidential address, 1967

CHAPTER 49

1960

SODERSTROM DENOUNCES PARTISANSHIP, QUESTIONS VICE- PRESIDENTIAL PICK

“It is conventional to say the future belongs to our unborn children, but the fact is it belongs to us. What we do today determines how the world shall go. Tomorrow is made up of the sum total of today’s experiences. No one knows what formula, nor how slight a change may reshape the pattern to our heart’s desire. Far from feeling hopeless or helpless we must seize every opportunity, however small, to help the world.”

-Reuben Soderstrom, Illinois AFL-CIO Convention, 1960

NATIONAL ROLE MODEL

Reuben Overcomes Local Resistance to Merger

Reuben hit the 1960’s running. Just days after the start of the New Year, Soderstrom left for Washington, D.C. to join the State Organization Conference (SOC), a massive gathering of State Organization officials called “for the purpose of discussing ways and means of strengthening the existing cooperation between National and State Organizations and also to explore the techniques for expansion of our future efforts.”⁵³⁹ While it sounded innocuous, the gathering was a high-stakes affair for Reuben personally as well as for organized labor as a whole. The AFL-CIO was facing a potential crisis in its national-state relations, and the 1960 conference, charged personally by President Meany to Soderstrom’s care, was the most comprehensive effort yet attempted to address the issue. Its success or failure would fall squarely on Reuben’s shoulders and its outcome could determine the fate of labor for decades to come.

The problem was long in coming. Five years after the national merger of the AFL and CIO, many state and local central bodies had yet to fully and properly merge. Several state organizations, including Reuben’s ISFL, had spent years arguing over often hotly contested details, a process that had left many scars and abiding rifts. Worse still, even in merged states several local central bodies remained separated, in open defiance of national and state mandates. Illinois was no exception to this rule; the Chicago Federation of Labor and Cook County Industrial Union Council, for example, had yet to come to terms despite the statewide merger over a year earlier.⁵⁴⁰

Even those bodies that were merged suffered from declining affiliations. The new AFL-CIO did not require a union to join their local and state federations; national unions were supposed to instruct their locals to affiliate, but there was no consequence if a local ignored this instruction. Consequently, many CIO-originated unions defected from their AFL-dominated state and central bodies. As Immanuel Ness and Stuart Eimer note in their history of the Central Labor Councils:

By 1959, the issue of affiliation with central bodies had reemerged as a point of contention...A delegate from the Michigan AFL-CIO indicated that he was tired of listening to national union presidents “give the most profound lip service to political action” while telling their local unions they could freeload on the backs of the local bodies that were responsible for carrying out political functions...He concluded by declaring “I am tired of freeloaders, not only the freeloader who comes into our shop and scabs and doesn’t pay his dues to the local union; I am kind of tired of the freeloaders who are riding on our backs, taking all the benefits our subordinate organizations give us and paying back nothing.”⁵⁴¹

Tempers were aflame; not since 1925 had anger and dissatisfaction among central body members run so high. Many state and local delegates wanted to make affiliation mandatory, an approach Meany staunchly resisted on the grounds that it violated union autonomy. In response, the 1959 AFL-CIO National Conference adopted a resolution recommending that Meany appoint a committee to work with the national body to increase affiliation, and that December the National President called upon his most seasoned state operator, Reuben Soderstrom, to help plan the massive conference to address the issue.⁵⁴² All eyes and hopes were on the Illinois President.

Reuben didn’t disappoint. The State Organization Conference (SOC) was a typical Soderstrom affair – inclusive in constitution and tightly orchestrated in action. Reuben personally arranged the agenda, with representatives from all the State Central Bodies listening to addresses by a parade of national officers and departmental directors.⁵⁴³ At the close of the conference, a small committee composed of legislative staff, a few select state officers, and Reuben himself gathered to formulate a clear and comprehensive proposal to address the crisis.

Soderstrom knew that any recommendation of mandatory affiliation would be dead on arrival, as federal and international unions would never give up their right to voluntary association. Instead, Reuben took a more subtle but effective approach; at the heart of his recommended reforms was an incorporation of state and local body interests into the national leadership structure, creating a permanent and empowered office representing state and local bodies within Washington. After a summary statement cautiously praising the work of the conference as a “profitable first step in the direction of developing closer relations...and creating better understanding” between the state and national bodies, Reuben gave his SOC’s assessment on how to fix the mess. First, he said, the AFL-CIO needed to create a Washington-based Department of Central Bodies charged with helping state and local organizations achieve “maximum affiliation.” He further called for a standing advisory committee of state and local bodies composed of the AFL-CIO President, the Director of COPE, the Legislative Director, the Director of Organization, and the Director of his proposed Department of Central Bodies. This Committee should also include an “adequate number of principle officers of state central bodies.” In return, central bodies would submit to greater national oversight, adopting a uniform annual reporting system to provide the national headquarters with information on income, expenditures, principle activities, affiliates, and unaffiliated locals. Finally, he wanted to make the SOC an annual affair, ensuring all state officials had a voice.⁵⁴⁴

It was a clever proposal, one that would integrate the central bodies more fully into the national AFL-CIO structure, making them more accountable while simultaneously granting them greater agency, all without surrendering the principle of voluntary affiliation. In response, President Meany created the new post of State and Central Bodies Coordinator, naming Tennessee State Federation President Stanton Smith to the post.⁵⁴⁵ Sadly, however, Soderstrom’s other recommendations were not acted on. Smith’s role as Coordinator was far inferior to the directorship Reub sought. The position was crafted as an additional role to be taken on by a sitting State President, rather than as a full-time Washington-based post in charge of a staffed and funded department. No regular forums were given to central body officials, nor were their representatives given a

voice on a standing advisory committee. Meanwhile, most supporters of state and local federations continued to push for mandatory affiliation, a futile struggle that largely ignored Reuben's more nuanced approach. Had Reuben's recommendations been pursued, the AFL-CIO may have been spared decades of strife and state and local decline. Still, the diluted reforms introduced in the wake of Soderstrom's efforts helped to ameliorate the damage; Smith's office brought renewed attention to the issue, and subsequent conventions used that office's findings to initiate new studies and positive reinforcement programs designed to encourage state and local affiliation.⁵⁴⁶

Defends Entitlements, Supports Political Unity and Action

While important, the State Organization Conference was far from Soderstrom's only national involvement that year. While in Washington for the SOC planning meeting, Reuben attended a Problems of the Aged Conference featuring Charles Schottland of Brandeis University, Nelson Cruickshank of the AFL-CIO, Eveline Burns of Columbia University, and Wilbur Cohen of the University of Michigan - four Social Security experts who, according to Reub, believed "Americans would soon be secure from cradle to grave." As he detailed in his article "Security for All" for the Illinois Carpenter and Builder later that year:

Experts agreed that during the next 10 to 25 years, Social Security pensions will increase at least 50 per cent...Medical and hospital care will be available to all Americans regardless of their ability to pay, probably through a combination of private and Social Security insurance programs. Unemployment benefits will be increased and extended far beyond the present maximum of 26 weeks and will not be cut off during a recession...Persons who are temporarily as well as permanently disabled not only will receive Social Security benefits but also will be rehabilitated and re-trained by the Government. Every family that does not have a wage earner will be aided by the Government as a matter of right rather than of charity. "We shall surely see medical care for the aged added before too long," Prof. Burns predicted, "and I cannot believe that within 25 years many people will not be asking why a policy that is good for those whose productive life is ended is not good also for children who are the producers of the future."⁵⁴⁷

Such optimistic predictions certainly excited Reuben; this was, after all, the security he had spent a lifetime fighting for. Care for the old, the sick, the disabled, and the unemployed had been central tenants of his political career, from his passage of widows' and orphans' pensions in his early days as a legislator through his championing of old age pensions and unemployment compensation at the height of the Great Depression to his expansion of occupational disease and workmen's compensation benefits as Illinois AFL-CIO President. Even more important to Reuben than the amount of these benefits was the principle of ownership—that these things were not gifts from industry but rights earned by and owed to workers, guaranteed in law and secured by government. To Soderstrom, "entitlement" was not a dirty word, but a holy one.

However, a lifetime of legislative fights had convinced the elder statesman it would take more than optimism or even moral certainty to secure these rights. It took legislative action, and labor's friends those days, in his estimation, were far too few. As he described in an address prepared for the University of Illinois Industrial Relations Institute's Central Body Conference:

The rough-riding, strike-breaking, union-busting employer organizations are planning more tyrannical legislation...President Eisenhower's signature had hardly been attached to the anti-union Landrum-Griffin bill before the cheering squads for the anti-unionists resumed their clamoring for further oppressive and restrictive legislation. The United States Chamber of Commerce, publicly gloating over the enactment of this unfair statute, which it forced through a spineless Congress, was not satisfied. These sadist representatives of the vested interests, sensing that the labor movement is reeling and staggering from the stab in the back inflicted by the Landrum-Griffin law, is now planning to close in for a finishing, fatal strangling blow. What other conclusion

can be drawn from the fact that the lackeys of the Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers and other union-hating groups in Congress who are barnstorming around the country shouting to all who will listen that the time has come to destroy the trade union movement—to finish the job?...

It is distressingly obvious that labor has been wasting time by depending upon our so-called friends in Congress, particularly the Senate, to save us because our real friends there can be counted on one hand, not including the little finger or thumb!⁵⁴⁸

Given such sentiment, it was likely with a heavy dose of skepticism that Reuben departed for the DC Willard Hotel for a three-day national legislative conference held by the AFL-CIO. The Conference, which began a mere two days after the close of the three-day SOC, focused on what Reub described as “a two-pronged legislative program—geared to winning congressional enactment of ‘enlightened public interest legislation’ and to heading off passage of further ‘unfair restrictive’ labor measures.”⁵⁴⁹ Over the next several days, Reub lobbied several Illinois members of Congress on labor’s agenda in Congress and heard from congressional leaders on their plans for the coming congressional session.

One of the biggest topics under discussion at the conference was the renewed focus on the Committee on Political Education (COPE). Established by the first AFL-CIO Constitutional Convention of 1955, COPE was a merger of the AFL’s Labor League for Political Education and the CIO’s Political Action Committee. It was constitutionally charged with “encouraging workers to register and vote, to exercise their full rights and responsibilities of citizenship and to perform their rightful part in the political life of the city, state, and national communities,” and was composed of local and state committees of AFL-CIO members as well as a National Committee overseen by Meany himself.⁵⁵⁰ In practical terms, COPE had three priorities: picking candidates, mobilizing voters, and raising cash—all vital elements if labor candidates had any hope of winning elections. As Soderstrom’s *Weekly Newsletter* described:

When a candidate for public office campaigns, he must pay for such things as TV and radio appearances, newspaper advertising, billboards, secretarial help, telephones, travel and a multitude of other things. In an overwhelming number of instances the only place where a labor endorsed candidate can get the money to pay the expenses is from working people themselves. For it is certain he won’t receive financial aid or other help from corporate executives.⁵⁵¹

While conservative interests decried COPE as “big labor” attempting to buy seats, the AFL-CIO was quick to respond that they were simply attempting to level the playing field. After all, as labor pointed out:

Eight families of enormous wealth contributed more money to candidates in the 1956 elections than the entire labor movement, with 16 million members. That is one good reason for the COPE Dollar Drive this year. Less than \$1 million of the \$33 million spent on campaigns in 1959 came from labor. Here’s the sad story: the Du Ponts, Pews, Rockefellers, Whitneys, Mellons, Vanderbilts, Olins and Reynolds spent \$1,004,986. The entire labor movement spent \$941,271.⁵⁵²

During the legislative convention that January, COPE representatives made one thing crystal clear: they intended to involve themselves to a greater degree than ever before, coordinating political action on national, state, and even local levels:

There is only one place where the elections this year—or any other year—will be won: in the precincts. That means that the success or failure of organized labor’s political activity as expressed through the program of the AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education (COPE), rests in the grass roots.⁵⁵³

For Reuben, such coordination seemed crucial. In fact, he viewed the missions of these three conferences—the State Organization Conference, the Problems of the Aged Conference, and the AFL-CIO Legislative Conference—as deeply intertwined. Only united, organized action, Reuben believed, could achieve labor’s goal of creating the secure future for all working Americans that Social Security prognosticators proclaimed. As he explained:

One thing is certain—we must work together in the labor world—more unitedly than ever before. We must think and work as a team in closer unity than ever before. Our merger on the national level has had the effect of mobilizing not our strength, but uniting that of labor’s enemies. To make our own national merger effective we must bolster up and eliminate any defects in our organizational structure.

We must organize the unorganized. We must build up our membership through concentrated organizing campaigns. We must reactivate our slumbering local unions. We must reject every incumbent lawmaker who is seeking re-election, in every district where there is a contest, unless such lawmaker is a genuine friend of labor, freedom, and humanity...As I see the situation the shock troops of the reactionary forces plotting our destruction must be withstood no matter how frequently they attack us. The chips are down and obviously there are two ways for us to go—to fold up and go out of business or to forge ahead, to fight on!⁵⁵⁴

Such coordination carried unforeseen costs, however, and Reuben himself would experience the price of intense national action (and interference) before the year’s end.

POLITICAL BATTLE LINES

Reuben Exerts Endorsement Power Over State Politicians

While Reuben may have held a dim view of the national situation, he felt considerably more confident about the state of labor in Illinois. As he detailed in his address to the attendees of the Central Body Conference:

The silver lining in this dark national outlook appears brighter within the states. In the General Assembly of Illinois the labor movement has never retreated. Here in this State we have had the help of the members of the Legislature in defeating the same identical features which were enacted in the Landrum-Griffin bill. The General Assembly of Illinois defeated the secondary boycott limitation proposal and the anti-peaceful picketing provision. In fact the General Assembly of Illinois joined with the officers and members of the State AFL-CIO in our effort to resell our employers on honest, sincere collective bargaining as the only sensible and profitable method of stabilizing the industries of this great State.⁵⁵⁵

Soderstrom had indeed achieved remarkable success in Springfield, a victory he attributed in no small measure to Illinois labor’s resistance to party capture. Reub refused to let his organization give a free pass to a politician just because she or he had a “D” next to their name, and through the Joint Labor Legislative Board he had continually supported Republicans who had favorable voting records with respect to labor. This approach had helped Reuben score legislative wins and defeat bad legislation in Illinois even as the Republican Party held control of both the Senate and the Governorship. Of course, Democratic politicians publicly touted any statement of support from Soderstrom early and often. For example, in 1960 Representative Fern Carter Pierce, running in the farm-heavy 32nd District of Boone, DeKalb, McHenry and Ogle counties, repeatedly singled out Reuben’s endorsement. Although she claimed the support from “farm, labor, business, educational, financial and welfare organizations,” Reub alone was quoted in the newspaper advertisements she ran on the eve of her primary election, proudly claiming:

Reuben G. Soderstrom, president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, recently said of Mrs. Pierce’s record:

“Representative Pierce has served two sessions successfully in the Illinois General Assembly. In fact, she has attained an unbroken legislative voting record on the side of wage earners, on the side of labor and humanity!”⁵⁵⁶

Rep. Clyde Choate likewise sought Reub’s endorsement to bolster his chances in the general election that year. When the Democratic House Majority Whip wrote to Reuben in search of a ringing endorsement, the renowned orator didn’t disappoint:

Your labor voting record has been better than good—It has always been excellent! In the last regular session it was again 100% perfect and I want to extend the appreciation and thanks of all branches of organized labor to you for this marvelous support. It is the prayerful hope of the officers and members of the entire labor movement of Illinois that our local trade unionists in the 58th Representative District will make a special effort to return you to your seat in the Illinois House of Representatives.⁵⁵⁷

Still, Reub didn’t hesitate to endorse Republicans whom he believed had demonstrated a positive record on labor. Outside of his own son Carl (a Republican Representative holding his father’s former seat), the most notable example of this was Soderstrom’s support of the Republican Governor William Stratton. Stratton had long been an ally of Reub’s, most importantly in blocking the passage of such anti-labor legislation as the anti-picketing and proposed right-to-work acts. Many anti-labor bills that failed to pass Republican chambers during Stratton’s tenure likely floundered due to the Governor’s open opposition, driving many Republicans to at least abstain from voting in favor of passage.

Just as Soderstrom counted on Stratton, the Governor had come to rely on Reuben as well, promoting him to positions of authority so he could secure passage of important legislation pertaining to their common interests. 1960 was no exception; that year the Governor had placed two bond issues before the voters for ratification—a \$195 million bond for the University of Illinois Building Program to provide “proper housing facilities for a potential future 60,000 students” and a Public Welfare Building Bond meant to “relieve crowded conditions in our state hospitals,” particularly mental institutions.⁵⁵⁸ Reuben was already an outspoken advocate on both fronts; that March he had (at the Governor’s request) co-sponsored the Twelfth Annual Mental Health Week in Illinois, writing to Gov. Stratton “There is a growing interest in the labor movement with respect to Mental Health activities and I want to express my thanks to you for including a representative of labor as a joint sponsor.”⁵⁵⁹ So when Mrs. Byron Harvey’s resignation opened up a post on the Board of Public Welfare Commissioners, Stratton knew exactly who he wanted to tap as her replacement.

Advocates for Mental Health and Education Infrastructure

Governor Stratton formally appointed Reuben Soderstrom to the Board of Public Welfare Commissioners on June 23rd, 1960.⁵⁶⁰ Reuben certainly was unique among the board members; as his hometown paper wrote at the time:

The nine-member board acts in an advisory capacity to Dr. Otto L. Bettag, director of the state department of Public Welfare, on mental health and conditions at the state’s mental institutions. It is made up of medical men, educators and sociologists. Mr. Soderstrom is the only representative of labor on the board.⁵⁶¹

If there was any doubt as to the reason for Reuben’s appointment, however, it was put to rest with his first public comment on his new position:

In commenting on his appointment, Soderstrom, who was reached at his home here today, said his organization was vitally interested in the proper care of mental patients, and that during the last session of the

Illinois General Assembly, he gave strong support to legislation calling for a referendum in November on a proposed \$150 million bond issue to relive crowded conditions in institutions.⁵⁶²

Reuben wasted no time ginning up support for the Mental Health and Public Education bonds. He forcefully and repeatedly made the case, both in the press and in speeches to union meetings and State Councils. He cited the great need as well as the relatively small sacrifice these measures required, telling members “University officials say that their bond issue, which will cost taxpayers about \$1.25 a year for 25 years, was more than necessary considering the rise in university enrollments...The welfare building bond issue will provide about half the structural improvements needed...(and) cost taxpayers 95 cents a year for 25 years”⁵⁶³ He even dedicated his Labor Day speech that year to the effort, telling the labor faithful that “The two bond issues...are badly needed and it is to be hoped that all our union people will not only vote for them, but also urge all other progressive-minded citizens to do the same thing.”⁵⁶⁴

As he had in times past, Soderstrom put aside personal animosity in service to the cause, working alongside traditional foes like the Illinois Retail Merchants Association’s Joseph Meek and Chicago Manufacturer Arnold Maremont (who believed the bonds’ failure would result in a state income tax) to win popular support. That fall Reub lent his voice to Maremont’s “Emergency Committee for 50,000,” a pro-bond campaign named for the 50,000 patients in Illinois mental hospitals and welfare institutions “whose comfort, care, treatment and welfare depend on the bond issue being passed.” As Maremont shored up conservatives, Reub drew liberal support, telling his base the bonds deserved the support of “all progressive minded citizens.”⁵⁶⁵ The biggest opposition, meanwhile, came from the Illinois Agricultural Association, which launched a counter campaign arguing that the needed repairs should come out of current funds.

Ultimately, these efforts yielded dramatic results. As Reuben wrote in the wake of the election:

Aside from the November 8th election itself, the universities’ and welfare institutions’ 345 million dollar building bonds issues were the most vital ballot proposals before the Illinois voters for a decision...Without the work performed by the officers of the State Building and Construction Trades Council and State labor movement, the farm opposition could not have been overcome. There is justifiable rejoicing, therefore, throughout the labor world over the adoption of these bond issues.⁵⁶⁶

Reuben wasn’t alone in attributing the success to labor’s efforts. As Dr. Otto Bettag, Director of the State Department of Public Welfare wrote to Reub in wake of the bonds’ passage:

In [sic] behalf of the department’s 50,000 patients and wards, its more than 14,900 personnel and the host of others who will benefit over the years, I wish to express deep appreciation to you—and through you to the membership of your fine organization—for your efforts in the interest of the \$150,000,000 public welfare bond issue. The truly outstanding support given by labor publications throughout the state, highlighted by the coverage in the Federation’s weekly newsletter, kept the bond issue constantly before one of the most important and influential segments of the voting public. Meetings and other community efforts by union locals also contributed significantly to the final result. I cannot let this occasion pass without expressing my personal and official gratitude to you and Mr. Stanley Johnson, Executive Vice President, for the active roles you played in this connection.⁵⁶⁷

Congress Serving “Mickey Finns” to Labor

Surely, Soderstrom’s energizing of the labor community played a large role in the bonds’ ballot successes. But labor votes alone could not have passed these initiatives. As he had with his considerable pro-labor legislative record, Reuben credited the measures’ success to support from across the aisle. It was this nonpartisan

approach that Reuben wanted to bring to the national political conversation, which he strongly felt had become disjointed. In his estimation, the national AFL-CIO had become too closely aligned with the Democratic Party, leading the latter to abuse the relationship and take labor votes for granted. As he bluntly put it, conjuring up the abuse of unsuspecting victims with drug-laced “Mickey Finn” cocktails:

One frightening and paralyzing legislative “Mickey Finn” after another has been fed to American wage earners by both major political parties until their confidence in their friendliness to labor has been completely shattered. Consequently there will be less crossing of the labor movement within political parties in the future. The Gompers Policy of examining the voting record regardless of whether he calls himself a Republican or a Democrat, will determine whether he deserves labor support. Liberalism is definitely dead in both major parties and organized labor must return to the old program of being partisan to principles and not to political parties...Unless we divorce ourselves from identity with political parties we will be crucified with a rash of legislative “Mickey Finns”—and moreover—we would deserve the hangover and headaches and oblivion such political stupidity will bring. This is not a retreat; it is good political sense.⁵⁶⁸

Soderstrom Denounces Lyndon B. Johnson as Kennedy’s VP Pick

This capture, Soderstrom said, was the reason for the failure of labor’s national legislative agenda. The Democrats had taken organized workers for granted, while Republicans had given up hope of courting their vote. Reuben was ripe for an opportunity to publicly air his frustrations, and when Democratic Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy picked Texan Senator Lyndon Johnson as his running mate in the summer of 1960, Soderstrom stuck. All of labor was furious over the choice; since World War Two, the conservative southerner had built a reputation as being both anti-union and anti-civil rights; President Meany called Johnson “the arch foe of labor” and worked hard publicly in private to force his removal from the ticket.⁵⁶⁹ Even Meany, however, wasn’t prepared to go as far as Reuben. On the eve of the Republican National Convention, held in Chicago that year, the national Republican committee hosted a labor luncheon in the Mayfair room of the Sheraton-Blackstone Hotel. Soderstrom was of course invited to the event, where New York Governor (and rumored Vice-Presidential nominee) Nelson Rockefeller made a play for labor votes, boldly declaring that “union members and working people will go Republican like never before in the history of the country.”⁵⁷⁰ The most newsworthy remarks from the event, though, came not from the potential Vice-Presidential candidate but from Reuben himself, who told reporters that Kennedy had “made chumps out of leaders of the American labor movement when he dictated the choice of Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson as the candidate for Vice President.” Calling the nominee’s labor voting record “bad, bad, bad, thoroughly bad!” the Illinois labor leader darkly warned “The selection of Johnson as Kennedy’s running mate puts a quietus, a wet blanket on the enthusiasm, usually shown by labor for the Democratic nominees.”⁵⁷¹

The reaction from labor was swift. Correspondence from labor leaders across the country soon came in attacking Soderstrom, demanding he explain himself. The letter from Upholsters’ International Union First Vice-President Alfred Rota of Philadelphia was one such example. He begins by claiming impartiality, criticizing not the comments themselves as much as his decision to make such statements without sanction from the AL-CIO leadership:

I think, Rube, you have jumped the gun, because no one knows yet who the AFL-CIO is going to endorse, if any one. At least you could have waited until the “Chiefs of the AFL-CIO” had an opportunity to decide on what the Labor Movement as a whole is going to decide to do. A good soldier does not go over the heads of his Generals. You should know that because of your position as President of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, which you have held many, many years, you have always expected loyalty and cooperation from your fellow officers on the Executive Board.

I know that you have been a Republican, but I should think that your first loyalty should be to the Labor Movement...I happen also to be a registered Republican and have been since 1917, but I vote for the man, not the Party, and in my position I would not dare, at least at this early date, not knowing all the facts, to make such a statement...

As Rota continues, however, it soon becomes clear that his concerns are primarily partisan, as he worries of the impact of Reub's words on the chances of Kennedy's election in such a close race:

It might be true, as you say, that Senator Johnson's record is "bad, bad, bad, thoroughly bad," but it certainly cannot be any worse than Nixon's, who is running for President, while Senator Johnson will only be Vice President.

The impression you leave with anyone who does not know any better is that they should vote for Nixon, and a worse candidate, as far as labor is concerned, could not be chosen...it would be very damaging to the welfare of the workers, if they took you literally, and because of it would vote for Nixon, and we would lose any votes on that account. I think we will need all the votes we can get in order to change the National Administration.

Despite his assertion that (unlike Reuben) his first loyalty is to the Labor Movement, Rota ultimately reveals that he is more than willing to accept an anti-labor Vice President if it can help the Democratic nominee's chances:

If, because of the choosing of Senator Johnson as Vice-President, Senator Kennedy can win next November, the fact that Johnson will be Vice-President will not in any way hurt labor as a whole...It is better to have a Democratic President, even though we may not like or agree on the Vice-President, than to have reactionary Nixon for President and a Vice-President of unknown quantity as far as labor is concerned.

In his closing, Rota essentially accuses Reuben of treachery, putting party and politics before labor and duty:

Well, the damage, whatever it amounts to, is done, and you cannot undo it. At least the others who were present, had sense enough not to commit themselves and apparently did not agree with your statement. We must be Union Leaders first and Republicans and Democrats second. It should be the man we vote for and elect, if he is a friend of Labor, whether we are Republicans or Democrats. We have our first obligation to the members we represent. We are supposed to lead them, not betray them.⁵⁷²

Alfred's critique, echoed by many in labor, was full of passion and obviously motivated by a genuine desire to do what was in labor's best interests. However, his misunderstanding of what Reuben was trying to accomplish in his remarks was indicative of the growing problem labor was facing in the political arena—a problem Soderstrom was actively trying to counter. Despite their protests to the contrary, Rota and those he represented had clearly lost the ability to distinguish between Democratic interests and Labor interests. This had lost them leverage within the Democratic Party coalition, so much so that a Democratic-controlled Senate and House could by 1960 pass anti-labor legislation like the Landrum-Griffin bill without fear of reprisal. The Party's decision to put an anti-labor candidate only one heartbeat from the Presidency was, in Reuben's eyes, merely the strongest sign yet of Labor's capture. As Rota himself made clear, he and those like him were willing to endure these abuses out of a fear of the alternative—a fear that had left the movement dangerously impotent.

This short-sightedness also rendered those like Rota unable to embrace the alternative, namely transforming the Republican Party. This is exactly what Soderstrom was seeking to encourage through his comments at the Rockefeller dinner. Reuben's comments were likely not spontaneous; in his estimation, the Democratic Party

needed a wake-up call, and Reub was determined to send them one. As the 1960 political season got underway, he watched with intense interest, looking for an opportunity to publicly prod the Democratic Party, and the Johnson nomination coupled with Rockefeller's outreach provided the perfect opportunity.

Nelson Rockefeller represented the moderate-to-liberal wing of the Republican Party; it was so closely identified with him that all moderate Republicans would later be derisively labeled by their enemies as "Rockefeller Republicans." At the time of Reub's comments, and as Soderstrom described in his response to Rota, "My comment was made before the Republicans had made their choice of top candidates. I was hoping that Nelson Rockefeller would be favorably considered – which he wasn't so both parties certainly let labor down with respect to producing a progressive ticket." But even if the Republicans failed to change today, Reuben argued, there was value in dissent, in refusing to simply accept the party line. He continued:

But a little display of dissatisfaction may pass the Forand bill, the jobsite picketing bill, the increase in the minimum wage bill in the August session of Congress. This would give these candidates a recent labor record to bring before the people in the fall campaign. It is too much to hope that Congress in the August session will repeal the Hobbs bill, the Lea bill, the Knowland amendment, the Taft-Hartley law, the Landrum-Griffin bill, which all four candidates have helped to place on the statute books.

Reuben flatly refuted the charge that he was putting partisanship first. Had Rota known the first thing about Soderstrom, he would likely never have advanced the charge. After all, though nominally a Republican, Reub had begun his political life as a Bull-Moose Progressive, and had been one of President Roosevelt's most ardent supporters, a far stronger advocate than the more conservative AFL leadership had been. He also reaffirmed that he would ultimately follow the AFL leadership, although he made clear his opinion:

I have never cared very much whether a candidate calls himself a Republican or Democrat, so long as he is friendly to labor...Please know that I'll support whoever is recommended by George Meany and the Executive Council—although under existing conditions it could well be that no recommendation will be made. It will depend, no doubt, upon what happens in the August session of Congress.

In all, Reuben's response to Rota is surprisingly even-tempered, even conciliatory, given the nature and tone of the accusations. This is perhaps in part to deescalate the situation; after all, Reuben's attempt to influence the Republican ticket had failed, and while the attack on Reub's loyalties were wildly out of bounds, the accusation that he had acted without the approval of national leadership carried greater potential for blowback. Still, Reuben ends his missive with a little bite:

Sincerely thanking you for your letter and trusting that lack of critical comment and complacency will not convince our U.S. Senators and Congressmen that nothing needs to be done by them in the August session of Congress, I am with every personal good wish,

Your friend,

R.G. Soderstrom
President⁵⁷³

Reuben Rejects Democratic Partisanship

While national in scope, the Johnson/Rota episode was far from the only battle Reuben would fight for labor's political soul in 1960. The next one, in fact, would land much closer to home. In August of 1960, the Illinois State AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education (COPE) met to discuss the coming general

election. It was the first time the AFL and CIO would make a joint endorsement; in 1956, the then-unmerged organizations had made rival endorsements—the ISFL supported the Republican Stratton, while the CIO backed his Democratic rival. Reuben had worked hard back then, overcoming strong opposition within his own ranks to secure the endorsement, and he was confident he could do so once again.

However, there were new challenges to overcome. Previously, political endorsements were settled by the ISFL Executive Committee, a small body Reub could easily influence. Under the terms of the merger, however, these decisions were made by the newly-established Illinois COPE, a committee composed of the state board of directors and 25 congressional district representatives, nearly 100 members in all. Moreover, many of those representatives were former CIO men, skeptical of a nonpartisan agenda and committed to a “realignment,” a strategy that author Max Green described as:

[A fight] to realign the Democratic Party, to move with civil rights and liberal forces against the Southerners and machine politicians who had checked the party’s liberal impulses. That is, it was attempting to transform the ideologically diverse Democratic Party into a party with a liberal ideology.⁵⁷⁴

Despite some early success in fending off these efforts during the primaries, Soderstrom was unable to stop these forces from forcing a straight-line Democratic endorsement. He dissented strongly, encouraging his peers to think about the implications of their actions—all to no avail. For the first time in the post-war era, Illinois union leaders backed every Democrat on the state ticket. The press coverage of the announcement was just as Soderstrom had predicted and feared; newspapers across the state ran headlines like “Unions for Democrats in Illinois” and “Unions Back State Demos,” destroying any semblance of labor’s non-partisanship.⁵⁷⁵

The biggest endorsement—and the one that the papers greeted with the greatest interest—was the backing of Democratic gubernatorial candidate Otto Kerner over incumbent William Stratton. The incumbent Governor, seeking an unprecedented third term, was known as a political ally of the Illinois AFL-CIO President. From the outset of the COPE meeting, Reuben had sought diplomatic alternatives to outright endorsement, initially gaining some traction with the idea of endorsing both Stratton and his Democratic rival Otto Kerner.⁵⁷⁶ The Chicago-based Cook County COPE, however, would have none of it. They were determined to deliver labor’s support fully to the Democratic Party. The best Reuben could do in the end was insert language into the final draft of the official endorsement that obliquely acknowledged the Governor’s past support, as well as Soderstrom’s regret:

We sincerely regret that we cannot recommend every one of the incumbents who seek re-election. Many of these incumbents have been helpful on some measure, but their over-all record falls short of our modest yardstick for recommendation. We thank them for the help they did extend.⁵⁷⁷

Soderstrom Confronts Hostile Convention

The snubbing of Stratton didn’t stop there. That October, Governor Stratton was invited to speak at the annual Illinois AFL-CIO convention, as was the tradition for a sitting Governor. This time, however, the experience was quite different. According to press accounts, the Republican governor was met with a chilly reception. It started to go off the rails when, at the start of his speech, Stratton gave Reuben his high praise, stating Soderstrom and Vice President Stanley Johnson had helped place Illinois among states “in which laws pertaining to labor are progressive, well-balanced and non-restrictive.” When he paused for the usual applause, however, he was met with a deafening silence. Visibly shaken, the Governor turned to Soderstrom and half-jokingly said “I thought that would get a hand, Rube.”⁵⁷⁸

It only got worse from there. He was booed eight times during his 20-minute speech. After the sweaty Governor mercifully left the stage, Reuben stormed up to the podium. Brimming with anger, he chided the delegates responsible for the booing, sternly telling them “This is not a political meeting! Booing and catcalls are bad manners. The governor gave us one of the best speeches I’ve ever heard. He’s been a good governor.”⁵⁷⁹

When Reuben said this, something that had never occurred in his 30 years of leadership happened—Soderstrom was booed! Stanley Johnson came to Reub’s defense, joining in the condemnation of the delegates’ behavior. “Never before in the house of labor have I seen such disrespect to a visitor!” he declared.

The spectacle continued. US Secretary of Labor Mitchell followed the Governor, again tempting the ire of the raucous crowd. As he gave his speech, the sea of Democratic Campaign buttons he saw in the crowd below prompted the Eisenhower man to defensively claim “I am here as your secretary of labor, not as a partisan.”⁵⁸⁰ When he ended his speech, several delegates unfurled a banner reading “This is Nixon’s GOP prosperity. International Harvester to shut 12 plants. No Thanksgiving turkeys for 25,000 families.” As the *Decatur Herald* reported, “One such banner was displayed in front of the speaker’s stand until Soderstrom pounded his gavel and declared ‘Get that thing out of here!’”⁵⁸¹

The affair was a complete debacle, and the press reported it with breathless glee. Rumors flew accusing the former CIO leadership of attempting (and potentially succeeding at) a labor coup. Many whispered that the aging President was too weak, physically as well as politically, to carry on. The hardest-hitting coverage came from the *Chicago American*, which published an article entitled “Chaos Hits State Parley of the AFL-CIO,” in which it painted the picture of an organization at the brink of civil war. It quoted anonymous sources calling the convention “disgusting and disgraceful. If the UAW ends up running the Illinois Labor movement, the Building Trades and the rest of the AFL unions are going to take a walk and George Meany can go to hell for himself...The lousiest saloon in the State is a better place to be than a ‘Red’ convention.” The CA ended its piece claiming “the very existence of the AFL-CIO is threatened.”⁵⁸² It was not an unfair observation; on the eve of the closest election in 12 years, increasing political tensions appeared ready to tear the toddling Illinois AFL-CIO apart.

Unity and Loyalty Demanded

Soderstrom had had enough. He could tolerate some degree of dissension, and had already endured his share of rejection, but he would suffer no mutiny. It was time to put his house in order, but to do so Reuben realized a simple silencing of the opposition from within his ranks would not suffice. He needed a clear show of unanimous support, not only of labor’s agenda but of his leadership. If labor was to retain its influence, there had to be no doubt in the minds of labor’s friends and enemies as to who spoke for her. Reub needed a public show of fealty, and he would have it.

The next morning, Reuben’s AFL-CIO Resolutions Committee introduced two resolutions. The first, “United We Stand,” reaffirmed the indivisible nature of the AFL-CIO union. It explicitly compared the struggle between the two former organizations to the American Civil War before concluding “Those were troublesome times, much like our present times...we are trying to keep our own ‘Union’ united and strong, for ‘United we stand, divided we fall.’”⁵⁸³ The second resolution was a salute to Reuben for his 30 thirty years of leadership, a glowing tribute which read in part:

We could recite volumes of the good performed by this kindly, fighting advocate of justice and decency for all. His particular fondness for helping poor and needy people has run through his whole life of fifty active years as a trade unionist. We salute Reuben G. Soderstrom for the last thirty years devoted to making this State

Organization the respected powerful body it is. We say thanks for a job well done.⁵⁸⁴

To introduce the resolution the committee selected Joe Germano, the former President of the Illinois CIO himself. A dutiful soldier, Germano threw his full support behind Soderstrom's leadership and called on his former CIO members to do the same. "There are those who want to destroy the AFL-CIO," Germano warned, and they were the ones responsible for any rumors of dissent.⁵⁸⁵ He acknowledged their split over some political issues but denied any allegation that they were at odds, telling the crowd "There may have been times when we did not see eye-to-eye on certain things, but this should not have been interpreted as meaning that he has not been a great labor leader.⁵⁸⁶" After this public disavowal of rebellion, CIO man Germano reaffirmed his loyalty to AFL man Reuben, promising to support Soderstrom as long as he remained head of the state AFL-CIO:

I have known Reuben Soderstrom probably longer than many of the delegates assembled at this great convention. He has been a friend of mine, and I of his, for many, many years. We have had high regard and respect for one another. I want to say in my opinion he has been an outstanding labor leader. This tribute paid to Brother Soderstrom this morning is a small token of appreciation for the work he has done, not only for the labor movement he has had the privilege to represent, but for the people of the great state of Illinois, and I know it to be a fact that his contribution to the labor movement did not only start and end in the state of Illinois, but because of his judgment in the higher circles of the national labor movement, his judgment and opinions have been recognized and put into effect...

I have always respected and loved Reuben Soderstrom, and I shall continue to respect and love him. I shall quarrel with him when I think I must, and I hope that Reuben Soderstrom shall continue to lead us for many, many years to come. And I hope all those who agree with me will please rise to your feet and approve this Resolution.⁵⁸⁷

The assembly approved the resolution with loud applause as Reuben rose to the stage. He stood before a cheering crowd that had only yesterday been a moody throng, using the moment to show both press and peers that labor would not collapse under its own weight—it was and would remain a house united. Taking the podium, he told all in attendance:

Friends, words always seem inadequate when one is called upon to respond to a tribute as fine as the one just paid to me. I want to thank every delegate for arranging this lovely program in my honor. It is a great privilege to be permitted to officially represent the Illinois State Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, and I want to say to you, in all humility, I feel highly honored and highly privileged to be permitted to speak for this great organization. I will never be able to tell you how much I appreciate the opportunity to be of service.

I have been blessed with wonderful help and a great deal of energy and despite my advancing years, I am still able to carry on my official duties in a fairly satisfactory way. In the event I find I am slipping somewhat in the future, I will be glad to resign. I will do it willingly. No one will need to push me out.

Thirty years ago when I first became president, the future looked somewhat bright then. I think it looks even brighter today. And with your help and with the help of our heavenly father, I think we can face the future unafraid.⁵⁸⁸

The tightly-orchestrated display of unity worked. No further articles were published pushing rumors of labor rebellion. Instead, Soderstrom received editorial praise for his conduct during the affair. "It is to the credit of Reuben G. Soderstrom, state AFL president, that he chided the delegates for their bad manners," the *Decatur*

Daily Review noted.⁵⁸⁹ The *Streator Times Press* concluded:

The overwhelming vote of confidence given R.G. Soderstrom as president of the Illinois AFL-CIO at its annual meeting in Springfield this week is pleasing news to Reub's host of friends and neighbors here. Soderstrom has headed the state organization for thirty years, demonstrating his devotion to the cause of labor and winning success as an able administrator. His service may be measured by the achievements recorded. Wise in his counsel and skilled at the bargaining table he has proven effective, possible also because of the confidence he has of his fellow workers and the respect he has gained at the hands of management. The little flurry exhibited at Springfield does not represent the thinking nor will it have the endorsement of the union members generally throughout Illinois. Out of the experience, he emerges stronger than before.⁵⁹⁰

Reuben had spent the year fighting fervently to keep labor endeared to both parties, but clearly the groundswell toward Democratic alignment occurred under his very feet. It was just the start of a tumultuous decade, and only time would tell if Reuben could in fact keep labor moving into the progressive and bipartisan future he'd spent a lifetime dreaming of.

In November, John F. Kennedy and his running mate Lyndon B. Johnson won the presidential election. In Illinois, Republican William Stratton lost the governorship.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

THE MARTYRS OF LABOR

By Reuben Soderstrom

If today we are still able to fight for a grander civilization, if today we are still able to fight for a higher standard of living, don't thank those who are directing this Ship of State, but come with me to the lonely graves of the pioneers of unionism. No marble shaft rears proudly over their humble resting place. No monument of stone or bronze tells of their mighty deeds but 'neath the green sod sleep hearts that once flamed for the cause of toil. These martyrs of labor—they have given more to liberty, equality and human brotherhood than all the statesmen of this land combined. They have fought battles for a greater cause than all the soldiers that ever bled on battle fields.

They have brought us nearer to the ideal of brotherhood of which Buddha dreamed on the Ganges three thousand years ago. In them the thoughts of Plato and the teachings of the lowly Nazarene assumed reality. Like Moses of yore that led the children of toil from bondage out into the desert of strife nearer and nearer to that promised land, and like that Hebrew prophet, they laid their bodies down in eternal rest in sight of Canaan.

Their reward was hunger, cold, the prison stripes and the gallows. Someday a grateful posterity will chant choruses in their memory. Someday happy children will plant flowers on their sunken graves. These humble tools of evolution—they have given more to civilization and the humanization of the race than all the statesmen and their warriors...

Let's not have another generation of schooling with the truth left out. Labor unions and friends of labor must work diligently to fill the great empty pages in the school books of the Nation. There is much in the school books about freedom, but too often it is the freedom of the industrial owners, of management, and not the workers or employees.

The struggle for justice is too seldom told with any adequate exposition of labor's heroic sacrifices; the story of union leaders shooting it out with hired gunmen in mine wars in southern Illinois; the story of Samuel Gompers, John Mitchell and Vic-tor Olander teaching millions of workers, the harsh cold truths of class conflict in an America that cherishes illusions, even now, that it has no classes.

Our skyscrapers, steel mills, rail-roads, our coal mines and cornfields are the achievement of human labor, not entirely that of an investment trust or a big man in the front office. Labor's role is real but very secondary, those who give of their physical energies are the most exhausted ones, the less rewarded ones. Let us never forget it!

When newspapers and politicians tell me that the roughness which I spoke of at the outset was sixty years ago and things are better now, I say: possibly, and because of the help from men like Governor John Altgeld, Clarence Darrow, Senator Robert Wagner, Sidney Hillman, Senator George Norris, former Mayor of New York LaGuardia, and President Franklin Roosevelt, but also and far more because of the help of obscure printers, small town union organizers, or fatigued farmers with dirt under their fingernails who were tired to death of being victimized by the shrewd and unscrupulous, and who deter-mined to use their organizations, their unions, their lodges, and even their churches to force the oppressors to make life better for all the people so that we might live longer and enjoy some of life's satisfactions.

America owes a great debt to its workers, past and present. It should be acknowledged and defined far more often than it is by all of us. I protest the silent and muted recognition of labor's tremendous contribution to our common welfare.⁵⁹¹

CHAPTER 50

1961

REUBEN OPPOSES DISCRIMINATION, PASSES FAIR EMPLOYMENT ACT

“Labor wants the highest and best surroundings for life and labor. We would like to enjoy the earth and the fullness thereof. We want more constant work and less greed. We want more leisure and less crime. We want more justice and less vengeance. We want more of the opportunities that bring out the better nature of man and which will make manhood more noble, womanhood more beautiful and childhood more happy and bright. These are the things labor wants and these are the things labor can obtain by working together and helping each other. All these things can be secured for the membership and for working people generally through organized effort.”

-Reuben Soderstrom
Illinois State AFL-CIO, 1961

NATIONAL MERGER, LOCAL EFFECTS

Packing Heat

Dan Healy always wore a gun. It was one of the first things people remembered about him. Not that he necessarily needed it; the Irish Bostonian already cut an imposing figure, his well-trimmed pinstripe suits and finely starched collars barely concealing a meaty, brawler’s frame. Even his broad grin seemed to hide a hint of danger and unpredictability, ready to turn in a moment’s notice. His dark eyes, framed by jet-black eyebrows made all the more prominent by his bright silver locks, carried that implicit threat even when he laughed. Dan Healy was not to be crossed.

As the National AFL-CIO’s Regional Director for Illinois, Healy enjoyed President Meany’s full confidence. When he spoke, everyone assumed they were hearing Meany’s voice. He was the President’s fixer, sent in to solve intractable problems no matter how many heads he had to crack to get it done. From the summer of 1957 through the winter of 1961 Dan had played that part with gusto, going into rival AFL and CIO central bodies throughout the state to “manage” their merge. The gun may have fit his image, but it was only for show—a bit of theater intended to carry the point across.

Until it wasn’t. The teamster-dominated Herring Central Body had adamantly refused to merge; when Meany sent AFL-CIO representative Rudolph Ezkovitz to speak to the rowdy crew, he was not well-received. “Eskovitz was told where to go and how to get there,” Herrin Trades Council President Horace Dagnan proudly told Meany, adding “From the way we see it labor has been hurt more under your regime than it has in the 20 years preceding...a copy of our By-Laws are enclosed; if you see any reference to the AFL CIO then you most certainly are welcome to send in one of your men, but on the other hand, if no affiliation is noted, please furnish assistance if requested, otherwise we will consider the matter closed.”⁵⁹²

Meany would suffer no such disobedience. He sent Healy downstate with a clear charge. “I direct you to secure at the earliest possible time, the books, property, and charter of said Local Central Body and to hold such in your possession in the name of the AFL-CIO until such time as you receive further instructions.”⁵⁹³ Healy didn’t hesitate; he marched into the rebellious den, conveyed Meany’s message and promptly moved to take their charter off the wall. As soon as he did, the hall burst into chaos. “Ain’t nobody come in here and tell us what to do,” one of the members shouted. “We don’t like them bastards and were not gonna do this!”⁵⁹⁴ With that, the throng leapt on Meany’s man, threatening all manner of harm. The explosive mob fed on its own anger, ready to tear him to shreds. In that moment, filled with screams, swears, and sweat, even the menacing Healy knew fear. For the first time ever he drew his gun, threatening to shoot anyone who got in his way. The motley crew immediately fell mute, eyes still burning as Dan grimly fulfilled his duty. He walked away without a shot fired, the charter in hand.

Discord and Dissent

By the start of 1961 chaos like the showdown in Herrin had finally given way to some semblance of order. Central Bodies from De Kalb to La Salle had slowly settled their differences, albeit with varying degrees of misgiving. In November of 1961 Healy left Illinois to assume a trusteeship over the Cleveland AFL-CIO when all 21 of their officers were suspended for corruption.⁵⁹⁵ Still, the process had left Illinois labor with plenty of bad blood, simmering just below the surface and waiting for an excuse to erupt. Resentment and unsettled scores would cut across the decade to come. Meany’s and Healy’s actions had also transformed Illinois labor in more subtle, insidious ways. The National AFL-CIO President increasingly leaned on trusted lieutenants with whom he had a personal connection—according to one contemporary source, “Old Dan was Meany’s right hand man. I think he and Meany had grown up together or something, they were good pals”—instead of relying on the State infrastructure.⁵⁹⁶ Whether intentional or not, this bypassing marginalized State Federations, diluting their authority.

All this weakened State leaders like Reub at the exact moment they needed power the most. The 1960’s began as an era of hope and promise. 1961 brought with it an energetic and youthful new US President, supported by labor and asking the nation and the world to “begin anew—remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness...Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths and encourage the arts and commerce.”⁵⁹⁷ But beneath that optimism flowed a strengthening current of anger and discontent. Strongest of these was of course the civil rights movement, gaining momentum through the nonviolent protests of men like Martin Luther King Jr. and the shocking aggressive reactions their efforts provoked. Women likewise continued to struggle, especially in the workplace, where they continued to earn less money for the same work. On top of this, laborers of all colors and creeds were hard hit by a severe recession, now in its tenth month. Fears of automation and unemployment ran high, with the average worker feeling powerless to stop it.

It was a time of hope and fear. A time of unprecedented oppression and historic freedom. A time of new unity and old fractions. It was the 1960s, and it would offer Reuben his greatest challenges yet.

THE RECESSION OF 1960

Fighting for the 30-Hour Week

The recession of 1960 had hurt workers hard. By the start of the following year, laborers across the country were desperately searching for work, with U.S. unemployment swelling to 6.7 percent.⁵⁹⁸ While Illinois stood slightly better at 6.1 percent, workers throughout the state fell into a panic.⁵⁹⁹ Many believed the root cause of the crisis was automation. No less a figure than Southern Christian Leadership Conference President Martin

Luther King Jr. spoke to such fears, declaring in an historic speech at the 25th Anniversary Dinner of the United Auto Workers that April:

New economic patterning through automation is dissolving the jobs of workers in some of the nation's basic industries. This is to me a catastrophe. We are neither technologically advanced nor socially enlightened if we witness this disaster for tens of thousands without finding a solution. And by a solution, I mean a real and genuine alternative, providing the same living standards which were swept away by a force called progress, but which for some is destruction. The society that performs miracles with machinery has the capacity to make some miracles for men, if it values men as highly as it values machines.⁶⁰⁰

Soderstrom believed he had just such a solution. Where others saw a crisis, Reub saw opportunity, and he viewed the current troubles as the best chance yet to push for a policy he'd been advocating for since the darkest days of the Great Depression. That Labor Day he called for a bold (if familiar) idea designed around spreading working hours amongst more laborers:

There are five million wage earners idle, able, and willing to work, and constantly seeking work in the industrial centers of these United States. No reliable signs are evidenced indicating that the situation is heading for betterment. Even "brink of war scares" have had no beneficial effect...Almost all of the economic trouble in the United States is caused by the failure to solve this problem.

The shorter workday is undoubtedly the real answer. Wage earners would much prefer employment to unemployment checks, helpful as these benefits are—and they desire work in the plants and establishments where they are accustomed to earn their livelihood. By reducing the work day from eight hours to six, an extra employee would be needed for every three workers...The shorter work day works. When the hours were reduced from 60 to 48 it resulted in absorbing the unemployed people. This was accomplished without any financial subsidy from government sources...

Out of our experience we have found the so-called wild ideas of today frequently become the practical realities of tomorrow. We know that government can take over and guide coal mines, railroads or steel industries. Government can do anything. 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 any reduction in pay.⁶⁰¹

Reuben was right. During the Second World War, government had proved itself capable of such guidance, and previous hour reductions had helped. He repeated his call for a 30-hour week again in publications like the *Peoria Journal Star* and the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, telling reporters "The only solution to unemployment is to reduce hours. That works."⁶⁰² He kept up the pressure through the Fall, making the issue the centerpiece of his keynote address at the Illinois AFL-CIO Convention that year. In the 20th century, he said, labor had witnessed the work week shrink by over 25 hours while the weekly wage had risen by over 88%.⁶⁰³ Now with government support labor could do so again.

But that support never came. Two days later Kennedy's Labor Secretary Arthur J. Goldberg came out against a 30-hour work week, declaring:

We feel that the first job is to put everybody back to work at 40 hours...Today it would not be practical to reduce the statutory work week. We have a strong conviction that this is necessary to protect our production, our jobs and to be sure that our goods compete in the world market where we are in competition with countries having 45, 48 hour and even higher work weeks.⁶⁰⁴

Reuben did all he could, passing a resolution urging the trimming of the work week to 30 hours and another

criticizing the Kennedy administration.⁶⁰⁵ The move was largely symbolic, however. Even Reub's own AFL-CIO seemed to cool on the idea. In April of that year United Auto Workers President (and former CIO chief) Walter Reuther blocked a move to have his union press for a 30-hour week in their collective bargaining negotiations.⁶⁰⁶ For the first time in his 31 years as President, Reuben appeared all out on his own, without the support of politicians or national labor.

Fighting to Increase the Minimum Wage

Undeterred, Reub pressed ahead with the parts of his wage agenda that he could. His son Carl introduced legislation requiring employers with four or more workers to pay a \$1 minimum wage, affecting over 200,000 workers not covered under the national minimum wage law.⁶⁰⁷ That March Reuben testified on behalf of the bill, claiming it was "modest and conservative" legislation with "so many exemptions I can't see how anyone would object to it."⁶⁰⁸ He took the opposition to task, bemusedly predicting that:

Certain industries or associations will come in here and water your committee table with crocodile tears, pleading imminent bankruptcy and ask to be exempted from the bill. They will have thousands of dollars with which to fight the bill and to hire propagandists to plead their case, but not one nickel for workers' wage increases. I speak today for the unorganized, unfinanced and for the greatest part, voiceless workers who haven't the wherewithal to place their case before you...A low wage scale is actually a social subsidization of business inefficiency, mismanagement, poor direction and slothfulness; it helps the inefficient and slothful to keep right on in their old, comfortable and intolerant practices at the expense of their employees and the public welfare.⁶⁰⁹

Reuben's foresight proved ruefully adequate. All throughout the legislative session, labor bent over backwards to pass a minimum wage bill. They solicited support from progressive business owners like Economic Development Board Chairman Arnold Maremont. They allowed a series of exemptions for various types of industries. They even lowered the minimum wage from \$1.00 to \$0.75, all to no avail. In the end, the Senate Industrial Affairs Committee killed the bill before it could ever come to a full vote.⁶¹⁰

EQUAL RIGHTS

Illinois Fair Employment Practices Act Passes

1961 was fast proving to be a dark year for Reuben legislatively. He had been abandoned on his call for a 30-hour week and was defeated on his minimum wage proposal. The hits wouldn't stop there. That summer Reuben also lost votes on gender equality, secret primary ballots, cash sickness, help for railroad workers, and more.⁶¹¹ As the end of the session approached it appeared as though Reuben would end the year without any notable legislative accomplishments.

Yet it was exactly at this moment that one of Reuben's greatest civil rights achievements would come to pass—The Fair Employment Practices Committee Act, more commonly known by its acronym, FEPC. The bill, which would make it illegal in Illinois to deny a job to anyone "because of race, color, religion, national origin or ancestry," was of central importance to Soderstrom, who was known as "a leading figure in the fight for (FEPC) legislation."⁶¹² Every other year, Reuben would climb the capitol steps to give testimony in solidarity with fellow workers of other faiths and colors. Every other year, he would trudge back down in defeat. As he described:

During the past 18 years Equal Job Opportunity legislation has been introduced in both the Illinois House and Senate. Six times during the 18 years this type of legislation has passed the House of Representatives but its advancement each time was blocked in the Illinois Senate. On one occasion it came within one vote of passing

in both Houses. Illinois is now the only important industrial state that does not have a Fair Employment Practice Commission. It seems obvious that the enactment of this proposal is long overdue.⁶¹³

To be honest, however, Reuben had also contributed to the problem. One of the primary reasons for the bill's failure in the past had been its exclusive focus on business. Employers had long claimed that unions were just as responsible, if not more so, for the exclusion of African-Americans from the workforce, and tried to amend the FRPC to include discrimination by unions. Reuben had always pushed hard to block any such effort, claiming the government could not dictate the membership of voluntary associations. Soderstrom had always maintained that the vast majority of unions did not have "Jim Crow bars of any kind."⁶¹⁴ In this he was flatly contradicted not only by anti-labor organizations like the Illinois Manufacturers Association but by advocacy groups like the NAACP, whose Illinois President Dr. LH Holman argued forcefully that "unions and business kept Negroes from jobs." He charged that "in the East St. Louis area the building trades council conspired with contractors to deny employment to Negroes."⁶¹⁵ Republican politicians like State Senator John Graham likewise publicly wondered why "Kentucky union workers were hired in construction of a Southern Illinois power plant when there were colored workers standing in Illinois hiring halls."⁶¹⁶ FEPC legislation lacking punishment for discriminating unions was easy prey for conservative legislators and their business backers, who could credibly claim that if labor was serious about outlawing discrimination, then they should hold themselves to the same standard. As the FEPC's hearing before the Illinois Senate neared, it seemed the bill was again destined for defeat.

This time, however, something changed in Reub. It is hard to tell exactly what it was that inspired his shift. Perhaps it was the inspiring example of the Civil Rights Movement's nonviolent resistance, a practice that so clearly drew on labor's tactics of peaceful strikes. It could have been the absence of his old friend and mentor Victor Olander, who had been the strongest objector to any legislative restraint on union membership (in the 1940s, when Soderstrom appeared willing to accept such oversight, it was Olander who pushed hard against any such compromise). It could simply have been that in a year marked by so many agonizingly close losses that Soderstrom deeply desired a win.

Whatever the reason, as the legislative session progressed Reuben sat down with his opponents to hammer out a compromise. He found that several industrialists, such as Bell and Howell Co. President Charles Percy and Inland Steel Co. Vice President William Caples, were willing to compromise if certain key conditions were met. These men, who were once confident that business could overcome discrimination on its own, had grown convinced that "We will never have equality of employment unless a law is passed."⁶¹⁷ One of the biggest hurdles, however, was the question of labor. They could not unilaterally disarm; if they were to agree to oversight, they needed labor to take the plunge with them. They needed Reuben to reverse himself and come out in favor of the universal application of FEPC.

Yet as Soderstrom approached the Senate Committee in the afternoon of Monday, April 10th, no one was certain of what he would say. Would he insist on union autonomy? Would he admit to racism within his own ranks? The committee members listened with rapt attention as Reuben began:

William Jennings Bryan said one time, "I can prove by you that your neighbor is selfish—and I can prove by your neighbor that you are selfish—so we must have laws to protect ourselves against ourselves." SB no. 406 (the FEPC bill) will give us the reminder and nudge needed to do what's right and eliminate the discrimination in employment with respect to race, creed, color or national origin. This legislation is needed because we are all human. We all have our faults and we all require a check on ourselves of some kind. Every human being has likes and dislikes and prejudices because he is human. It is a human failing...

I honestly believe that it would be the ruination of most employers and employees if they were permitted to

have their own way altogether—and this bill proposes to save them from that ruination by keeping a check on them through the force of this proposed legislation...Morally and economically, (this bill) is sound. To deprive or deny the opportunity of employment to any of our people based solely on race or religion is obviously unsound and economically indefensible. It mocks our accepted belief in traditional dignity and consigns thousands of our citizens to jobs below their highest skills or to the ranks of those who are permanently unemployed...I wholeheartedly request, on behalf of all branches of labor, that SB no. 406 be advanced out of this committee on industrial affairs with a favorable recommendation. I want to do that in the holy name of labor, justice, and right and humanity!⁶¹⁸

It was a powerful movement. Reuben reversed decades of Illinois Labor policy and came out in support of a universal FEPC. As reporter Kenneth Watson noted in his explanation of the bill, “In addition to prohibiting private business firms and governments from practicing discrimination, the Illinois law also applies to ‘all labor organizations furnishing skilled, unskilled, and craft union skilled labor.’” The impact on organized labor would be huge, he said, because although some unions such as the Springfield Hod Carriers and Common Laborers Union had large minority memberships, “Negroes are to all practical extent non-existent in the higher-wage skilled unions including the Carpenters, Electricians and Plumbers.”⁶¹⁹

Reuben Fights Off 5 Challengers and Holds Office

Predictably, many in Illinois labor were less than excited about the passage of such legislation. Tensions over discrimination again broke out repeatedly at the Illinois convention later that year. The biggest fight occurred over Resolution 63, which stated in part “That this convention go on record to appoint or elect a large, racially-integrated committee to study, discuss, and adopt means by which they can establish an effective, racially-integrated apprenticeship program.”⁶²⁰ The sponsor, delegate Holston E. Black, Jr., an African-American member of Steelworkers No. 1063, Granite City, had also specifically identified “Negros” as being denied opportunity at an apprenticeship. This insertion evoked a long argument over whether African-Americans should be given special attention or protection. At the height of the fight, Black denounced those who denied that those who shared the color of his skin suffered a more separate and vicious kind of discrimination, declaring:

We are afraid to face the fact when you say “Negro” you may be stepping on someone’s toes. Well, you are not stepping on my toes when you say Negro, because I am a Negro. I can never be anything but a Negro. But I do want my rights as a citizen of the United States and as a brother, and I say brother in the union. I hope that word means something. We talk about brotherhood and democracy. We have to live up to it.

I feel the apprenticeship program should be opened to me, as well as anyone else. Why didn’t I use the word “minority groups?” As far as I am concerned, there is a distinct line that separates in the United States the Caucasian and the Negro. There may be some others, Mexicans that fall into that category because of the pigmentation of their skin...

If we look around this hall we see many Caucasians, they are in the majority here. We don’t know if they are Germans, Jews, Swedish, or what they are. But if you look at the pigmentation here of the skin of my Negro brothers, there is no question in your mind of what we are. So when we go up to the apprenticeship program window and say, “We would like to be a member of the apprentice program,” we are automatically excluded because of the pigmentation of our skin. We have to get some training. If we don’t, we are going to be lost. We want to keep this country for all of us. We want to be strong as a United States of America, not as a divided United States, Negroes and whites. We want it as citizens of the United States. That is all we are asking, an effective, racially-integrated apprenticeship program, depriving no one of their rights.⁶²¹

Sadly, Black lost the fight. The word “Negroes” was removed from the resolution.

These heightened racial tensions, combined with lingering anger over last year’s convention fight, resulted in five separate candidates being nominated as candidates to supplant Reuben as President at the Illinois AFL-CIO convention.⁶²² The move was remarkable on two levels. First because Soderstrom had for so long run unopposed, even in the organization’s most chaotic years. Second, by trying to push for a Presidential vote at the convention instead of by a general vote, Reuben’s opponents hoped to effectively mount a procedural coup through the capture of a small number of delegates. Reuben pushed back hard, warning the delegates:

We have always had the referendum method of electing officers in our conventions. It is really wrong to take the vote away from 1,200,000 people and give it to something like 1,800 delegates. The method we have makes it impossible for the people who detest the labor organizations to tamper with the elections. You can tamper with some 1,800 delegates. People from the outside, enemies of labor can do that, but you cannot tamper with 1,200,000 people. I think in Illinois where we have some of the strongest anti-labor organizations in the world, it is much safer to leave the election of officers of this great organizations in the hands of the membership than to reduce it to some smaller figure where they can be tampered with.⁶²³

Reuben survived the insurrection attempt with relative ease. Furthermore, in what had appeared to become a pattern, the assault on Reub’s leadership was parred (yet again) with a tribute to his service: a 50-year pin in honor of Soderstrom’s 50 years in the International Typographical Union. First Vice President John Pilch of the ITU visited the annual Illinois convention to perform the honors, calling him a “peerless leader” with a lifetime of experience and service.⁶²⁴

Reub responded in kind, paying homage to his union as the home of “Some of the finest men God ever made...When a baseball player makes a home run it is regarded as a big day for that team. I don’t know whether this is a big day for my fellow delegates or not, but it is a big day for your president and I want to thank the officers and members of the International Typographical Union for sending representatives here to dramatize my 50 years of membership.”⁶²⁵ Behind the applause and accolades, however, an uneasy tension was growing. Soderstrom’s experience was fast becoming a double-edged blade, with a growing number of delegates agitating for change.

At Miami Convention, Soderstrom Inspired by MLK’s Dream

In contrast to the Illinois convention, the national AFL-CIO gathering in Miami Beach was an uplifting and exciting event. Soderstrom, still high on the success of the FEPC, roundly approved of the Convention’s Civil Rights Resolution, which he described as “undoubtedly the most comprehensive proposal ever presented to any labor convention. It will successfully implement the many programs now underway to eliminate discrimination in employment with respect to race, color, creed, or national origin.”⁶²⁶ Fittingly, the highlight of the convention for Soderstrom was the keynote address by none other than Martin Luther King, Jr. The Civil Rights leader inspired the labor faithful, comparing the experience of those in the Civil Rights movement to the early organizers of labor:

Negroes are almost entirely a working people. There are pitifully few Negro millionaires and few Negro employers. Negroes in the United States read the history of labor and find it mirrors their own experience. We are confronted by powerful forces telling us to rely on the goodwill and understanding of those who profit by exploiting us. They deplore our discontent, they resent our will to organize, so that we may guarantee that humanity will prevail and equality will be exacted. They are shocked that action organizations, sit-ins, civil disobedience and protests are becoming our everyday tools, just as strikes, demonstrations and union organization became yours to ensure that bargaining power genuinely existed on both sides of the table.

We want to rely on the goodwill of those who oppose us. Indeed, we have brought forth the method of nonviolence to give an example of unilateral goodwill in an effort to evoke on those who have not yet felt it in their hearts. But we know if we are not simultaneously organizing our own strength we will have no means to move forward. If we do not advance, the crushing burden of centuries of neglect and economic deprivation will destroy our will, our spirits and our hope. In this way labor's historic tradition of moving forward to create a vital people as consumers and citizens, has become our own tradition, and for the same reasons.

Our needs are identical with labor's needs: decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old age security, health and welfare resources, conditions in which families can grow, have education for their children and respect in the community. That is why Negroes support labor's demands and fight laws which curb labor. Less than a century ago the laborer had no rights, little or no respect, and led a life which was socially submerged and barren. Then came the unions which brought him rights and freedom. That is why the labor-hater and labor-baiter is virtually always a twin-headed creature spewing anti-Negro epithets from one mouth and anti-labor propaganda from the other mouth.

History is a great teacher. Now everyone knows that the labor movement did not diminish the strength of the nation but enlarged it. By raising the living standards of millions, labor miraculously created a market for industry and lifted the whole nation to undreamed levels of production. Those who today attack labor forget these simple truths, but history remembers them.

I look forward confidently to the day when all who work for a living will be one with no thought to their separateness as Negroes, Jews, Italians or any other distinctions, where the brotherhood of man will be undergirded by a secure and expanding prosperity for all. This will be the day when we bring into full realization the American dream—a dream yet unfulfilled. A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character; a dream of a nation where all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone, but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity; the dream of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of the human personality. That is the dream...⁶²⁷

Reub was stunned with Dr. King's passion and eloquence. It must have been a thrill for the skilled orator from Illinois to be treated to soaring oratory from someone else, the young Civil Rights leader. He later described the event in a report, writing "An amazingly articulate and eloquent speaker at Monday afternoon's session of the convention was Negro leader Martin Luther King, who called on labor to end discrimination in unions and give Negroes financial support for their 'struggle in the South.'"⁶²⁸

As the year came to a close, Reuben celebrated a momentous year fraught with conflict both within and without. He had survived defeat and desertion, emerging to bring Illinois into the new era with the successful passage of its first Civil Rights legislation.

But a tough war was yet to come, starting on the little-trod streets of Cairo, Illinois...

PILLAR XI

CIVIL RIGHTS: RACE AND LABOR

A COMMON HERITAGE

The organized labor and civil rights movements are intimately and inexorably linked. They share a common history, morality, and mission—a connection leaders of both movements have been quick to recognize. “The American Federation of Labor came into being to fight for equal justice for all workers, regardless of race, religion or national origin,” President Reuben Soderstrom reminded his membership at the dawn of the civil rights era. “The founder of our movement was an immigrant Jew, Samuel Gompers, and the name we live under was suggested by a Negro delegate from Pittsburgh.”⁶²⁹ More than a decade later, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., echoed that sentiment. “It is not a coincidence the labor movement and the civil rights movement have the same essential origins,” he said in his historic speech at the Illinois AFL-CIO convention. “Each is a movement that grew out of burning needs of an oppressed poor for security and equality. Each was denied justice by the dominant forces of society and had to win a place in the sun by its own intense struggle and indescribable self-sacrifice.”⁶³⁰

The fact that both causes carried on that struggle in such similar fashion was no accident. Many of the tools and strategies now most closely associated with the civil rights movement were in fact pioneered by those who first fought for workers’ rights. “The civil rights movement is using the tactics developed by organized labor,” Reuben noted in 1965. “The protests, marches, assemblies and boycotts...focus and attract attention, interest and the effort of the American people, marshalling the moral, physical and spiritual support of an aroused national conscience.”⁶³¹ Both movements even faced many of the same enemies. Some of labor’s greatest opponents, men like Vance Muse, author of the anti-labor “right to work” campaign, began their careers as virulent white nationalists and segregationists. Similarly, people of color had long been abused by manufacturers and industrialists, who used workers from those communities as strikebreakers and cheap labor. This practice had the dubious bonus of turning white trade unionists and unorganized black workers against one another, a division labor leaders had long deplored. “Race prejudice is possibly, more than anything else, the strongest influence that the enemies of humanity have been able to wield to keep the working people divided and fighting each other so that they might exploit them all at their leisure,” wrote then-ISFL President John Walker, Reuben’s mentor and predecessor, in 1916. “Until race prejudice has disappeared from this world, exploitation of the people will go on.”⁶³²

EARLY DIVISIONS

Walker’s words proved prophetic. For decades, the natural bonds which should have united white and minority workers—a solidarity that had long been encouraged by union leadership—was undermined by the same prejudices and racism that poisoned the nation. “In the main, and quite naturally, union members possess the prejudices of the communities in which they live,” wrote the AFL-CIO’s Arthur Goldberg in 1956. Despite condemnation of discrimination by the majority of politicians, preachers, and union officials, Goldberg said, “The rank and file membership has not always been any more ready to follow their union leaders than their religious leaders on this subject.”⁶³³

This prejudice was compounded by the AFL leadership's reticence to confront racism within its own ranks. Since its founding, a number of the organization's affiliate unions had "color clauses" which expressly forbid black workers from membership. Several African American unionists, most notably A. Philip Randolph, organizer and president of the predominantly black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, vigorously protested this injustice. They appealed to the AFL to require its unions to forbid discriminatory practices. Federation leadership demurred, however, claiming they lacked the authority to compel their member unions to accept members of color.⁶³⁴

Soderstrom was deeply opposed to discrimination and believed in the need to take action against it. "There can be no doubt that there are many unfair discriminations against capable and willing Negroes, based on nothing but race," he wrote in 1941, continuing, "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 many more difficulties to overcome. He is entitled to the sympathetic aid of his fellow citizens."⁶³⁵ Soderstrom built ties within the black community during his career as a state representative, working with African American legislators to pass several pieces of legislation, including the Injunction Limitation Act in 1925 and the Anti-Injunction Act a decade later.⁶³⁶ As president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, however, he felt constrained by the AFL leadership's rulings.⁶³⁷

Furthering this conflict was the position of Reuben's Secretary-Treasurer, Victor Olander. Like Soderstrom, Olander believed in equal rights, and had in fact worked hard to help unionize minority workers. Once, when asked by a black union delegate how he could possibly know of the challenges workers of color faced, Vic responded "I know, because I organized them."⁶³⁸ Unlike Reuben, however, he firmly denied there was any substantive discrimination within labor, and forcefully rejected any attempt to resolve the problem as at best useless and, at worst, slanderous. When the ISFL delegates advanced a resolution in 1936 in support of Randolph's efforts, Olander attacked it at length, calling it an "utterly false statement that discrimination prevails throughout the American labor movement, which is the impression that would be created by the adoption of this particular resolution...I have repeated that time and again, and in all the cases the major problem has not been of discrimination on the part of trade unions—though there is something of that sort going on which ought to be eliminated—but discrimination of the public generally and of the employers generally."⁶³⁹ Under his advisement, Reuben withheld support from both internal reforms and broader social legislation like the Fair Employment Practice Committee Acts of the 1940s on the grounds that such bills could be used to undermine the legitimacy of unions.⁶⁴⁰

REUBEN FIGHTS FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

Reuben's position on civil rights legislation began to develop in the 1950s, however. There are several likely contributing factors for this, beginning with Victor Olander's passing in February of 1949. While certainly a loss, Olander's absence allowed Soderstrom to move Illinois labor past the secretary-treasurer's fears and to openly address and acknowledge racial problems. Later that year, Reuben came out fully in favor of the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) Act, putting the full weight of the ISFL behind the legislative effort to end discrimination.⁶⁴¹ When it failed to pass, Soderstrom vowed his continued support, and in the next legislative session testified on behalf of the FEPC bill before the Senate Committee of Industrial Affairs. He called on white citizens of goodwill to embrace the push for racial progress. As he said in a speech the following August:

A lot of thoughtless people are asking today "Why all this clamor for rights? Don't minority groups know when they are well off?" But—have you noticed how many of the people who say that are those who have never met with discrimination? Before you condemn minority pleadings, just think how you would feel if you weren't wanted—not after having had a chance to prove your worth, but before and regardless! Remember that

America was founded by men and women who were annoyed to action by restrictions—on jobs, on religion, on speech...Can we, therefore, be anything but patient and understanding of those who are trying to achieve what we have been born to—equal treatment, the right to be judged as individuals, not labeled as a minority and held outside the common life?

These minorities want the right to belong. They want the same rights we possess—the right to work and be useful, the right to economic security, the right to freedom from want for their families, and, most important of all, the right to participate on equal terms in our common life.⁶⁴²

At the same time, Reuben began working with the Jewish Labor Committee, an organization dedicated to combating anti-Semitism. Before long, Soderstrom was asked to chair the fundraising efforts for Histadrut, labor federation of the nascent state of Israel. JLC Field Director Lillian Herstein, impressed with Reub's "forthright and eloquent" argument for an end to all discrimination based on race, color, or creed, sent copies of his speeches to various newspapers.⁶⁴³ Within a few years, Soderstrom had garnered a reputation as a fierce defender of civil rights.

In 1953, the JLC decided to honor Reuben's work with a testimonial dinner given "in recognition of the work that Soderstrom, as legislative head of the trade unionists of Illinois, has done in establishing equality of opportunity for all people."⁶⁴⁴ The event drew national attention, and even featured a keynote address from the brand-new AFL Secretary-Treasurer William Schnitzler. Like Soderstrom after Olander, Schnitzler had brought new attention and energy to the issue of discrimination in the wake of AFL President Green's death on November 21, 1952. Speaking at Reuben's celebration on March 9, 1953, he broke with the national organization's past acquiescence in the face of racism, telling all in attendance:

Some people who profess to be sympathetic with our aims frequently tell us that our methods are wrong—that we can't compel people to behave better by law, that we must rely on education to change their thinking. That argument leaves me cold when I consider that segregation still exists in so many schools in American cities. How in the world are you going to educate people not to discriminate when you separate our children in the schools and thereby deliberately make them conscious of racial and color distinctions?⁶⁴⁵

While Schnitzler's remarks made national news, it was Reuben's acceptance speech that made the most eloquent case for the union fight against discrimination. Honest and insightful, the address asserted these two struggles were inseparable, and served as a call to arms for union and civil rights activists alike:

The American Federation of Labor has long adhered to the fundamental principle laid down by our forefathers—that all men are created equal...It would be a wonderful thing here tonight if I could say to you that our affiliated unions have always lived up to the principles laid down by the parent body. However, I cannot make such a statement because it would not be true. Despite the American Federation of Labor's consistent record of working for equality, we have been compelled, at times, to fight bigotry and intolerance in some of our local unions...I can say to you that Illinois is fairly clean, but it is not enough—we must make it 100% clean.

Unity between races, a fraternal brotherhood, is the essence of trade unionism...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...We, each of us, stand as individuals, jealous of the rights and determined for the freedoms of every individual both here and across the sea. We, each of us, stand united, too, knowing that there is no greater strength than that of union brothers and sisters, working against intolerance and discrimination, hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder. Unionism and the fight against evil and prejudice are a necessity fifty-two weeks each year. What we preach here tonight we must practice every day throughout

the year, and the years ahead.⁶⁴⁶

THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

It wasn't long before Reuben's words were put to the test. On May 17, 1954, the US Supreme Court unanimously ruled that segregating public schools by race was unconstitutional, sparking a fierce nationwide fight over the legality of institutionalized racism. A little over 18 months later, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to relinquish her bus seat to a white passenger, an act of nonviolent civil disobedience which soon blossomed into the Montgomery bus boycott. The civil rights movement had begun in earnest.

Reuben helped lead the legislative fight for civil rights in Illinois and beyond. He made repeated trips to Washington, working alongside Illinois Senators Everett Dirksen (R) and Paul Douglas (D) to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1957, a landmark voting rights bill, along with subsequent amendments in 1960.⁶⁴⁷ Soderstrom took care to adopt a bipartisan approach throughout, stressing his Republican bona fides even as he pushed for Democratic legislation. As he wrote to President Eisenhower:

In discussing this legislative session last week with US Senator Everett Dirksen, the thought occurred to both of us that perhaps the President of the United States could add his influence...this is an election year and the Illinois Republicans could make use of such a lift from the President of the United States...This is a sincere suggestion. I am a registered Republican. My son is a Republican member of the Illinois General Assembly. Our political alignment is perfect.⁶⁴⁸

In 1961, Reuben was finally able to pass the Fair Employment Practices Committee Act through the Illinois General Assembly, making it illegal in Illinois to deny a job to anyone because of race, color, religion, national origin, or ancestry. Privately, Soderstrom also worked behind the scenes to eliminate discrimination within specific industries. When African American Rep. J. Horace Gardner reached out for help in ending discrimination in race track employment in 1959, for example, Reub went directly to Arlington Race Track President Ben Lindheimer to resolve the issue, urging him to replace out-of-state workers with qualified black Illinoisans.⁶⁴⁹ In all such dealings, Reuben focused more on persuasion than provocation or threat, even as he insisted on resolution.

In 1960, Reub hosted the AFL-CIO Midwestern Advisory Committee on Civil Rights in Chicago, on which his second-in-command Stanley Johnson served as chair. Welcoming his fellow brothers, He encouraged them to enact lasting legislative change, and not to relent until the job was done:

All of you have stood firm against the forces that have been hurled against you during the time I have served as president of the AFL-CIO. Yes, you have been hated by those who seek your destruction but you have been admired and loved for your loyalty and devotion by all of those who knew about your struggle for justice, right, and equality in the civil rights field...Be not provoked or discouraged, but close your ranks tighter than ever before and support the candidates who are in sympathy with your cause.⁶⁵⁰

Four years later, Reuben welcomed many of those same labor officials back to Illinois, along with the illustrious Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to celebrate the momentous passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act at the Illinois Rally for Civil Rights held at Chicago's Soldier Field. The following year, at Reuben's request, Dr. King returned to speak at the Illinois AFL-CIO annual convention.

While Reuben supported protests and legal challenges to injustice, his support of civil disobedience was varied, particularly when it could result in violence. His position can be traced back to organized labor's fight over the CIO's use of "sit-down" strikes in the 1930s. These strikes, wherein workers locked themselves inside

their factories and refused to leave, were meant to provoke violent confrontations like the "Battle of the Running Bulls," a 1937 that left 13 workers and bystanders shot and 11 officers injured.⁶⁵¹ Reuben condemned such tactics at the time, warning "The public press of the United States, because of the illegal sit-down strike, has turned against the CIO."⁶⁵² Indeed, the CIO's actions cost them broad support; as President Roosevelt told CIO chief John L. Lewis when asked why he refused to publicly back the organization in its struggles with the authorities, "The majority of the people are just saying one thing, 'a plague on both your houses.'"⁶⁵³

Soderstrom knew the civil rights movement drew from the past practices of labor. He worried the 1960 "sit-in" protests, which began when four black students in Greensboro, North Carolina sat at and refused to leave a whites-only lunch counter and soon spread across the South, could result in similar violence and a souring of public opinion. His fears deepened when the police began making mass arrests and one of the protestors' lawyers had his house bombed.⁶⁵⁴ As he had done with the CIO decades earlier, Reuben advised civil rights advocates that "the most effective method, whenever tried, has been the resort to quiet counsel, to discussion between the races, to careful community planning...It is in the thoughtful conference, the meaningful discussion and planning that the moral appeal and the 'conscience of America' can do its work in the hearts of the people."⁶⁵⁵

Such caution came with costs. "I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate," wrote Martin Luther King from a Birmingham jail in 1963, "Who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice...who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom..."⁶⁵⁶ Dr. King was particularly frustrated with AFL-CIO leadership, which had withheld its support from his 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, even though it was organized in part by Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters head A. Phillip Randolph. King and others worried the success of labor leaders like Soderstrom had dulled them to the "fierce urgency of now"—in his historic speech before the Illinois AFL-CIO, King directly confronted the issue, telling those in attendance:

I want to discuss with you this morning, honestly and frankly, some of the challenges facing the labor movement and some of the challenges facing the civil rights movement, and the opportunities that we have in the days ahead. And I say, I want to discuss the problems with you frankly and honestly because I think if we are to be friends, we must be honest with each other...Despite the striking similarities in the origins of the labor movement and the civil rights movement, there are features today that are markedly different. The civil rights movement is organizationally weak, amateurish, and inexperienced. Yet, it has profound moral appeal; it is growing dynamically, and it is introducing basic democratic reforms in our society. The labor movement, on the other hand, is organizationally powerful, but it is stagnating and receding as a social force. As the work force has grown substantially in the past twenty years, the ranks of organized labor have remained stationary, and its moral appeal flickers instead of shining as it did in the thirties.⁶⁵⁷

Ironically, a similar critique would later be levied against King's approach by those in the "black power" movement, a collection of organizations which eschewed his idealism and trust in the "long arc of the moral universe" in favor of what King described as "a nihilistic philosophy born out of the conviction that the Negro can't win."⁶⁵⁸ In 1969, one of these groups rushed the stage at the Illinois AFL-CIO annual convention in Chicago, threatening to "tear the whole place up!"⁶⁵⁹

A COMMON BOND

Despite their differences, these two powerful movements shared an abiding bond that lasted throughout the era of civil rights. The relationship between organized labor and communities of color was and remains a

symbiotic one, driven by necessity as well as affinity. “The labor movement needs the Negro, and the Negro needs the labor movement,” said Rep. Corneal Davis, author of the Illinois FEPC Act, in his 1965 Illinois AFL-CIO convention address. “My plea to you is to join hands...For only as the Negro becomes a full citizen can the promise of the American dream come true.”⁶⁶⁰ As Dr. King wrote in a letter to Reuben later that year, “It is my firm conviction that the civil rights movement and the labor movement must be staunch allies. The forces that are anti-labor are usually anti-Negro and vice versa. So in a real sense, the labor movement and the civil rights movement are tied in a single garment of destiny.”⁶⁶¹

For Soderstrom, respect—both for the movement’s leaders and those they represented—was central to this all-important partnership. Reuben held Dr. King in particular esteem, praising him as “A man whose voice rings loudest and clearest in this great civil rights movement...a man who is, I believe, through all of these multiple and overwhelming labors, animated not by consideration of sordid gain but by the loftier purpose of serving his race and honoring God by uplifting and blessing the toiling millions of His children.”⁶⁶² He was devastated by news of Dr. King’s assassination in 1968, writing in his condolences to Mrs. King that her husband was “an eloquent Christ-like personality whose heart was beating with the heart-beats of poor and needy people, a gentle and considerate advocate of nonviolence who ironically became a sacrifice to his quality. He was my personal friend.”⁶⁶³

Throughout his presidency, Reub never wavered in his support for the civil rights movement. His steadfastness was rewarded; over the years, many civil rights leaders of state and national importance came to Illinois labors’ union halls and conventions to inform, give encouragement, and seek support. All of them considered Reuben a friend. From legal minds such as Chicago ACLU Executive Director Ed Meyerding, who cheered Reuben as “one of these giants who has struggled long and manfully against the forces of intolerance and oppression,” to religious figures like Father Joseph Donahue, who considered him “little less than a hero” for his defense of human rights, to advocacy groups like the Jewish labor committee, which honored him as “a lifelong foe of prejudice against race, color, or creed,” civil rights leaders in Illinois and the nation knew Reuben Soderstrom as a powerful defender of civil as well as labor rights, an advocate for two of the most important and intertwined movements of the 20th century.⁶⁶⁴

CHAPTER 51

1962

REUBEN WELCOMES AFL PRESIDENT, SPARS WITH ILLINOIS GOVERNOR

“Some people collect coins, some collect stamps and other curios. My most important hobby has been to collect gavels. I do have many convention badges and other mementos, but my most precious possession in the field of souvenirs is my gavel collection. I now have thirty-two of them”

-Reuben Soderstrom
Labor Day Address, 1962

SODERSTROM AND THE NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE IN CAIRO, ILLINOIS

Charlie Koen knew what was about to happen, and he was ready. He'd been prepared ever since he traveled to Carbondale the year before to attend an anniversary celebration marking the end of slavery. He still remembered the speakers—including a white-haired, animated labor man from upstate—going on about the importance of Lincoln's legacy and what it meant for the predominantly black audience. Charlie would later say it was then that he learned there was such a thing as the Emancipation Proclamation.⁶⁶⁵ He had stood there in the September heat, transfixed on the charismatic orator, his throat tight with emotion as he listened. It was a transformative moment—that day Charlie knew he'd never be the same.

Nine months later in his hometown of Cairo, Illinois, his moment had arrived. He didn't fear the insults or abuse; over the past three months, the 17-year-old high-school student had been beaten and arrested (not always in that order) so many times that he'd become numb to the thought of it. Besides, he wasn't alone; over 70 white college integrationists and black high school students like himself marched by his side as he took to the street. They looked to him for leadership; as President of the Cairo Nonviolent Freedom Committee, Charlie had led this nonviolent fight to end segregation in his downstate hometown from its very start. It had not been easy.

Cairo, sitting on Illinois' southern tip below the Old Dominion herself, was a “magnolia-shaded old river port” that had more in common with Birmingham than Chicago.⁶⁶⁶ It possessed a “social atmosphere akin to the Old South,” complete with a long tradition of inequality and segregation.⁶⁶⁷ Still, Charlie had an advantage his southern brothers and sisters did not—the law. Segregation was illegal under Illinois statute, and any business seeking to discriminate had to do so quietly. That's why Charlie's protests, which threatened to expose the town's treatment of roughly 37% of its own citizens, provoked such anger, fear, and ultimately violence.⁶⁶⁸

It started that June, when Charlie and a small group of demonstrators carried signs reading “Help us end injustice in Cairo” and “Jim Crow must go if Cairo is to grow” in front of Mack's restaurant when it refused service to some of Charlie's friends. Jim Cox, the store's owner, and his wife responded to the signs by turning

his eatery's power hose on the group and eventually signing a warrant for Charlie's arrest on charges of trespassing.⁶⁶⁹ Instead of scaring off protest, Cox's reaction sparked national interest. The national Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) sent Mary McCollum, a white 22-year-old former student of Southern Illinois University, to help Charlie.⁶⁷⁰ Together they endured repeated assaults (including at least one knife attack) as they spread the protest across the city and beyond. They filed charges with the Illinois Human Relations Commission against Cox and three other restaurants in Cairo, Herrin, and Mount Vernon.⁶⁷¹ They filed discrimination charges in court against William Thistlewood, owner of T'Wood's Roller Bowl, after he refused to admit 19-year-old Frank Hollis access to the rink. They protested against a pool operated by the Rotary Club when it turned away black swimmers.

Of course, local forces tried to smear the protestors as outside agitators and "out of control Negro youth."⁶⁷² Even the town's preachers got in on the act; when the Reverend Richard Smilie of the Cairo Ministerial Alliance slandered the demonstrators from his pulpit, two protestors responded by visiting his church in person the following Sunday for service, politely greeting the congregation and sitting in the front pew so the preacher could see their faces (Smilie had a visiting preacher give the sermon that day in his stead).⁶⁷³

This nonviolent approach drew an increasingly violent response. Time and again, and in increasing numbers, the peaceful protestors were arrested on ridiculous charges like "inciting mob violence," "disturbing the peace," and "disorderly conduct." Time and again, they were released on bail and returned to the streets. By that fall, the group had scored an impressive number of victories, desegregating a number of establishments and spurring an investigation by the Governor and State Attorney General.

It was getting expensive, however. Bail could easily cost in excess of \$300 plus costs, and while local supporters like African-American undertaker Eddie Ruffian did what they could to cover these expenses, the Movement in Cairo was fast running out of funds. Things got even worse that September, when the local White Citizens Committee of the USA (founded by Thistlewood) pushed a new "anti-parade law" through the city council, effectively banning peaceful protests.⁶⁷⁴ The local police had cleared out the jails in anticipation of filling them with Charlie and his friends. The plan was simple—arrest so many demonstrators that the Movement would go broke trying to post their bail.

That's what had Charlie Koen so vexed that hot September day as he and his fellow supporters took those first fateful steps onto the pavement—that their arrests could break the movement financially. The police and pro-segregationists made good on their word; they arrested 68 protesters that day, all under the new anti-parade statute. Thankfully, the SNCC and the Illinois NAACP offered to provide funds in support, but as October began it was clear to Charlie and his friends that they desperately needed help.

Reuben had watched these events with growing alarm. When the sit-in movement began in 1960, Soderstrom had approached it with some misgiving. While he approved of what the protestors were trying to accomplish, he disapproved of outright civil disobedience. As a labor leader he had generally obeyed anti-labor laws—even those he considered unjust—until he could get them successfully undone in the legislature or in court. He also worried that the Supreme Court would overturn any law challenging the right of private businesses to discriminate.

Much had changed in the last two years, however. In 1962, Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, the main opponent to the idea that the Court could and should protect the civil rights of minorities, was replaced by former Secretary of Labor and AFL-CIO lawyer Arthur Goldberg, giving the liberal wing of the Court a clear majority for the first time. More importantly to Reuben, the young people in Cairo weren't breaking the law. They were peacefully demonstrating for protections and rights already granted them in Illinois; rights and protections that Reuben himself had helped pass during his famous Anti-Injunction days in the mid-

1920s!

To Soderstrom, the Civil Rights movement was a direct descendant of the struggle labor—and Reub—had fought for decades. In fact, it's hard to imagine that Reub didn't see something of himself in young Charlie. After all, when he was the boy's age he'd participated in his first strike, a scrawny whelp standing alongside his fellow "bottle boys" in the glass factories protesting for safe conditions and fair pay. Just like those in Cairo, Soderstrom and his fellow workers had been unfairly portrayed as violent, unruly, and "other"—foreign-born outsiders who were using threat and intimidation to coerce the "poor factory owners." Just like Charlie, Reub risked his liberty and personal safety, repeatedly facing arrest and violence simply for exercising his constitutional rights. Above all, Reub understood the value of solidarity, the necessity of having others in your corner when your opponents seem so strong and the odds so great.

Given this, it is hardly surprising that when called upon for help, Soderstrom put aside his past reservations and answered their need. During the 1962 convention Paul Brooks, a union delegate and field secretary for the SNCC, came to Reuben and his fellow delegates seeking support for the fight in Cairo. Calling the situation "more an emergency and more important than any other freedom struggle at this time," he sought to raise \$50,000 in Illinois to carry on the "struggle for freedom." According to all accounts, Reuben offered his unconditional support to the fight, telling Brooks he had the "complete cooperation of labor," and pledged the Illinois AFL-CIO's resources in the battle to "wipe out discrimination."⁶⁷⁵ He didn't stop there; before the convention closed Soderstrom passed a resolution calling for the discontinuance of labor participation in Southern Illinois, Inc., an area chamber of commerce. He also requested Governor Otto Kerner discontinue payments to the organization's executive secretary, Jeffrey Hughes, whose salary was subsidized by the state. The next day Reub awoke with satisfaction to read the local paper's unambiguous headline: "State Union Backs Cairo Integration."⁶⁷⁶ The support helped keep the protests alive well into 1963.

But although the labor president may have initially identified with Charlie Koen, the young man would go down a very different path than the one Reub had chosen. Soderstrom's experience in the labor movement had led him to value integration. Like his mentors and idols, Soderstrom sought to weave organized labor into the social fabric, making it a fundamental institution of American life. Consequently, he sought public service as a legislator and used his authority as a labor leader to create a "seat at the table" for unions in Springfield. Everything Reuben learned taught him to treasure his "American inheritance," a reverence he'd driven home when Charles Koen first heard him speak in September of 1961.

Koen's experiences led him on a much darker journey. When he stood there listening to Reuben speak on the blessings of the Emancipation Proclamation, the emotion that overcame him was not awe or inspiration, but anger. Anger at the fact that there was no Emancipation Proclamation for the black folk of Cairo. Anger that his "American inheritance" had been taken from him. Anger at those who'd denied him that inheritance. Anger that spurred his first steps toward militancy. Charlie eventually discarded the nonviolent resistance of the SNCC for a philosophy of aggression; as he later put it, "There won't be any peace in town until blacks cut this racist cancer completely away."⁶⁷⁷ By the end of the decade Charles had become the leader of a militant group, was linked to fire bombings, and was eventually convicted for multiple assaults.⁶⁷⁸

Koen wasn't alone; eventually many within the Civil Rights movement shunned non-violence and embraced burning down the establishment they once sought to better. It was a move that threatened to swallow friend and foe alike, including the Illinois AFL-CIO. 1962 may have been the last time Reub heard of Charles Koen, but it was far from his last encounter with men possessed of the revolutionary impulses that threatened to undo the non-violent, progressive legacy he'd spent a lifetime building and protecting.

EDUCATION AND AUTOMATION

Dedication of the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations at the University of Illinois

Reuben's interest in the Cairo protests was likely driven in part by its roots in the Illinois school system. Reuben had little formal education himself; he never advanced beyond the 7th grade. Despite this, the self-educated Soderstrom demonstrated a deep and loving commitment to education throughout his entire life. Personally, he'd overseen the learning of his younger sister Olga and paid for her nursing school. His own daughter Jeanne was a teacher and school counselor, responsible for art programs throughout the district. His son Carl and wife Virginia were University of Illinois graduates; grandson Carl was enrolled in the pre-medical program there. Professionally, Soderstrom's first act as an Illinois legislator was a bill providing free textbooks to the schoolchildren of Streator. He'd served as Chairman of the Education Committee in the Illinois House since 1929, overseeing the appropriation of millions of dollars for all levels of education. Reuben also served on the national AFL Committee on Education from 1931-1936.

Of all Reuben's achievements in the field of labor education, however, perhaps none was greater than the creation of the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations at the University of Illinois. Located on the University's Urbana campus, the Institute was first started in 1946 thanks largely to Reuben's efforts in the legislature. The program proved quite successful, and in the winter of 1962 the University formally unveiled a new and improved Illinois Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations Building at 504 E. Armory Street in Champaign, IL. The impressive three-story structure, which featured spacious classrooms, faculty and staff offices, and an amazing library, was largely the product of a massive labor fundraising campaign, and when the building was dedicated that November 29th, Soderstrom was asked to be the first speaker. As always, Reub used the occasion to extol the virtues of unionism, asking those in attendance to expand their view of what labor truly is:

May I say a labor unionist is a most unusual and important person, a pioneer of the American spirit who believes in the fulfillment of democracy's promise. His belief arises out of the firm conviction of his own dignity and the dignity of all other men and an understanding of the world in which he lives...Among those who have not been in touch with it, the labor union is looked upon as simply a movement to increase wages and shorten the hours of labor, and to achieve these two objectives it is simply a striking machine. Those who have this conception of the Labor Movement have much to learn in connection with it. They should realize that the Labor Movement deals with the things that uplift humanity, and that everything, every step that has been taken to bring about improvements and raise the standards of the wage earners and workers generally, is a part of the Movement of Labor.

This, of course, includes education. I have been exposed to a little education in my time and it was good for me, and I know it must be good for the people whom I have the honor and privilege to represent. Education may be costly, but it is never as expensive as ignorance.⁶⁷⁹

Reuben also took the opportunity to articulate his theory of bottom-up economics. He continued:

Labor unions do provide larger paychecks. Larger pay envelopes mean that the consumer has more money to spend. This creates a mass market for the things we manufacture such as automobiles, television sets, sporting goods and living necessities such as food and clothing. Industry and business thrives, making more money, and this expands the tax base proportionally. This strengthens the Nation and provides revenue needed for our national defense, and to promote freedom and peace throughout the world, and to finance our space programs and to take care of our day-to-day services needed by our population.⁶⁸⁰

In five sentences, Soderstrom drew a straight line from a union wage to sending a man into space; such was the simple yet powerful oratory of the labor leader.

Soderstrom vs. Kennedy and the 35-Hour Work Week

While education programs like those offered at the Labor Institute fulfilled a union ideal, they also served a very practical purpose—helping workers adapt to the changing labor market. One of the biggest changes on the minds of all workers was the increase of automation. Although the economic crisis of 1961 had passed, many feared the job losses the nation suffered at the beginning of the decade were just the start of a larger trend driven by the mechanization of labor. In a new study released that year (and featured by Reuben in his *Weekly Newsletter*) Georgia Tech School of Industrial Management Director Dr. Walter Buckingham explored the human impact of automation. He worried that too many were buying into the “myth” that science was creating as many or more jobs than it destroyed. In Ford’s Cleveland plant, for example, 48 men could now do in 20 minutes what used to take 400 men twice as long to complete. Meanwhile, in a Chicago radio plant two workers were now assembling radios at a rate that used to require 200 men or more.⁶⁸¹ Even President Kennedy fretted about the impact of automation on the job market, telling the American people that “the major domestic challenge of the sixties is to maintain full employment at a time when automation is replacing men.”⁶⁸²

Reuben believed he had the answer: a shorter work week. Never one to quit, Reuben renewed the push he’d begun the year before, despite his plan’s flat rejection by President Kennedy’s administration. In his opening convention address that year, Soderstrom again made headlines by calling for a shorter work week, telling the crowd:

I sincerely believe as long as there is one person seeking work and unable to find it, the hours of labor are too long. As a matter of fact the 40-hour work week is no more sacred than the 60-hour week or the 44-hour week. After almost a quarter of a century it has become necessary, once again, to adjust the work week to the realities of the economic and technological situation.⁶⁸³

Having failed to convince the political establishment, Reub this time addressed his idea to the delegates themselves, calling on them to make a shorter work week a necessary condition of their contract negotiations. As the *Mount Vernon Register-News* reported:

Soderstrom, president of the AFL-CIO State Federation of Labor, said the best way to handle the (unemployment) problem in Illinois is for unions to reject any labor contract unless it provides for fewer hours. “In some industries it may be necessary to reduce the hours only 30 minutes a day,” Soderstrom added. “In other industries it may be necessary to reduce the hours 45 minutes or perhaps one hour a day.”⁶⁸⁴

Once again, however, the Kennedy administration shot down Soderstrom’s idea at the Illinois Labor Convention, this time sending new Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz to deliver the blow. From the *Decatur Herald*:

Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz said today a 35-hour work week is the wrong answer to unemployment...He said the way to balance the manpower budget—to put 820,000 new workers into jobs each year—was to enact legislation for more educational aid, medical services for the aged and for expanded markets...In sizing up how to meet the problem of about 4 ½ million unemployed, Wirtz said: “If we declare war on poverty, juvenile delinquency and the needs of the aged, it will put to the fullest test the manpower potential of our country.”⁶⁸⁵

That was the key difference between Kennedy and Soderstrom; when faced with the challenge of how to

return to the job growth of the 1950's (820,000 new jobs per year), Soderstrom favored controlling the supply of work through limiting hours, while JFK preferred creating a demand for services, particularly through the expansion of social programs. Although not often expressed in such terms, President Kennedy genuinely thought of the government prerogatives and programs that would later take shape as the "War on Poverty" as a jobs program, not unlike FDR's New Deal public works projects.

Reuben remained skeptical, however. Experience had taught him that government-sponsored job programs were temporary. Legislation limiting the work week, in contrast, had lasting impact. Moreover, he maintained, such changes had never hurt the economy. Just the opposite; providing working men and women with the time and means to pursue leisure had created a robust and hungry market, spurring economic growth. Reuben refused to relent. He took to print and radio to get his message out, calling for shorter hours as the best solution to automation and unemployment. His message predictably drew attacks from critics on the right. Lowell A. Nye, editor and publisher of the suburban weekly *The Harvard*, sent a letter to Reub after hearing him address the idea during a radio interview, writing:

I call that talk a bit irresponsible, if you really said it. Maybe those of us who are conservative in thinking should discard our beliefs and go hell-bent toward inflation, like you fellows who are kow-towing so supinely to labor leader thinking. Right now this small business (10 employees) is faced with paying \$700 to \$800 more this year because of a big hike in our unemployment rate. But shortening our work week certainly won't alleviate this problem. My men and women need every dollar they earn. If they got the same money for a shorter week, I would most certainly have to raise advertising rates... and subscription rates, also. This would be nothing but pure, unadulterated inflation...I hope you are not so completely bought off that you can understand this.⁶⁸⁶

Reub didn't pull any punches in his response. He mocked the idea that higher wages would lead to inflation, charging that Nye and his colleagues were far more concerned with their profit margin:

Those who work for a livelihood are bedeviled and slugged with high mark-ups and a variety of questionable merchandising methods. Perhaps legislation should be enacted compelling merchants to put two price tags on each article, containing the price they paid for it and the price they are selling it for. This would let the customer know the amount of profiteering on each transaction. If you are competent to edit a newspaper you will understand that larger pay envelopes give the consumer more money to spend. This creates a mass market for the things we manufacture... Business and industry thrives, makes more money and the tax base is increased proportionately. This strengthens the nation. Thus the union worker when employed steadily becomes a social and financial force due to his success in raising wages and shortening hours sufficiently to keep wage-earners fully employed.⁶⁸⁷

Reub also attached a copy of his keynote address at the state convention, adding, "I don't like the way you use the word 'bought.' I'll match my personal integrity with any newspaper editor in the business."

POLITICAL INTRIGUES

George Meany Visits "My Friend Reub"

While Reuben failed to convince the Kennedy administration of the value of a shorter week, the idea resonated with AFL-CIO National President George Meany. That summer in a speech to the Ladies' Garment Workers in Atlantic City, N.J., Meany said the AFL-CIO would "seriously consider" a nationwide campaign to reduce the standard workweek from 40 hours to 35 hours, an announcement that was met with cheers by the over 1,000 workers in attendance. He later told reporters he would present the proposal to the

AFL-CIO Executive Council when they met in Chicago that August.⁶⁸⁸

The announcement was a major boon for Reuben; it also appeared to help re-establish the connection between himself and Meany. Ever since the troubles surrounding the Illinois AFL-CIO merger, the relationship between the state and national presidents had appeared somewhat strained. Meany had not attended a single Illinois state convention since the consolidation, despite repeated invitations. According to AFL-CIO records, most of the national president's communication concerning Illinois labor during this period was conducted with and through personal envoys, rather than state organization officials like Reub or his lieutenants. Meany also appeared to offer little or no support to Reub in dealing with the post-merger challenges to his leadership. While there is no direct evidence of a break between the two, and each of these issues could have alternate explanations, a broader look at these facts taken as a whole suggests a chilling of relations in the years after the two organizations merged.

That began to change in 1962, however. Finally, after meeting with Reuben in Chicago, President Meany agreed to speak at the Illinois AFL-CIO Convention for the first time in the joint organization's history. During his address, Meany praised the Illinois leadership, especially the man he described affectionately as "my friend, Reub."⁶⁸⁹ His speech to the Illinois faithful repeatedly stressed the need for unity and political action, calling on labor to keep their energies focused on their shared goals and to keep a clear eye on who the enemy was; after reciting the long list of labor victories he reminded the crowd:

Each and every one of these things I mention were placed on the statute books as laws to protect American workers over the unyielding, undying opposition of the organized employers of this Country. This is one thing about the N.A.M. (National Association of Manufacturers): I read in the paper where they were going to start a campaign against us. Well, one thing about them—they are consistent. Each and every item that has come into being and been placed on the statute books for the benefit of the little people of this Country for the last 62 years has been uncompromisingly opposed by the National Association of Manufacturers. They have a consistent record.⁶⁹⁰

The lines were met with warm applause. Meany's convention appearance was positively received, and his return to the convention helped to reaffirm Reub's stature, not to mention his personal friendship with the AFL-CIO president.

Bad Blood with Governor Kerner

While Reuben's connection with Meany grew stronger in 1962, his relationship with another important political figure began to rapidly deteriorate. Reuben had never been overly fond of Illinois Governor Otto Kerner. True, he was a Democrat, but he had taken the office from George Stratton, a man Reuben considered friendly to labor and worthy of his personal respect. Labor's endorsement of Kerner was given over Soderstrom's objection, the first time that had happened to him in his three decades of leadership. Despite this rocky start, the two men should have been able to maintain an amicable relationship. They largely shared the same agenda, and Kerner possessed a reputation so sterling that it earned him the nickname "Mr. Clean." According to the *Chicago Tribune*:

(Otto Kerner) had a gold-standard political resume. Educated at Brown, Cambridge and Northwestern universities, he was the son of a former Illinois attorney general and federal judge. He served with distinction during World War II, and rose to the rank of major general in the Illinois National Guard. He married Helena Cermak, daughter of the late Chicago mayor. He served as U.S. attorney for Northern Illinois and as a Cook County judge.⁶⁹¹

Still, Reuben didn't trust him, and the gulf between them seemed to widen as the year progressed. First came Kerner's attempt (like Governor Green before him) to fill traditional labor posts with non-labor men. Soon after his election Otto attempted to install Chicago lawyer and department veteran Samuel Bernstein as Director of Labor, despite the fact that Bernstein did not belong to a union. Although Kerner eventually placed Robert Donnelly of the Electrical Workers Union to the post, his initial resistance led one "top labor leader"—likely Soderstrom himself—to describe the governor in the press as "uncooperative, aloof, inaccessible."⁶⁹²

Then came a series of rumors that Reuben received about the governor's plans to allow cities to merge fire and police departments in Illinois. When Reub confronted Otto, the governor denied any knowledge of the plan.⁶⁹³ This was soon followed by speculation that Kerner intended to separate the Unemployment Division and Unemployment Services from the Department of Labor. Again, Kerner denied any knowledge or intent.⁶⁹⁴ It is not clear where this talk was coming from, or whether Reuben believed the denials. What is clear is that Reuben took these rumors seriously.

It was an argument over taxes that ultimately soured the relationship between these two men. In November of 1962 Kerner called a special session of the legislature to transfer \$15 million from the motor fuel tax fund for use in public relief. Although Republican opposition to the measure was high, Kerner should have been able to rely on support from his Democratic power base—until Reuben got involved. The *Decatur Daily Review* reported:

Democratic leaders sought without avail to dissuade Kerner from pushing his request for this bill. They were influenced in part by a letter from Reuben G. Soderstrom, president of the Illinois state AFL-CIO, to all members of the House and Senate, urging them to oppose the proposed funds for transfer. Kerner persisted, however, and inserted a section in his prepared message in which he lashed out at "special interests" that are opposing the transfer. These groups, he said, are putting special interests "ahead of people."⁶⁹⁵

Reuben certainly believed in providing adequate funds for public relief. As he testified before the Advisory Committee the Illinois Public Aid Commission that May:

Unemployment is our greatest problem. It causes almost all of our economic trouble. When the breadwinner is out of work, home conditions become bad, the wife is in a terrible state of mind, there is no income. If unemployed wage earners have not earned enough credits to be classified as wage earners, they are not eligible for unemployment benefits. They then must turn to Public Aid for a helping hand. The same is true if their unemployment benefits have run out or become exhausted. Revenue is needed to provide bread for unemployed needy people and the legislature should be called upon to produce the necessary appropriations. It is a safe assertion for me to make that the Illinois labor movement will support the state administration in its efforts to provide the money necessary to tide recipients of relief over the present emergency period.⁶⁹⁶

Still, Soderstrom opposed the governor's plan for good reason—he was worried that the diversion of funds would wreck construction activity by slowing down projects, costing jobs. He called for the money to be borrowed instead from the Agricultural Premium Fund, which was plush with unspent cash.⁶⁹⁷ The governor would hear none of it, however. From that point on, he considered Reub just another "special interest," no better than any other lobbyist in Springfield. The break was complete; Soderstrom and Kerner would forever remain at odds.

Despite some setbacks, it had been a good year. Reuben had joined the fight for Civil Rights in Illinois and got to celebrate a new era of labor studies at the state's premiere university. But he was still out-of-step with the Kennedy administration, first by vociferously opposing Lyndon Johnson, and then by butting heads with

the Kennedy administration over the 35-hour work week. However, the state of Illinois was won by Kennedy with the narrowest of margins in the 1960 election, and a massive 1.2 million labor votes sat at Reuben's fingertips. For that reason it is perhaps not surprising that our protagonist soon found an elegant, ivory white invitation in his mailbox...

CHAPTER 52

1963

KENNEDY CAJOLES REUBEN FOR ILLINOIS LABOR VOTES

“Thirty three years ago R.G. Soderstrom left his Linotype machine at the Times-Press to embark upon a career as president of the Illinois Federation of Labor. It was a recognition he had earned in the field of organized labor, for he had always been a leader in local and state activities.”

Streator Daily Times-Press
October 2, 1963

A DAY TO REMEMBER

Reuben couldn't stop smiling. Normally, that wouldn't be a remarkable thing; even at 65, the gland-handing labor leader was still known for an infectious optimism, his 5 foot 9 inch, 215-pound frame driven by a seemingly endless well of energy that drew anyone near into his orbit. Today, however, there was something different about the trademark smile—less the knowing grin of an assured orator ready for battle, it bore witness to an innocence and wonder, as if he were a child on his first visit to Disneyland. In many ways, he was; this was the day he'd been anticipating ever since he received the letter direct from the White House inviting him to a luncheon with President Kennedy.

He'd met and mingled with Presidents before, of course, from his early days stumping with Teddy and Franklin Roosevelt down through his work in Washington under the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. Still, this was something special; an official lunch in the State Dining Room was a privileged affair, the opulence of the pristine ivory walls and gold-damask draperies matched only by the intimacy of the experience. And there was something special about this young President: in particular, a dynamic magnetism that drew in even the most savvy and skeptical. Soderstrom had been excited by the selection of Kennedy as the Democratic Presidential candidate in 1960; he'd been considerably less enthused about the Party's choice of Johnson as his Vice President, however. The announcement, widely met with jeers from labor, had even lead Reuben to publicly reconsider his support for Kennedy, telling the press that labor may be best served by not voting at all to register their displeasure.⁶⁹⁸ The move nearly lost Kennedy Illinois; he won the state by fewer than 9,000 votes, a margin of .19%.⁶⁹⁹

That opposition (and its fallout) was a big reason why Reuben had been selected as one of the 33 labor leaders invited to the Capitol that May 2, 1963. The 1964 election was just around the corner, and the administration was worried about its chances. Kennedy believed his support of Civil Rights jeopardized his position in the South, especially in Texas (which he previously won by less than 2%) and Louisiana (where the States' Rights party took over 20% of the vote).⁷⁰⁰ He was also concerned that the economic stagnation of the past few years would suppress the labor vote. As he confided to his advisors at the time:

What is it we have to sell them? We hope to sell them prosperity, but for the average guy, prosperity is

nil...He's not unprosperous, but he's not very prosperous. He's not going to make out well off. And the people who are well off hate our guts.⁷⁰¹

All this meant two things; first, that the President must keep Johnson on the ticket for Southern support, and second, that decision must receive labor's blessing. It was with this political math in mind that President Kennedy had invited labor leaders from Texas and Louisiana, along with officials from media-savvy New York and the Washington Beltway, to a lunch just the week before to "reintroduce" the Vice President to labor.⁷⁰² As labor reporter Victor Riesel recounted:

A gay and informal luncheon gathering at the White House—which has gone unreported—was one of the biggest political stories of the year. In a deliberate and subtle move, President Kennedy laid low the rumors which have been widely circulated on the political demise of Vice President Lyndon Johnson...Mr. Johnson would not have been asked to this get-together if the President had not wanted his intimacy and friendship with the Vice-President talked about amongst the men who will give their unions' energy, manpower, and funds to the 1964 campaign. The President went out of his way to make this clear to the liberal and labor leaders present.⁷⁰³

While this initial meeting focused mostly on the South and Northeast, Kennedy swiftly turned his attention to the Midwest, inviting labor leaders from swing states including Michigan and Pennsylvania, and from West Virginia.⁷⁰⁴ On the top of that list, however, sat Illinois. With 27 electoral votes, the Prairie State was worth more than any other in the Union save New York and California—a prize jewel that could easily hold the election in the balance. Moreover, the "Daley Machine" had already milked the upstate of every Democratic vote it had (including, some whispered, many it didn't). If the President wanted to secure the Illinois vote, he would have to look outside Chicago for an ally. He needed a voice respected throughout the state, a voice listened to by the average guy in the middle class, a voice that could be trusted as bipartisan. He needed Reuben Soderstrom.

From the outset of the lunch Kennedy worked especially hard to ingratiate himself to Reub. Shortly before the melon cup au porto was served, the President rose to declare, "There will be no political speeches," drawing looks of confusion and disappointment from his guests. After a beat, the President slyly continued, "That's because I'm afraid Reub Soderstrom will ask for equal time," drawing chuckles from all.⁷⁰⁵ After a sumptuous serving of roast leg of lamb vert pre, the guests were given a tour of the White House. The President had other plans for Reuben, however. As his sister Olga later recounted:

President Kennedy drew Reub aside and took him on a personal tour. They went together to the elevator and the President said he thought Reub would enjoy seeing President Teddy Roosevelt's bedroom and President Abe Lincoln's bedroom. President Kennedy had apparently done some research on Reub and knew he had been a follower of Teddy Roosevelt and his Bull Moose Party. Reub really appreciated this extra personal attention paid him by President John F. Kennedy.⁷⁰⁶

It is not known what the two men discussed in private; perhaps they shared a few historical anecdotes of Lincoln. Or perhaps Kennedy took the moment to privately lobby Reuben on his needs in Illinois in the upcoming election. In any event, it was a day to remember, and Reuben left the White House deeply impressed by not just the office or attention but by the man himself. Soderstrom not been so taken with a President since FDR, a man who, just like JFK, was born to wealth and privilege but built his legacy on improving life for all, especially the poor and dispossessed. As he subsequently wrote of Kennedy, "He possessed the rare faculty of displaying a personal interest in the welfare of all the people of this great Nation, regardless of race or color. It mattered not to him whether they were rich or poor, black or white. He was their accepted guide and pilot."⁷⁰⁷ Whatever transpired during their fateful meeting certainly swayed

Soderstrom; he committed to give the President his voice and full support in the coming election.

But he would never have the chance. A few months later, an assassin's bullet took the life of the dynamic leader in Dallas, Texas, leaving the nation in a state of shock and revulsion. Reuben had only begun to know the new President, and the sudden loss hit him like a punch to the gut. Two weeks after the assassination, Reuben spoke to the Delegates of the 15th Annual Central Labor Union Conference in the gleaming, new North Wing of the University of Illinois's Illinois Union Building at Urbana. He took the opportunity to eulogize the fallen leader, giving shape and voice to the grief that clutched at the heart of so many in labor and beyond. To Reub, JFK's life and loss was not only a tragedy but a lesson, an example for the nation whose sudden loss made his moral example all the more important:

The members of the Labor Movement, like all other good people in our blessed land, are still badly shaken up over the cowardly and incredible assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy...John F. Kennedy, at times gay and witty, was indeed a grand national leader, blessed with a delightful family, a charmingly attractive wife and two beautiful children. He was also very wealthy. In fact he had everything most of us want or would like very much to have. Instead of retiring, however, into a pleasant field of personal comfort, pleasure, travel, and amusement, which he could have done, he chose to spend his time, talents, and mental energies at shouldering the burdens, problems, and troubles of our people and especially working people. That is why wage earners mourn.

It is difficult to estimate how much we have lost...The loss to the Labor Movement is deep and crushing; the loss to the Nation and the world is historic and overpowering. John F. Kennedy was a man of intellect as well as action. He somehow represented vitality and energy, the intelligence and enthusiasm, the courage and the hope of these United States in the middle of this 20th century...

Among the last words John F. Kennedy wrote were these: "In a world full of frustration, America's leadership must be guided by the lights of learning and reason." Momentarily the light of reason was extinguished by the crack of a rifle shot in Dallas on November 22nd. But that light is, in reality, inextinguishable, and with the aid of our schools, colleges, universities, the Labor Movement and the Great Ruler Above, it will show the way to our Country and our Country's leaders as we mourn for the 35th President of the United States in the turbulent days ahead.⁷⁰⁸

POLITICS OLD AND NEW

Both Governor and Statehouse Unfriendly to Labor

The death of President Kennedy united the nation in grief. It was a unity that had been sorely lacking for most of 1963, especially in Illinois. The year did not start well for labor politically; the 1962 elections ushered in substantial Republican majorities in both the House and Senate, giving anti-labor interests a firm hold on the General Assembly.⁷⁰⁹ Democrats still held the Governor's mansion, but there was no love lost between Soderstrom and Kerner. Soderstrom believed the Governor was behind anti-labor initiatives like the proposed merging of Police and Firefighting forces and the attempted reorganization of the Illinois Department of Labor (charges which Kerner fervently denied).⁷¹⁰ More importantly, Reuben disliked Otto for his record on labor legislation. In the 1963 session the Governor vetoed a host of labor bills that Soderstrom had shepherded through the General Assembly. As Reuben ruefully reported to the delegates that year:

The Governor vetoed a number of Labor proposals. He vetoed the 40-hour week bill for State Employees, and the bill proposing to extend Unemployment Insurance Benefits to State Employees paid entirely out of Federal funds. He vetoed the bill proposing an increase in wages for fire fighters and policemen, and also the bill

designed to prevent mergers of firemen and police forces. No fire fighter wants to be a policeman, and no policeman wants to be a fire fighter. He also vetoed the bill proposing to improve barber shop standards, and limit the number of Illinois barber colleges to forty.⁷¹¹

To further complicate matters, the Illinois press in 1963 cast renewed and negative attention on the work of lobbyists in Springfield. The reasons for this were varied and complex; they varied from efforts by liberal politicians to increase transparency on political spending to machinations by conservative Republicans to sell to the public the idea that pro-labor bills were the underhanded work of “special interests.” Whether the attacks came from the right or the left, the caricature was the same—lobbyists were unaccountable and powerful lackeys who put the wants of their backers ahead of the needs of the common good. “I do not mean to say that all lobbyists are bad,” wrote Senator Paul Simon in the wake his ‘lobbying transparency bill’ failure. “Most are good, decent people who represent worthy causes. But if honest lobbyists don’t want to get tarred with the same reputation as the dishonest, they are going to have to speak up.”⁷¹² Republican Mayor and Lieutenant Governor hopeful Allan Walters was less subtle in his denunciation of those he claimed were responsible for prevailing minimum wage laws. “State officials tend to ignore the overall interests of the state, and direct their attention to those groups who can afford lobbyists in Springfield. Few citizens can afford such campaigns.”⁷¹³

Walters was half right; Reuben and his lieutenants *were* primarily responsible for prevailing wage, minimum wage, and nearly all the labor protections in Illinois law. Without him, the legal landscape would be far less favorable for the average worker. But unlike the lobbyists of the Manufacturers’ Association or the Retail Merchants Association, Soderstrom’s efforts were funded by the average citizen. In fact, Reuben had long refused to raise dues, choosing instead to live simply and rely on increasing the number of affiliated workers to cover costs. Reub maintained it was the size of labor’s membership, not its pocketbook, which drove its success. Furthermore, the bills and policies labor supported generally benefited not only workers but Illinois as a whole. More money in the hands of workers meant a stronger consumer base, creating a rising tide that lifted all boats. As Soderstrom told the delegates that year at the national convention:

Just about 30 years ago when our country was going through the worst economic depression in its history, there were only three million members in the movement of labor. Today we have seventeen million members...Without unions our wage level would be less. Our buying power would definitely be reduced. Fewer cars, fewer home utensils, fewer clothes and manufactured goods would be sold; the farmer would have a smaller market and the businessman would have less trade...Vacations with pay, for example, negotiated by labor unions, have made it possible for millions of wage earners to see America and enjoy their God-given heritage. Union-negotiated welfare and insurance plans have made it possible for the breadwinner of the family to provide better protection for himself and his dependents regardless of his income, and union-negotiated pensions have been a move toward removing the apprehensions and fears of old age. By supporting labor legislation, the labor movement has contributed towards a better day and better life for all the people of America.⁷¹⁴

This difference was largely lost on the press, however, which painted all who lobbied in Springfield with the same broad brush, often vilifying advocates like Soderstrom in the process. A prime example is a major piece by the *Alton Evening Telegraph*, decrying lobbyists as Springfield’s “Third House:”

Although they have no formal function in government, theirs is a voice always offered and sometimes sought by legislators in the other two houses. They elect no officers, have no well-established organization, and yet there always seems to be a quorum of them present on the third floor of the rotunda of the Capitol Building in Springfield when the General Assembly is in session...

Lobbyists are usually a combination of diplomat and hail-fellow, well-met types...and among the lobbyists are many former state legislators whose experience as lawmakers and working acquaintances with their former colleagues make them valuable...(for example) R.G. Soderstrom, Streator, president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor (AFL-CIO) whose son is a state labor representative, lobbies for the Federation. He also is a former House member.⁷¹⁵

“Wage Earners Have Been Slaughtered and Crucified”

Given this toxic environment, it should come as little surprise that 1963 was the year that the political system of compromise Reuben had spent decades building broke down for the first time. For decades, Reuben had been able to work with his counterparts in the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association and the like to manage changes to the Workmen’s Compensation and Occupational Disease Acts. As Reuben described the process:

We worked out a procedure of having representatives of labor sort of get together and incorporate what I term a very stiff bill of the things desired by the representatives of labor in Illinois. We know that it cannot be enacted but it’s referred usually to the Committee of Judiciary and the employers, they 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...The procedure works out very well because when the representatives of labor and the employers start to clash on some given point the subcommittee from the Judiciary Committees of the House and Senate usually make a decision for us, and in that way we attain what is known as an Agreed Bill.⁷¹⁶

This carefully choreographed dance was a staple in labor-management relations. It was especially important for Workmen’s Compensation and Occupational Disease legislation because such issues were “so complicated that it would take the entire time of the Judiciary Committee of both houses to consider all the details of the proposals that are involved in that type of legislation.”⁷¹⁷ But by May of 1963 this well-worn process had come to a screeching halt. As Reuben described in an essay that spring, labor and management had met over 20 times, but the results were “A big, ugly cipher. The Agreed Bill procedure has failed. The legislative subcommittees ‘lowered the boom!’”⁷¹⁸ Although the IMA was intransigent as ever, Reuben blamed the Republican-led legislature, not management, for the breakdown:

In a peculiar spirit of reluctance, the Legislative subcommittees joined with the employers and refused to arbitrate or decide the points of disagreement...The only thing agreed upon was that both sides have disagreed and that the subcommittees were evading the hot potato of carrying out their obvious obligations.

Reub grew angrier as he continued, the heat of his fury increasing with every word as he railed against the Assembly’s cowardice. He moved from the agreed bill process to the whole legislative session, which he claimed was one of (if not the) worst in history:

There has been less sympathy for, and less attention paid, to unfortunate wage earners in this session of the Legislature than any previous session within the memory of those who watch the work of the Illinois General Assembly. Instead, there has been a visible spirit of hostility and antagonism in evidence almost constantly. In fact, several lawmakers have displayed a frivolous and sometimes arrogant desire to hurt somebody rather than to help poor and needy and unfortunate people among their constituency.

Many lawmakers, of course, remained faithful to themselves and to Labor’s great cause, for which our union membership is grateful. They were true to their campaign pledges, but a surprising number of lawmakers

seemingly forgot their campaign promises and also where they came from, and deserted both Labor and their own constituents by joining with the most reactionary Illinois employers who are responsible for this frenzied, and we are sorry to say, apparently successful attempt to stop the painful march of injured and crippled working people in the legislative halls of this great State.

To date the hopes of wage earners have been slaughtered and crucified again and again by management in this legislative session. It has been a most disappointing performance by some of those from whom Labor has a right to expect sympathy and help. It is especially heart-breaking to employees who meet with accidents or disease while at work, those who have lost their arms, their legs, their eyesight or their lives. Many thoughtless and often callous employers, and their legislative representatives, do not even grudgingly express sympathy or mourn for those who are dead. Methinks they should hang their heads in shame!⁷¹⁹

Reuben's ire didn't ease with time. Just the opposite; by the end of the session Reuben was swinging at the politicians in Springfield every chance he got. As the legislature adjourned that June, Reuben thundered to the press, "A shameful Ebenezer Scrooge atmosphere of chronic reaction defeated the hopes and aspirations of Illinois working people during the 1963 session of the General Assembly."⁷²⁰ Reub's disgust with the legislature was on full display again that September at the Illinois AFL-CIO convention as he inveighed against them with his full rhetorical might in his Presidential Address:

Today we have a spirit of reaction in the General Assembly of Illinois. That same spirit was in existence 50 years ago. I felt at that time that many evils in industry could be corrected by legislation, and to combat this spirit of reaction more than 50 years ago, I filed my petition and became a candidate of the House of Representatives in Illinois. I went through a difficult, hard campaign, and everywhere I was accused of being young and I never tried to deny it. But as a young man I knew something about the feelings of young men and I knew what it meant to have a condition in our political society, which made it difficult for a young man to rise in life unless he became the favorite of some corporation.

I wanted the government to be as the fathers intended it—so that the humblest citizen in the land could rise to any position in the business or political world to which his merits entitled him. Things should be so that if a young man entered politics he would not find arrayed against him all of the great corporations, their financial and political influences unless he was willing to join with them in a conspiracy against the welfare of the people as a whole.⁷²¹

As 1963 came to a close, it was clear that Reuben feared the "spirit of reaction" was threatening once again to corrupt government, reestablishing the conspiracy that he had spent a lifetime fighting against. The political force and fortunes of business were once again ascendant in Illinois, Soderstrom warned, to a degree he had not witnessed since the 1920s. Now in the winter of his career, Reuben openly worried that organized labor's darkest days were not behind but ahead, its greatest fight yet to come.

SODERSTROM INVITES REV. ABERNATHY TO CONVENTION

Amidst Labor's many disappointments, there was one bright spot to which Reuben could turn, one success that stood out to those within labor and beyond—the advancement of Civil Rights, especially within the world of work. Despite legislative failures in other fields, Soderstrom succeeded in enacting a bill extending the Fair Employment Practices Commission legislation to cover public employment agencies. He also saw to it that Illinois was the first of 39 states to adopt the Poll Tax Resolution, prepared by Organized Labor and designed to amend the Constitution, to eliminate the payment of a poll tax as a prerequisite to become eligible to vote.⁷²²

Reuben's expansion of Civil Rights wasn't limited to the legislative field, however. That year he also helped secure the Illinois AFL-CIO's passage of Resolution 68, officially lending the organization's support to President Kennedy's pursuit of equal opportunity for all and urging all union leadership to continue to push "toward elimination of racial discrimination."⁷²³ In a precedent-setting move, Reuben moved the topic to the forefront of Illinois labor by inviting Civil Rights leaders to deliver addresses at that year's annual convention, including Representative Corneal Davis, the sponsor of the Illinois Fair Employment Act, and Martin Luther King Jr. himself.⁷²⁴ Rep. Davis, whom Soderstrom described to the audience as having "an eloquent way of wrapping up humanitarian issues in the cloak of morality and oftentimes in the white cloak of Christianity," gave an historic address to the Delegates, proclaiming that "The labor movement needs the Negro and the Negro needs the labor movement. Thank God, today there are more than a million and perhaps a million and a half Negroes in various labor organizations. For only as the Negro becomes a full citizen can the promise of the American Dream come true."⁷²⁵ He continued to explore the connection between the two, directly comparing the struggle for workers' rights to the current fight:

The surge of labor to its place of prominence in our society has been against tremendous resistance. Many men have suffered in the struggle; others have been jailed; still others have been killed and thousands have taken to the streets and endured hardship along with their families to achieve a decent standard of living for all workers. In this struggle to achieve fuller rights for its members, the labor movement has created a climate which has brought increased benefits to all Americans. This is a unique contribution of the labor movement to the history of our country.⁷²⁶

He concluded by giving his personal thanks and support to labor's leadership, singling out Soderstrom and his Stanley Johnson for their efforts:

Labor is a most important sector of our economy and the progress and growth of the economic life of our nation depends in a large measure upon the strength of the labor movement and the statesmanship exercised by its leaders in grappling with the crucial problems of our times. And let me say this, I know Reub Soderstrom and I know Stanley Johnson. I know these labor leaders, and, thank God they are working to right the wrongs, whatever they are, and against the minorities, against all people of all races and all creeds, not only in the state of Illinois, but in this nation. Thank God for them. May your zeal and dedication light the fires of a new crusade for equality for all men within the ranks of labor that shall sweep across the prairies of Illinois and bring the dawn of a new day of labor relations.⁷²⁷

Martin Luther King was unable to attend the convention; by the summer of 1963 he was busy working with labor leader and civil rights advocate A. Phillip Randolph, planning for their highly anticipated "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." When King addressed the estimated 250,000 supporters from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that August, one month before the Illinois Convention, he electrified the Movement and the nation with the now immortalized articulation of his dream for the nation. In Illinois, meanwhile, King dispatched the luminary Reverend Ralph Abernathy, Secretary-Treasurer of the Southern Christian Leadership Council, to speak in his stead. Reuben welcomed the Civil Rights leader with open arms, introducing him to the crowd as "A fearless leader of his race, a minister of the gospel who understands organized labor, a representative of the Great Ruler above, who believes in justice and right and freedom. I feel highly honored to be permitted to present to you this great spiritual leader, one of the greatest exponents of human rights of our time."⁷²⁸ In a masterful speech, the Reverend Abernathy called for solidarity in the struggle to come:

As Americans we are at one of the most difficult periods and difficult stages in our history. We have not as yet fully realized we are all brothers and a man must be judged by the quality of his soul and not by the color of his skin or the texture of his hair, or the pigment found beneath his skin. We are all tied together in one single

bond of mutuality and what affects one affects all of us. I feel and I know, we are brothers and sisters, that we are allies together for I have discovered that these forces that are anti-Negro, are anti-Jewish, anti-minority, whatever group it might be, are also anti-labor. So we have a very close kinship and we are fighting to achieve as Americans the same goals.

We must make it clear the Negro will no longer be satisfied with second class citizenship and that you will no longer be satisfied with any minority, whether it be the Negro, the Puerto Rican, the Mexican, or any other minority group having second class citizenship here in the United States of America. We are not just asking that labor support us, but I want to assure you today that more than ever before, know that the civil rights organizations will support you also. If you will do your job, and if I will do my job and if every American citizen will do his job we will all be able to stand and sing together.⁷²⁹

As Abernathy finished to applause, Reuben took to the stage to reaffirm Labor's support, proclaiming "The Negroes of Illinois are helping the labor movement... and the labor movement in turn is helping the Negro. We are standing together and working together to attain these objectives...Regardless of color, most citizens of Illinois know in their hearts the time for stalling and explanations is over and the time is here to establish equality in the field of employment on this great frontier of civil rights."⁷³⁰

REUBEN'S PROTÉGÉ, BOB GIBSON

The 1963 convention was a rousing success, a stirring display of solidarity and resolve. Sadly, the joy it wrought was soon shattered by the tragic death of the nation's beloved President, John F. Kennedy. JFK's untimely death was not the only fatality the Illinois Labor movement suffered in 1963, however. Early on the morning of July 1st, Maurice "Mac" McElligott, Secretary-Treasurer of the Illinois AFL-CIO, passed. His obituary highlighted the leader's endearing and fun-loving nature, reminding readers:

The wide-ranging friendships and respect, which Maurice McElligott developed over a lifetime of service, are not given to many...His genial and likable personality was a great asset in the organizing drives of the 1930's. Coupling this with his knowledge of the trade, and a desire to help fellow workers help themselves, made a winning combination...His cheerful spirit will still remain with us in memory and example.⁷³¹

What was less-spoken of, yet equally well-known, was the darker curse that accompanied the lovable McElligott's congeniality. As one colleague related:

Maurice was a victim of the booze...He'd drink a shot of whiskey and he never turned one down and by the end of the afternoon or day this glass would be full of whiskey. He would take a shot and then spit the rest of it in here and this thing would be like solid, straight whiskey. I've seen him do it a million times.⁷³²

Despite broad knowledge of this poorly-kept secret, Maurice's death still came as a surprise. After all, the Secretary-Treasurer had lived with his disease for as long as anyone could remember, and while most believed it would eventually be the death of him, few thought that it would come so soon or sudden. So when the Executive Council scrambled for his replacement, a fight soon broke out over who should replace him. On one end stood Stanley Johnson, Executive Vice President and longtime opponent of the AFL-CIO merger. He was Secretary-Treasurer of the old ISFL, and had originally been slated to assume the role within the merged organization before his belligerence during the negotiations made him unacceptable to the CIO. Although his current post was technically above the Secretary-Treasurer position, it was a temporary title that most agreed would be retired after Johnson (presumably) ascended to the Presidency. Stanley knew that if a young, popular leader were picked as Secretary, it would rob him of the ability to pick his own second and successor. He preferred choosing an older candidate, or possibly even taking the title himself.

On the other end stood Joe Germano. Following the precedent set by Walter Reuther, Joe had retired from the CIO Presidency willingly, accepting a position as one of the organization's 16 vice presidents. Germano hated Stanley, however, and was bound and determined that Mac's successor should be the organization's dynamic, young Community Services Director, Bob Gibson. Gibson had impressed Joe since their early days in the CIO, and he knew that if Reuben got the chance to know and work with him, Bob could become Soderstrom's preferred protégé.

Reuben, of course, was ultimately responsible for the choice. As President, he was the one who would recommend a candidate to the Executive Board, a recommendation that would almost certainly be met with unanimous approval once made. Although Stanley was Soderstrom's second, Joe was the one with the President's ear. The two shared a practical outlook and sense of duty. Moreover, as the leader of the CIO faction, Reuben was inclined to give Germano's opinion considerable deference. When it came to Bob's selection, however, there was a glaring problem: according to the Illinois AFL-CIO constitution, any replacement had to be a serving vice-president. Reuben was in a bind; he wanted Gibson, but as it stood it still appeared as though Stanley might get his way.

As the Executive Board gathered in Chicago that Thursday to pick Maurice's successor, Soderstrom took Gibson aside, Reub's piercing gray eyes staring him straight down as he spoke. "You know, Bob, that Joe Germano sure thinks a lot of you," he said.

"I think a lot of him, too," Bob replied.

"Well, I just want you to know we got ourselves in a kind of pickle." Reub explained the situation to Bob, shook his head, and sighed. "I just don't know what to do."

"Well, it's pretty clear to me," Bob said, trying to hide his obvious disappointment. "I understand, though. You do what you need to do." To his surprise, Bob's words were met with a wry look from Reub, who gave a quick nod of satisfaction, as if he'd just passed some sort of test. As Reub walked away and into the conference room, Joe came up with a grin on his face and a glint in his eye.

"You know you're going to take Mac's place. You think you can handle it?"

"Well, I know I can handle it, but Reub just left here and he doesn't think we can do it, and I'm not sure you can either."

"You watch me," Joe shot back with a wink, striding into the room.

Germano entered just as Reuben was calling the meeting to order. He started off by noting Maurice's passing with sadness, pausing to mourn the friend they'd lost. After a moment, Soderstrom broke the silence to begin their first order of business: picking Mac's successor. He made clear his preference for Gibson, extolling his service as Community Services Director. "We all appreciate his work, Reub," Stanley cut in with an impatient tone, "But the rules are clear. Mac's replacement has to come from the Executive Board. He's got to be a vice president."

At that moment Joe rose to his feet, puffed out his chest, and loudly exclaimed "Well, then, I quit!" All present turned their heads toward Germano, their faces full of confusion. Was the former CIO chief withdrawing? Was this the start of a new split between the AFL and CIO in Illinois? Reub maintained a stoic calm as an anxious muttering filled the room. The two men stared each other down for several seconds, both

finally breaking into smiles as Joe continued. “I’m resigning my spot on the Executive Board and I want you to name Gibson to my seat.”

Stanley’s eyes popped wide. Of course—why hadn’t he seen it before? After all, Reuben had become President of the ISFL without first serving as a vice president himself 33 years earlier when Walker chose him to lead, engineering Soderstrom’s nomination to the Executive Board in the exact same way. Reub must have orchestrated this entire scene in advance with Joe, and now he, Stanley, was entirely powerless to stop it.

“Well, then,” Reub continued with mock regret, “I want to thank you, Mr. Germano, for all your fine service.”

“Oh, I’ll be back,” Joe answered with a wink, drawing a chuckle from the Board. Reuben continued:

“Gentlemen, it appears we have a vice presidency to fill. I’d like to nominate Robert Gibson. Anyone want to second that motion?”

Five minutes later it was finished. Bob was nominated to vice president, then immediately nominated to Secretary-Treasurer. Joe was then picked to fill the vice presidency vacated by Gibson.⁷³³ Bob accepted the post with honor and humility, writing in the newsletter:

I realize more than anyone else the tremendous responsibility in trying to fill the job of our beloved friend and colleague, Maurice McElligott, but with the grace of God, the help of my fellow officers, and the leaders of the Labor Movement in Illinois, we can reach our goal together, and tackle the problems that face us with determination and dedication.⁷³⁴

Finally, Reub got the man he’d wanted—someone who he would eventually come to see as his heir and potential successor. Amidst all the challenges of 1963, this was an unambiguously bright moment.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

EULOGY FOR PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY

By Reuben G. Soderstrom, delivered Friday, December 6, 1963 on the occasion of the 15th Annual Central Labor Union Conference at the University of Illinois.

The members of the Labor Movement, like all other good people in our blessed land, are still badly shaken up over the cowardly and incredible assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. He possessed the rare faculty of displaying a personal interest in the welfare of all the people of this great Nation, regardless of race or color. It mattered not to him whether they were rich or poor, black or white. He was their accepted guide and pilot!

John F. Kennedy, at times gay and witty, was indeed a grand national leader, blessed with a delightful family, a charmingly attractive wife and two beautiful children. He was also very wealthy. In fact, he had everything that most of us want or would like very much to have. Instead of retiring, however, into a pleasant field of personal comfort, pleasure, travel and amusement, which he could have done, he chose to spend his time, talents, and mental energies at shouldering the burdens, problems and troubles of our people and especially working people. That is why wage earners mourn.

It is difficult to estimate how much we have lost. President Kennedy struggled for social justice, equality, human brotherhood, peace and freedom. He worked harder for a better day and a better life than any other public official not only in America but anywhere in the world.

The loss to the Labor Movement is deep and crushing; the loss to the Nation and to the world is historic and overpowering. John F. Kennedy was a man of intellect as well as action. He somehow represented the vitality and energy, the intelligence and the enthusiasm, the courage and the hope of these United States in the middle of this 20th century. On that frigid morning less than three years ago when he took the oath of office, he said:

Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage—unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

John F. Kennedy died in and for this belief, the belief in those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed, and which in his day it recommitted itself—rights which we hope to see exercised around the world, but which we are determined to see exercised within our borders.

No madman's bullet can stop this present march of human rights; no murder, however tragic, can make it waver or falter. In death as in life, the words and spirit of our newly martyred President will lead the Nation ever closer toward the fulfillment of the ideals of domestic brotherhood and international peace by which his administration has been guided from the start.

Among the last words John F. Kennedy wrote were these: "In a world full of frustration, America's leadership

must be guided by the lights of learning and reason.” Momentarily the light of reason was extinguished by the crack of a rifle shot in Dallas on November 22nd. But that light is, in reality, inextinguishable, and with the aid of our schools, colleges, universities, the Labor Movement and the Great Ruler Above, it will show the way to our Country and our Country's leaders as we mourn the for the 35th President of the United States in the turbulent days ahead.

Public officials, political personalities, business executives, religious leaders, and labor officials expressed shock and dismay at the assassination of President Kennedy. It was a terrible tragedy for the Nation and the world. The Illinois State Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations extends heartfelt sympathy to Mrs. Kennedy and the President's family in this hour of sad bereavement.

CHAPTER 54

1964

LBJ COURTS RGS

“Reuben Soderstrom and his colleagues have worked to make America a stronger Nation, they have worked to make it a better place to live...we have followed a course to a stable, prosperous, and good society, where child labor is outlawed, where minimum wages are guaranteed, where the elderly receive social security and the young find opportunity; where labor and industry bargain freely; where our Nation is safe with a defense system stronger than those of all the other nations on earth combined. We are not about to give any of those rights up”

-President Lyndon B. Johnson, Peoria, IL, 1964

SODERSTROM BRINGS VETERAN LEADERSHIP TO NATIONAL STAGE

Presidential Lyndon Johnson Visits Peoria

It had been a long day on the campaign trail for President Lyndon Johnson; he'd spent the morning and early afternoon in Des Moines and Springfield respectively, speaking from State Capitols, county courthouses, and even directly from his motorcade, using the newly installed limousine speaker to address the supporters that lined the streets. According to police estimates, over 300,000 supporters had already seen JBJ, from the band members playing “Hello Lyndon” when he emerged from his plane in Iowa to the masses chanting “We Want Lyndon” outside Lincoln’s tomb as he placed a wreath in tribute. By the time he boarded Air Force One at a quarter past four that Wednesday, October 7th, 1964, he must have been eagerly anticipating the more relaxed atmosphere of a sleepy downstate city like Peoria.

But if anything the large crowds in Peoria were even more intense. Over 3,000 fans met him at the airport, pressing against the fence in a near frenzy as LBJ entered his motorcade. Three times the President stopped his motorcade to wave to the crowd. When he arrived downtown, President Johnson moved to an open car, giving the crowds a better view. “He’s so much handsomer in person than he is on TV!” exclaimed one woman as he passed.⁷³⁵ After giving a brief speech at the Courthouse Square, the President made his way to the evening’s headline event—his address before Reuben Soderstrom’s Illinois AFL-CIO.

As the Motorcade inched its way toward the Peoria Armory, the labor delegates inside began to clamor in a mix of excitement and agitation. The secret service had gone to extreme measures to prepare for the President’s speech. Already they had cleared the entire hall, allowing the attendees back in only after they searched it to their satisfaction. Even then, the agents refused entrance to the galleries, severely limiting the number of guests. No bags or satchels were allowed in the room and photographs were not allowed during the President’s speech (presumably to prevent any confusion between the shooting of a picture and the firing of a weapon). All these precautions, while understandable, had exhausted the assembly. Reuben tried his best to settle their nerves:

Now, you are a wonderful group of delegates, and you have gone through a long, hard day. The President will be here in about eight or nine minutes, maybe less than that. Before he comes, we are going to ask the band to

entertain this crowd, to give the audience a chance to relax.⁷³⁶

The delegates broke into applause and cheers as Reuben stepped off the platform, gavel still in hand, to receive the President. As Soderstrom approached the side entrance, however, three large secret service agents blocked the doorway. "Sir, you can't have that here," one of the agents said, pointing to the gavel.

"Oh, yes I can," Reub defiantly replied, "I'm the President."

"You can't have a club like that around the President," the agent tersely maintained.

But Reuben refused to relent. He held on the gavel even tighter, telling the President's protectors that an abundance of caution was all well and good, but if they were so worried he'd use his ceremonial hammer to bludgeon the President of the United States they could drag it out of his 76-year-old hands. They declined, giving way to Soderstrom as he strode out to meet the President.⁷³⁷

Reuben greeted Lyndon and his entourage with full affection; all their previous disagreements forgotten. President Soderstrom led President Johnson and his entourage into the hall, eager to introduce his distinguished guest. The band struck up "Rolls and Flourishes" as soon as the doors opened, triggering a raucous chorus of excitement from the crowd. In the words of one eyewitness:

The Delegates of the 7th Annual Illinois State AFL-CIO Convention arose and extended a tremendous and thrilling ovation to President Lyndon B. Johnson. The ovation continued as President Johnson was escorted to the rostrum and the band played "Hail to the Chief," as the delegates cheered, whistled and applauded at great length...⁷³⁸

The cheer was deafening. Knowing when to give way, Reuben forwent his usual elaborate introduction, instead announcing simply "Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States!" The delegates applauded, cheered, whistled, and waved placards as the President of the United States of America took the podium to deliver his message:

Mr. Soderstrom, Governor Kerner, Senator Douglas, Governor Shapiro, Attorney General Clark, State Auditor Howlett, Mr. Paul Powell, secretary of state, my friends:

You and I have a job to do on November 3rd, and we are going to do that job, and we are going to take one thing at a time. But the first job is to get out of convention, get back home, quit our big talk and our bragging, and get down to work and get our friends and our uncles, and our cousins and our aunts to the polls, and elect Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey by the greatest landslide.

Then we are not going to repeal these laws that we have been passing ever since the days of Franklin D. Roosevelt. We are going to keep them. I wish I had all night to talk to you about them, there are so many of them. But together we have come a long way in 30 years, and there is not a single man or woman in this room that would go back where we came from or would want their children to go back where we came from.

We have abolished child labor and the sweatshops, and we don't want to go back to it. We rejected the arguments of those who fought our social security program and said it ought to be voluntary, and we are not about to go back to it. We have made collective bargaining the law of the land and we are going to keep it that way. We have said that we believed a laborer was worthy of his hire, and we have passed minimum wage laws and maximum hours laws, and we are not about to turn our back on them.

Today we have 20 million people living in decency and dignity off their social security checks. And we are going to make the system sounder and more sensible, and improve it and extend it, and not destroy it. We are not going to sit idly by and let a few men defeat us in our attempt to give this Nation a sensible, sane, wise medical care plan under social security.

We believe that every boy and girl in this land ought to be entitled to all the education that he can profitably take, and it doesn't make any difference how long we have to work, or how many speeches we have to make, or how many States we have to cover—we are going to build those schoolhouses and put a teacher in every schoolroom until that job is done.

We believe in equal rights for all Americans and special privileges for none, and we are going to solve our problems just like you workingmen solve them around the council table when you have a difference. We are going to reason them out. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, we are going to come now and let us reason together. We are not going to allow anyone to tear this Nation to pieces.

We don't hate, we don't fear, we don't doubt. We have faith, and we love our country and love its people and each other.⁷³⁹

The President continued, discounting the “voices of doom” that attacked such progress and the leaders who brought it. He vowed to fight all the way until Election Day, going “all day long” until every vote was counted. Most importantly, he promised the labor faithful:

If you will give us the mandate, if you, by your vote, will give us your approval, we will go back to that Capital City on the Potomac and we will take the programs that were started by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and carried on by Harry S. Truman, and advanced by John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and we will build a greater America.

During our 4 years it may not be possible for us to enact a program that will make every man a king, but it will be possible to preserve what we have, and to add to it, and to make this land a better place for all of us to live in.

So remember all the things that are at stake. Remember that you have much to preserve and much to protect.

Now, go and do your duty!⁷⁴⁰

The hall erupted in applause as President Johnson ended his speech and ceded the stage to Soderstrom, who ended the event with a message of humble praise:

Anything that we might do from now on would be an anti-climax, friends. You have been a wonderful audience, and this has been a wonderful day. I am proud of every delegate to this convention. You did yourselves proud!⁷⁴¹

Reuben had every reason to be proud; President Johnson's appearance was the highlight of a year marked by labor victories earned despite long odds and difficult circumstance. It was the year of the Freedom Summer and of the Civil Rights Act. It was the year of “the reapportionment,” a political standoff that threw state elections into chaos in Illinois. And it was a year that saw Reuben score unprecedented success for labor in Illinois.

Reub Called to White House Again

There was a reason for Johnson's visit to Peoria; in the 1960 national election, the Democratic ticket won Illinois by a razor thin margin. Reuben—with a constituency of over 1.2 million voters—was a formidable ally in winning the state again. And likewise, Johnson's visit was truly a coup for Soderstrom—a national first. US Presidents had frequently addressed national conventions of labor, and Senator John Kennedy (who last spoke at the AFL-CIO convention the week before his assassination) had once given his remarks to the New York State AFL-CIO via telephone, while a Presidential candidate.⁷⁴² However, no sitting President in the history of the United States had addressed a State labor convention in person. Moreover, Johnson was widely viewed to be “cool” on organized labor—and the feeling was mutual. Reuben himself had publicly railed against LBJ's appointment to the Vice Presidency in 1960, going so far as to suggest that labor voters may want to stay home on Election Day in protest.⁷⁴³

But a lot had changed. 1964 saw the new President crisscrossing the nation in search of votes, feeling vulnerable about his big Civil Rights push. He was also uniquely cautious with regards to the working vote. His rocky relationship with labor had nearly cost him the last election, with the Democratic ticket struggling in Illinois.⁷⁴⁴ Johnson needed to heal his ties with labor broadly and with Illinois labor specifically. Reuben's invitation to and private tour of the White House the year before had been a part of this effort, with the then-Vice President personally conveying his support of the AFL-CIO and its policies to the Illinois leader. Johnson needed Soderstrom's support, and Reuben believed he could leverage that need.

Soderstrom also had a new asset in the form of his Secretary-Treasurer Bob Gibson. In addition to his post in the Illinois AFL-CIO, Gibson was National Treasurer of the Young Democratic Club of America, and one of Bob's fellow members in this organization served as a labor liaison to Johnson. Moreover, Reuben knew Democratic Party officials in Peoria (the site of the 1964 Illinois AFL-CIO convention) were also putting pressure on the White House to make a visit.

Despite these advantages, the chances of the President speaking still seemed remote. Both Gibson and Executive Vice President Stanley Johnson thought they had little chance and advised Reub against getting his hopes up. Undeterred, Soderstrom made his request, sending the President a signed formal invitation.⁷⁴⁵

Johnson soon followed up on Reub's invitation with one of his own. On September 1, 1964, the President staged a labor gathering at the White House with what labor reporter Victor Riesel described as “the kind of skillful personal direction that would make Darryl Zanuck appear an amateur.”⁷⁴⁶ It began with a phone call to AFL-CIO President Meany, who was at that moment meeting with Reuben and his fellow members on the General Board to discuss their upcoming Presidential endorsement. LBJ invited the entire board to the East Room to discuss the matter; when they arrived the President surprised them with an address that was both personal and direct. As Riesel described:

He (Johnson) strode into the center of this circle of veterans of many political and industrial wars. He told them he and they were allies. He spoke of their own goals as though he has read every resolution ever written by AFL-CIO staffers. It was more than a pep talk. It was a program—though Mr. Johnson did not have a note in his hand.⁷⁴⁷

Reuben was impressed by the President's sincerity and skill. It was what came next, however, that truly surprised him—a firm commitment to help labor get a 35-hour work week, a pledge that went “far more than the combined promises of all recent Democratic Presidents.”⁷⁴⁸ This was music to Reuben's ears. Soderstrom had been a staunch advocate of such a policy even before it had been adopted by the AFL-CIO. As he had written just days earlier, “35-hour week is the wonder drug of this economic age because it will abolish poverty and wipe out unemployment....Any other scheme is a quack remedy.”⁷⁴⁹ This was the type of leader Reuben wanted to have speak at his convention, and during the Scotch and Bourbon social that followed

Soderstrom spoke individually with LBJ about presidential politics and a visit to Peoria. Afterwards, Reuben gave an unambiguous and enthusiastic endorsement of the President and his policies to the press.⁷⁵⁰ One month later Soderstrom was presenting the US President to the Illinois convention.

REUB SUPPORTS LBJ'S BIG PUSH

Civil Rights and the War on Poverty

Reuben and his allies in labor weren't the only ones impressed by the new LBJ. Across the nation, citizens responded to the unexpectedly progressive President's call to action. In his first State of the Union address, Johnson set out a bold, liberal agenda aimed squarely at helping working men and women free themselves from the ravages of poverty and second-class citizenship:

Let this session of Congress be known as the session which did more for civil rights than the last hundred sessions combined; as the session which enacted the most far-reaching tax cut of our time; as the session which declared all-out war on human poverty and unemployment in these United States; as the session which finally recognized the health needs of all our older citizens; as the session which reformed our tangled transportation and transit policies; as the session which achieved the most effective, efficient foreign aid program ever; and as the session which helped to build more homes, more schools, more libraries, and more hospitals than any single session of Congress in the history of our Republic.⁷⁵¹

Two major initiatives sprung from Johnson's historic address. The first, a "war on poverty" (a phrase earlier articulated by Secretary of Labor Wirtz at the 1962 Illinois State Labor Convention) waged through the Food Stamp and Economic Opportunity Acts, designed to help alleviate the toll of poverty and eliminate its prevalence through government work and training programs. According to the President:

This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America. I urge this Congress and all Americans to join with me in that effort. It will not be a short or easy struggle, no single weapon or strategy will suffice, but we shall not rest until that war is won. The richest nation on earth can afford to win it. We cannot afford to lose it...Poverty is a national problem, requiring improved national organization and support. But this attack, to be effective, must also be organized at the State and the local level and must be supported and directed by State and local efforts. For the war against poverty will not be won here in Washington. It must be won in the field, in every private home, in every public office, from the courthouse to the White House.⁷⁵²

Reuben couldn't agree more. This was the exactly the type of aggressive, wide-ranging government interventionism that Reuben dreamed of since the start of the post-war era. As Soderstrom wrote in his Labor Day Address that year:

In the history of this great Nation, Labor Day, 1964, becomes unique because the President of the United States has declared "War on Poverty." In the lives of working people and in the onward march of the movement of labor, there comes a time when wage earners must take their side, no one can be neutral in a great war, especially a war on poverty. The President of the United States is leading millions of citizens, who have rallied to him in this economic struggle, because he has convinced them that poverty is a needless thing in the Country of ours.⁷⁵³

Soderstrom of course shared LBJ's conviction and rejected the view of conservative critics that poverty was an inevitable, if unsavory, aspect of society; a necessary cost of civilization. Reuben had steadfastly preached a progressive view of history, convinced that long-standing social ills could and should be eradicated by strong

government action. Even in the 1960s, he was still a staunch New Deal progressive:

At one time it was normal to be poor. They were always with us and outnumbered all our other groups combined. This is no longer true. The Labor Movement has toppled over the old ideas and oppressive situations which produced and perpetuated poverty. Today only 20 per cent of our people can be classified as poor or exposed to incomes below decent living standards. Under the direction and compulsion of governmental guidance and Presidential leadership, poverty can be driven out of our economy.⁷⁵⁴

This idea of government directing and compelling action was crucial in Soderstrom's understanding of how to tackle social ills. Ardently opposed to the conservative philosophy that "As government expands, liberty contracts," Reuben had argued passionately that a strong, empowered government was not only good but essential:

Over the years it has become increasingly clear that the government can get this job done. Government can do anything. Government can take over railroads. Government can take over coal mines—we have seen these things done. Government can take our citizens and put them in uniforms and send them to the battle fronts of the world. Government can do anything!

Government can also make things favorable for the people, and that is the duty of government. Government can wipe out poverty, and the time is now upon us when this grand and thrilling possibility may become a reality.⁷⁵⁵

Reuben was also strongly supportive of the President's legendary Civil Rights Act, signed that summer to prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, creed, or nationality. "All of us who are interested in equality for the American Negro were made happy by the enactment of a Federal Civil Rights Law," he said in response to the bill's passage. "While it was not entirely satisfactory to organized labor, it is recognized as a first step in the right direction."⁷⁵⁶ Soderstrom's only critique of the Civil Rights Act was that it didn't go far enough, especially in regards to enforcement of fair employment practices like those he helped pass in Illinois. Other labor leaders shared his concerns; as William Pollard, staff representative of the AFL-CIO Department of Civil Rights, told the District of Columbia Board of Commissioners that September:

(The Civil Rights Act's goals) cannot be reached by a magic wand—they must be woven, strand by strand, throughout the fabric of American society. The fair employment practices laws we seek should include conciliation and enforcement powers. We want unions covered by such fair employment practices legislation. This has always been our official position...It seems plain (to organized labor) that most of the rights we seek to insure for our minority groups depend on our ability, first, to create jobs, and second, to assure their availability.⁷⁵⁷

Still, the passage of the act was cause for celebration. In Illinois, Senate approval of the bill was greeted the following day with a rally in Chicago's Soldier Field, led by none other than Martin Luther King Jr. himself. The Illinois Rally for Civil Rights was a massive affair, sponsored by nearly 200 Illinois civic and religious organizations, including Soderstrom's Illinois AFL-CIO.⁷⁵⁸ Reuben served as an Honorary Chairman, working alongside University of Notre Dame President Rev. Theodore Hesburgh and the Archdiocese of Chicago, the Chicago Board of Education, Chicago Board of Rabbis, the Illinois Department of Labor and others.

On the morning of June 21, he proudly escorted his daughter Jeanne to the Conrad Hilton Hotel to meet Dr. King in person before departing in official cars for the rally.⁷⁵⁹ Ascending the platform to sit beside her father as the four-hour affair unfolded, Jeanne must have been overwhelmed by the sight before her. More than

57,000 people had braved the morning rain to lend their voices in support. The crowd grew as the day continued, undeterred by the afternoon heat. Reub and Jeanne joined in the applause as Dr. King rose to the podium, listening intently as the reverend called on all citizens who believed in the cause of civil rights to continue the fight:

We must continue to engage in demonstrations, boycotts, and rent strikes, and to use all the resources at our disposal. We must go to the ballot box and vote in large numbers. But nonviolence is the most total weapon available to the Negro in his struggle for human dignity...passage of the civil rights bill does not mean that we have reached the end of the civil rights struggle. It was merely a step in a 1,000-mile journey. We have come a long way in our journey, but we have a long, long way to go.⁷⁶⁰

Dr. King's sentiment was shared by organized labor. Not willing to simply wait idly by, unions launched their own wide-scale drives to apply the Civil Rights Act to their own administrations. In November of 1964, the Steelworkers began a series of institutes that reached in to each of the USWA's 30 districts to suggest implementation techniques. "We intend to use all of the means at our command to make meaningful the civil rights law which we and so many others fought so long and so hard to have enacted," USWA President David McDonald announced. "Nothing less than full compliance will suffice."⁷⁶¹

Reuben was very proud of the role that Illinois labor played in the Civil Rights struggle, particularly with regards to training and education. To many in labor, the biggest barrier to African-Americans with regards to work was not outright discrimination but a lack of opportunity for training and education. To combat this, the Illinois State Department of Labor worked with the unions of Illinois to establish apprenticeship programs to provide training to all workers, regardless of color or creed. These efforts, particularly the Chicago Apprenticeship Information Center, drew national attention and the support of the U.S. Department of Labor.⁷⁶²

Wrestling with Illinois Reapportionment

Labor secured several landmark policy achievements in 1964. However, it still faced several significant hurdles in the electoral arena, specifically in regards to apportionment. In many states, districts were unfairly drawn, favoring less-populated rural districts over cities and other urban areas. This effectively meant that farmers' and rural citizens' votes counted more than labor votes; as Reuben noted in his Weekly Newsletter, "The rural minority—some 30 per cent of the population—still controls most state legislatures and has disproportionate influence in the U.S. House of Representatives."⁷⁶³

Illinois was one of the greatest offenders. Under the 1955 apportionment, Illinois House districts ranged in size from 104,349 to 313,459, according to 1960 census figures. This meant that 40% of the state's population could elect a majority of the Illinois House, despite the fact that the House was supposed to be based on population.⁷⁶⁴ In the wake of that census, the Illinois legislature underwent a prolonged battle to reapportion the state fairly, to no avail. A map drawn and passed by a special session of the 1963 Republican-controlled legislature was vetoed by the Governor, a move that was upheld by the courts in January of 1964.

All this meant that the 1964 Illinois State House Elections would be conducted on an "at-large" basis, meaning every voter would vote for every single member of the Illinois House. This result had two major effects on political candidates. First, they would lose the regional advantage they typically enjoyed. Second, the complex ballot would almost certainly encourage straight-ticket voting, resulting in increased partisanship.

This was a major challenge for Reuben's son, Carl Soderstrom. As a Republican representative from Streator, he had traditionally relied on his constituents' personal knowledge of him and his record. Now, however, his

political life was in the hands of voters who barely knew him. It was a heavily Democratic year, and Carl rightly worried that many voters who would normally be sympathetic to his pro-labor positions would vote against him simply because he had an “R” next to his name. Conversely, he was concerned that many of his opponents in the Republican Party would take to opportunity to drive him out of power.

Luckily, many local papers had noted Rep. Soderstrom’s record over the years and took pains to encourage their readership to vote for him. The *Freeport Journal-Standard* listed him as one of 26 bipartisan candidates (13 Democrats and 13 Republicans) who they believed deserved the people’s vote.⁷⁶⁵ The *Alton Evening Telegraph* soon followed suit, naming him a “Republican to mark.”⁷⁶⁶ Even Democratic leaders supported the Republican Soderstrom; that fall the Illinois Democratic Forum named him one of 12 Republicans to vote for.⁷⁶⁷ Of course, subsequent records also show Reuben’s strong hand in some of this, particularly with regards to Carl’s Democratic support. He wrote to Governor Kerner that October requesting Democratic support for his son, for labor’s sake:

Labor needs Carl in the House of Representatives...Please request LaSalle, Winnebago, Will, Peoria and Sangamon Democratic County Chairmen to urge voters to put an ‘X’ in the Democratic circle and in the square in front of Carl’s name. His defeat would be a tragic blow to liberal legislative support in Illinois as well as to me personally.⁷⁶⁸

However it was achieved, this broad support resulted in a landslide win for Carl. In 1964 he actually led the Republican ticket with 1,012,933 votes, an unprecedented win.⁷⁶⁹

Labor also won big at the poles. The people of Illinois handed an astounding 118 seats to the Democrats, while the Republicans won barely half that number.⁷⁷⁰ National labor leaders wrote to Reub to commend the performance. “Congratulations on your magnificent victory in Illinois,” AFL-CIO Department of Legislation Director Andrew Biemiller wrote after the win. “Obviously, a great deal of constructive work was done.”⁷⁷¹ The election success was certain to strengthen both Soderstroms’ hands in the legislative season ahead.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Competition within the Illinois AFL-CIO

While Reuben and his new team succeeded professionally, however, old tensions soon boiled to the surface. Most prominent was the agitation between Reub’s new Secretary Treasurer, Bob Gibson, and his long-serving Executive Vice President, Stanley Johnson. Stanley and Bob had shared a tenuous relationship ever since the merger, when Johnson wanted to eliminate Gibson’s post entirely, on the grounds that the merged organization could not afford him. There certainly was enduring tension between the downstate CIO man Gibson and the Chicago-based, AFL man Johnson, impatiently waiting in the wings to succeed the 76 year-old Soderstrom. A downstate man himself, it was rumored that Reuben favored the style of Gibson, and further harbored skepticism about Stanley’s leadership ability. For that reason, Soderstrom may have found himself in a position where he could not retire: he could not lobby for Gibson to take the reins without suffering the wrath of Chicago labor (and the AFL’s lingering doubts about their unskilled CIO brethren); on the other hand, he did not feel that Stanley was the man to take leadership during such turbulent times. The three men were in something of a stalemate and Reuben continued—probably quite happily—being the executive in charge.

Even after the merger in the late 1950s, Johnson tried to fire Gibson in the new organization’s first meeting. After that attempt, Johnson called Gibson, who had been waiting outside the meeting room, into his office. “You know what happened in the board meeting?” Johnson sourly asked.

“No, I don’t know what happened,” Gibson nervously replied.

“Well I made a motion to let you go, you know, because the CIO is not gonna pay their fair share. Now they’ve assigned you to me.”

“Well sounds to me like you lost the motion then,” Gibson wryly noted.

“Yeah, but don’t take it personal.”

“What do you mean don’t take it personal?” Gibson asked incredulously. “You’re gonna fire me and I don’t take that personal? The hell I don’t! I’m a part of that agreement, the way Germano explained it to me, and if you want to stay at odds with me that’s ok with me.”

“I said don’t take it personal,” Stanley repeated in a condescending tone. “I’m just figuring out where the money’s coming from to pay for all of this. Come in here next week at this time and bring me a mission statement for your job, ‘cause I don’t know what the hell a community services director does.”⁷⁷²

Stanley and Bob worked out an uneasy peace in the years that followed. Bob’s elevation to Secretary, however, threatened to reopen some of those old wounds. Stanley was wary of the younger Gibson, who could now pose a threat to Johnson’s election as President after Reub’s retirement.

Just exactly when that retirement might be, meanwhile, was another source of conflict—this time between Stanley and Reub. A lunch encounter that year, later recounted by Gibson, perfectly illustrated Stanley’s growing frustration:

I’ll always remember Reub and I and Stanley going to lunch in Mirena City, and he (Reuben)says, “Does anybody got anything on their mind? You know I come in here to see you fellas, if you’ve got anything on your mind feel free to talk to me. So Stanley says, “Well there’s something I’ve been wanting to talk to you about Reub.”

“Well, Stanley, now’s your time, we’re just relaxing, so tell me.”

“Well Reub, I’ve been here now for 15 years. Do you remember when you came over and talked to me about taking this job?”

“I sure do,” Reub said, “Just like it was yesterday, Stanley.”

“Well, remember what you told me that day Reub?”

“I don’t remember everything I said,” he says.

“I offered you this job and you’ve done a good job at it.”

“Yeah,” he says, “but Reub, you told me you were 65 years old and you were only going to be here about 4 or 5 more years and then I would be the President. Do you remember telling me that?”

Reub says, “Well I don’t remember phrasing it exactly that way Stanley but I just got to tell you something. Honestly Stanley, you ain’t ready for the job yet.”⁷⁷³

Johnson was slowly coming to understand that Reuben not only had no intention of stepping down anytime soon, and that he was more than a little reluctant to endorse Stanley as his successor. It was a realization that would begin to take its toll, creating further friction with Illinois labor.

Closing Out a Good Year

Despite these troubles, Soderstrom was able to end 1964 in celebration. Over the last year he had witnessed gains he once never thought he'd see in his lifetime—a Federal Civil Rights Act, a War on Poverty, and a Presidential commitment to a 35-hour week. He'd had the President of the United States at his podium. He'd celebrated his son's unprecedented electoral win in a statewide election. That December, Soderstrom was honored by the Fraternal Order of Eagles with the prestigious Grand Aerie Green-Murray Award in an impressive dinner in the Eagles' Hall in Streator, Illinois. An account of the event reported both the honors bestowed and their impact:

President Soderstrom was praised by those who spoke for the groups present as one of the Nation's great labor leaders and as one who had attained an unbroken record of humanitarian service for others in what is regarded by the fraternal Order of Eagles as a most difficult field of bewildering economic endeavor.

At the close of the speaking program the Eagles Green-Murray Plaque, suitable engraved, was presented to the misty-eyed President of our State Organization who was deeply touched by the accolades and tributes he received. Though understandably emotionally shaken, President Soderstrom succeeded in rising to the occasion, and after expressing his gratitude, pride and humility, entertained the audience with a review of labor's accomplishments in the legislative field which drew applause, shouts of approval and a standing ovation at the close of an address which, no doubt, will be long remembered.⁷⁷⁴

It was a wonderful end to an accomplished year.

CHAPTER 54

1965

SODERSTROM AND KING ADVANCE LABOR RIGHTS, CIVIL RIGHTS

“Under the leadership of Reuben Soderstrom, the cause of labor has been carried to the four corners of Illinois. Do not let the snow on the roof fool you, for inside our president the cause of God, country, and trade unionism burns like a furnace.”

-Lester Keck, President of the Springfield Trades and Labor Council, 1965

DR. KING VISITS SODERSTROM IN SPRINGFIELD

Bob Gibson, Reuben’s hand-picked Secretary-Treasurer of the Illinois AFL-CIO, was inspired. He’d heard all kinds of speeches and speakers; as an active member of the Young Democrats he’d listened to nearly every politician of note, from local legislators to U.S. Senators. He even introduced John Kennedy when he came to speak at Granite City in ’60. Still, none of them came close to the man he’d just heard – Civil Rights pioneer Martin Luther King Jr. Gibson later recounted:

He was a spell-binder. He preached a sermon rather than just a speech. He had a...I don’t know what it was...with his voice that he knew just how to build you up. He’d zap you with something he really wants to accomplish.⁷⁷⁵

King’s entrancing style and provocative message, delivered just feet from the new Illinois AFL-CIO Secretary, had put Gibson in a heady mix of adrenaline and inspiration. The feeling continued as he sat down to lunch with King himself. The setting didn’t help the sense of the surreal. The Glade Room of the St. Nicholas Hotel was an otherworldly location, its outdoor theme complemented by woodland murals, a forest of artificial trees, and a frosted-glass terrace that shimmered like sunlight. Surrounding him were the members of the Illinois AFL-CIO Executive Board, still sweaty from the 90-plus degree heat.

At the head of the table was Reuben Soderstrom, deep in conversation with MLK. Although they’d only met once before—a Chicago event at Soldier Field celebrating the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act—they talked as if they were old friends. Their easy rapport wasn’t entirely unexpected; after all, they shared much in common. As King wrote in his “thank you” letter to Soderstrom after the event:

It is my firm conviction that the civil rights movement and the labor movement must be staunch allies. The forces that are anti-labor are usually anti-Negro and vice versa. So in a real sense, the labor movement and the civil rights movement are tied in a single garment of destiny.⁷⁷⁶

Soderstrom couldn’t agree more. He viewed the Civil Rights movement as the child of organized labor, a direct inheritor and beneficiary of the mission, principles, and tactics that movement pioneered—a connection Reuben explicitly made at that year’s convention:

The civil rights movement is using the tactics developed by organized labor. The protests, marches, assemblies and boycotts are entirely proper and fitting, so long as they are peaceful, without intimidation, coercion or violence. They focus and attract attention, interest and the effort of the American people, marshalling the moral, physical and spiritual support of an aroused national conscience. The civil rights movement is on the march and I think in the right direction and the right way. In my judgment, they are going to overcome the obstacles confronting them just as labor has done.⁷⁷⁷

Soderstrom and King chatted with each other, trading ideas in the modern room. The pleasant scene was soon interrupted, though, as the Springfield Chief of Police entered and quickly made his way over to their table. He went straight to Reuben and whispered in his ear. Soderstrom's face grew sterner as the officer continued, his eyes scanning back and forth as he processed the information. As soon as the Chief left, Reuben turned toward the table and calmly told them "I hate to tell you folks this, especially in the presence of our honored guest here, but the Chief just got a bomb threat; they are going to try to assassinate Martin Luther King this afternoon. That would be the worst thing that could ever happen to this organization and to the country, and we're not gonna let that happen."

Bob Gibson could hardly believe his hears. His dreamlike haze had turned decidedly nightmarish; he began to sink in his chair and stare blankly forward, swallowed by his own thoughts.

"Bob?" Soderstrom thundered, quickly jerking Gibson out of himself.

"Yes Reub?" Bob answered.

"I want you to stay with Martin Luther all afternoon. Wherever he goes, you go. I need to go find the Chief and deal with this."

And like that, Reuben was gone, off to deal with the threat. Bob looked at Martin Luther King, overwhelmed both by the stature of his guest and the situation at hand. He genuinely did not know what to do next.

"It'll be alright, son," Martin Luther told Gibson soothingly, as if it was Bob's life, not his, that was under mortal threat. "Now let's see...do you know how to get to the Lincoln Memorial?"⁷⁷⁸

Reuben immediately proceeded to the police station while Gibson nervously sat with their VIP guest and talked him out of a tour around Springfield.

1965 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Lie Detector Tests

The threatened attempt on MLK's life that day as he visited Reuben's Springfield was yet another example of the gnawing hatred that accompanied the passage of the Civil Rights Act. It was an animosity born of deep and abiding mistrust, a feeling that unsurprisingly found its way into the employment practices of business owners. By 1965 a disturbing number of employers had begun to mandate "lie detection tests" as a condition for hiring or continued employment. Spurred in part by the new polygraph questioning technique designed by Cleve Backster in 1960, these tests were, in the words of Soderstrom's *Newsletter*, part of "an epidemic of test-enamored people (who) are asserting themselves by bedeviling wage earners in Illinois. Today decent citizens when seeking employment are having their dignity violated by physical tests, not always administered by doctors, lie tests and an endless number of other I.Q. tests. The testing craze is overdone and getting out of hand."⁷⁷⁹

Of course, the unreliability of these tests and their practitioners was a matter of huge concern for the AFL-CIO. As a leading polygraph proponent testified before a House subcommittee that year, a full 80% of lie detector operators were without any qualification whatsoever, while the remaining 20% were considered by the American Psychiatric Society to be unqualified.⁷⁸⁰ However, labor's primary objection to such tests was, in the words of AFL-CIO President George Meany, "to the invasion of privacy—a right of American citizens we believe to be most precious." He continued:

The lie detector is only one of many widespread and uncontrolled invasions of individual privacy...Of course, there are the justifiers—those who rationalize these actions on the ground of security, the prevention of pilferage and theft of money and goods, the production of 'secret' production processes and the ever-present quest of efficiency. Not one of these goals—important though they may be—is paramount, in our opinion, to the right of every American citizen to individual privacy of mind and body. That is a principle for which this Nation has fought many wars and suffered much. It cannot be bartered away; it must not be allowed to dwindle away....⁷⁸¹

Reuben was deeply troubled by lie detector tests. In the 1965 legislative session he threw his full-throated weight behind House Bill 247, a law banning lie detector tests in places of employment. To him, the fact that these tests were inadmissible as evidence in court meant that they were not pursuits of justice but attempts at control. In his testimony before the House that March, Soderstrom stressed "Neither the government nor private employers should be permitted to engage in this sort of police state surveillance of the lives of individual citizens." He argued passionately against the practice on constitutional grounds, telling the representatives:

There is always some humor associated with legislative work—one of my associates suggested that the "lie detector" test should be applied to the employer. Seriously, I do not want "lie detector" or "polygraph" tests used on the employer, despite the fact that some of them probably would not pass "cum laude." I don't want the "lie detector" test used on members of the General Assembly either, despite the "bad press" the Legislature at times is subjected to. And I don't want "polygraph" equipment used on wage earners as a condition of employment or continuous employment...they infringe on the fundamental rights of American citizens to personal privacy.⁷⁸²

Reuben's opponents struck back, with men like Chicago armored car company owner Robert Wilson claiming "The only beneficiaries of this bill would be the criminally inclined and the psychological misfits." Soderstrom replied that Wilson and his like "ought to be ashamed of themselves."⁷⁸³ In the end, however, he was unable to stop his conservative opponents from killing the bill, ensuring that the policing of U.S. citizens by private companies would continue unabated.

Betrayed by Governor

Reub's disappointment over the lie detector ban, however, soon paled in comparison to his raw anger over the defeat of House Bill 992. This legislation, designed to permit labor unions to enter into a contractual relationship with local governments, was vital to Reuben. Across the country, unions were making an epic transformation. In the private sector, union membership was declining; in the public sector, in contrast, union membership was exploding. The AFL-CIO was clearly beginning to view public sector union membership as vital to its growth, as did its state counterparts.

Soderstrom's federation, however, faced a significant problem. Along with Ohio, Illinois was one of only two industrialized northern states without a law allowing public employers to enter into collective bargaining

agreements with their employees. This was a huge black eye for Reuben; in 1945 he'd been able to pass such a law through the General Assembly, only to see it vetoed by then- Governor Green (a politician Reuben initially struggled with). In the past twenty years, he'd made some limited inroads on public labor statutes, specifically with respect to the Chicago Transit Authority, the University Civil Service System, and municipal fire departments. He also secured a law in 1955 authorizing the State Director of Personnel to negotiate pay, hours, and working conditions subject to the State Personnel Code. He'd even won statutes in 1961 and 1963 authorizing voluntary checkoff of union dues for state and local governmental employees. Still, no law requiring public employers to bargain or prohibiting them from interfering with the unionization of their employees existed.⁷⁸⁴

This political failure was due in large part to the "Daley Machine." Chicago Democrats controlled the city through a system of patronage and they viewed public sector unions as the chief threat to their power.⁷⁸⁵ This meant that for years Reuben was unable to depend on Democratic votes that had helped push such reforms through in other states. Still, after years of fighting, Soderstrom believed he had the votes needed to finally bring public sector protection to Illinois. HB 992 had 15 sponsors, 11 Democrats and 4 Republicans. He also had the support of Governor Kerner, who promised Reub he would send the message to his men on the House Municipalities Committee that they should pass it. He was confident enough in the bill's passage to use its pending passage in a pitch to Clyde Reynolds, President of the East St. Louis Federation of Teachers, to join the State AFL-CIO. As he wrote to Reynolds that January:

A special effort is presently under way to secure the enactment of legislation which will enable unions of teachers to enter into a contractual relationship with school boards. Legislative work is costly. It is carried on in Illinois through our State Organization at the low per capita tax of less than one cent per week per member. Your membership should come into the fold and thus contribute their share of the money needed to secure and hold their legislative gains.⁷⁸⁶

Passage of key bills like this one was the very reason for the State Organization's existence, according to Reuben. It was also the foundation of his leadership. It was his experience with the General Assembly, both as a legislator and advocate, which made him an effective President. As the bill's hearing began on Tuesday, May 11, Soderstrom was supremely competent. He sent his lieutenant Stanley Johnson to the Capitol to see the process through.

Stanley came back with horrible news. In a surprise move, the Committee voted down the bill by a vote of 17-9.⁷⁸⁷ It was a crushing defeat, and Reub immediately set out on the warpath to discover what had happened. Publicly, he blamed turncoat committee members, many of whom had relied on labor for their elections. His *Weekly Newsletter* excoriated those whom Reuben believed had betrayed labor with their vote:

The checking of roll calls reveals that a majority of those who voted wrong were supported in good faith by the labor movement in the last November election...The working people were defeated, downgraded and relegated to their usual subordinate position by some public officials who owe labor a great debt of gratitude.⁷⁸⁸

Privately, however, Soderstrom placed the bill's failure at the feet of one man before all others: Otto Kerner. The Governor, Reub maintained, had given his word that the bill would have his approval. When Soderstrom cornered the Democratic defectors in the aftermath of the vote, however, they all told the same tale – that in the days before the vote, Kerner sent explicit instructions to kill the bill. Reub was furious. Still, he had to tread carefully. He already had a strained relationship with Kerner – a powerful politician who enjoyed popular support among the Democratic Party and organized labor, even within Reuben's own Executive Board. To openly accuse the Governor of betrayal would invite a war that would benefit no one. Still, Soderstrom couldn't let such naked disregard of labor go unchallenged. Instead, Soderstrom and his Executive

leadership sent a jointly-signed letter to Kerner in the days after the vote letting the Governor know he, Reuben, knew exactly what Kerner had done, while tactfully placing the blame for the vote on “miscommunication” and undisciplined staff:

Our current gripe or trouble is undoubtedly traceable to mistakes of (your) legislative assistants of possibly someone who had ulterior political motives. In the General Assembly there is apparently a lack of military smoothness in carrying out the Chief Executive’s legislative desires or instructions.

On H.B. No. 992...the Governor’s legislative lieutenants disregarded his expressed desire made to our State President for favorable action on this proposal and they passed the word to Democratic House members to kill the bill. They did!

We can’t believe that you knew about the switch. It undoubtedly was unauthorized because in the past if a Chief Executive found a change in his position necessary it was always regarded as decent and a common courtesy to call in those interested and explain why the assured support had been withdrawn. Anything less than that even today with its low political standards, can be looked upon as very bad manners.

No notice of withdrawal of your support was transmitted to the proponents of H.B. No. 992 and labor received an undeserved and disgraceful committee clobbering as the result of a complete disregard or a deliberate misrepresentation of your position favoring advancement of this bill.⁷⁸⁹

As the letter made clear, as angry as Reuben was about the loss, he was even more disgusted by the lack of respect shown. He understood that a politician, even a friendly one, would have to occasionally act against labor to keep his coalition; that was politics. But for the governor to kill the bill without an explanation or warning was cowardly. This insult Reub considered even worse than the injury—the only thing he liked less than losing was being taken by surprise. It wasn’t the first time, either. Reub repeatedly heard from legislators that Kerner planned to support anti-labor laws or veto friendly legislation, only to have Kerner deny it when confronted. Soderstrom was owed, and if Kerner would not own his actions, he would pay in other ways. If not, Reuben vowed to drag his fight with the governor out into the public eye:

We have no desire to make a Statewide newspaper issue of the shocking treatment experienced. We do think this kind of “dirty pool” is unwarranted, however, and should never again recur. The Labor Movement is justifiably resentful and distressingly disappointed at the bill’s defeat and deeply offended by the shabby treatment received from those responsible for deceiving us as well as deceiving labor’s friends on the House Committee on Municipalities.

While legislation is desired no law is actually required for public bodies to enter into contracts with unions like they do now with everybody else, including contractors and employers. Organized labor is therefore requesting and sincerely hoping that the Governor of Illinois will try to make amends for the mess his meddling lieutenants have created. It can be achieved by urging all public officials to do what our late President John F. Kennedy did when he issued an executive order respecting the principle of collective bargaining and the signing of contracts with unionized public employees. This was the act of a genuine friend of labor.⁷⁹⁰

Reuben also characteristically doubled down on the seemingly lost cause, making it the cornerstone of labor’s legislative agenda. While he did not make his grievances with the governor known, he did start making a loud argument for public employee contracts in media outlets and appearances throughout the state. He wrote several articles making the case for the law, arguing:

The right of freedom of contract is a constitutional guarantee and it is inconceivable that the political

subdivisions should withhold from unions the obvious intent that a contractual relationship must be general in its application...Labor people do have the same freedoms as other citizens – freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of press and the right of freedom of contract. The way to lose these precious freedoms is not to use them or to let some political overlord bluff their subordinates into believing that they are denied some of these freedoms.⁷⁹¹

Soderstrom also made the proposed law the focus of his presidential address that year. “Union Chief Says New Law Needed,” headlined the *Alton Evening Telegraph* the day after Reub’s speech, quoting Reuben as he told the delegates:

Political subdivisions...are also employers and to the extent which they are employers, they should sign contracts with labor unions just as they do with service agencies, contractors or other employers. If we are to have a free enterprise system, labor also should be free to enter into contracts with public bodies.⁷⁹²

Reuben’s fight pitted him against powerful enemies, however—ones in many ways more powerful than traditional foes like the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association. This was a battle within his own ranks, waged against the very Democratic politicians and interests labor so often relied on, a fact which sparked some opposition within labor itself. It was a move with the potential to cause considerable trouble in the years to come.

REUBEN REBUKES POLICE BRUTALITY IN STREATOR

Legal Worker Dissent Met by Illegal Police Action

While Reuben focused on his legislative efforts in Springfield, a separate crisis was brewing closer to home. In March of 1965 the Glass Bottle Blowers Association (GBBA) called for a nation-wide strike, idling 64 plants across the country. Two of those, the Owens-Illinois and the Thatcher Glass Manufacturing Company, were located in Streator. Some 3,000 Streator citizens established picket lines at the plants, and soon began an effort to block a C.B. & Q. railroad engine from picking up loaded cars of bottles from one of the local plants. As the *Streator Times-Press* described that March 22:

Several hundred persons formed a living barricade across the “Q” switch near North Shabbona Street before 8 a.m. today to halt the engine from access to the Owens-Illinois plant with hundreds of other persons drawn to the scene as onlookers. The regular train crew left the engine at this point, with supervisory railroad employees prepared to operate the engine, but the pickets refused to budge.

Chief of Police Andrew Kolesar mounted the engine and addressed the pickets. He informed them they were on private property and asked them to disperse. The pickets were also told that sheriff’s deputies and state troopers would be called and arrests made if the strikers continued to bar the engine.⁷⁹³

In response to Kolesar, President William Brown of GBBA Local 140 moved the protestors off private property and sent the protestors down to the Shabbona street crossing. The police, however, seemed intent on a confrontation, and the following morning a combined group of Streator police, La Salle county deputies and state troopers violently broke the human blockade. Brown fought back publically, protesting the way the picketers had been “manhandled.” He declared the protesting laborers had been “double-crossed” by the police chief and moved his men back on railroad property in response.⁷⁹⁴ The C.B & Q. Railroad, meanwhile, used the incident against the unions in court, perversely arguing that the act of police brutality was an indication that the situation had grown out of control. Federal Judge Michael Igoe agreed, issuing an injunction against their respective unions, Locals 140 and 174, declaring “civil law in La Salle County and in

Streator has completely broken down.”⁷⁹⁵ Circuit Judge Leonard Hoffman soon followed suit, and a few days later the C.B. & Q. trains picked up the cars unimpeded.⁷⁹⁶

Reuben was outraged at the police actions in his own hometown. He immediately sent a note to Governor Kerner:

Strikes are sometimes necessary and the Streator walkout was more than justified. In the field of peaceful picketing during strikes there seems to be too many times when the wishes of the employer are carried out by the State Police and the desires of wage-earners disregarded. Rarely ever do the police respect a peaceful picket line. Will you please get in touch with (Department of Public Safety Director) Joseph Ragen and urge him to instruct his police officers that wage-earners have a right to picket peacefully as long as it is done without intimidation, coercion, or violence. I know the officers of the local union involved. They are good citizens and resent police brutality. I do too and I know the Governor of Illinois also feels that way. It should be stopped completely.⁷⁹⁷

Justifiably not content to wait for action from the Governor, Reub wrote to Director Ragen himself:

Labor desires no position over and above what is right and an equal freedom of all men. Police brutality is never exercised against the employer. It ought not to be used against peaceful pickets. Please do what you can to see that it is discontinued in the justifiable strike. Streator is my home town. Among these strikers are some of the finest people that God ever made and they naturally resent unwarranted and what seems to be unlawful and biased police action. I trust you will see to it that such action does not recur.⁷⁹⁸

Fortunately, outside action quickly overtook local events. The day after the altercation, the national GBBA struck a deal with industry management, bringing a quick end to the struggle in Streator.⁷⁹⁹ However, the incident reinforced Reuben’s resistance to police unions. Historically, police not been unionized. Two previous attempts to organize, first in 1915 and again during World War II, had ended in failure. The general public, never fond of unions broadly, wholeheartedly disapproved of giving police the right to strike, leaving such activity illegal for police. Instead, a crop of benevolent associations existed to advocate for the health and well-being of officers. In the 1960’s, however, the leadership of these associations realized that their position had changed. Not only were white collar public employees increasingly becoming unionized, but the more violent side of the civil rights movement – particularly the race riots that had erupted in major cities like Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and New York City – had generated considerable public fear. The police fraternal leadership used this to their advantage, threatening to engage in strikes regardless of their illegality unless their demands were met. A scared populace gave in, fearful what would happen if the police carried through on their threats. By the end of the decade, police forces had largely become formally unionized.⁸⁰⁰

Reuben strongly disapproved of this development. As his Secretary-Treasurer, Bob Gibson, later explained:

Reub never, ever thought police or fire ought to be in the union. More times than not the police will side with the management people every time. He said, “You just look at the history of these labor disputes and find out who got hurt. They’ve got police forces Bob, that just go around the country looking for these disputes.” And they did. That was their job. He said, “It’s really a military organization. These policemen do what they’re told. It’s not like you and I, (where) if somebody tells you go do this we say no you go do it. Forget it! It’s more a military operation, and if it goes into the union I don’t know what the consequences (will be). The best thing is to just keep them out.”

Police were used by the Mayors (for the benefit of) corporations. They would pay the Mayor off to send the police out to protect the company grounds and push the workers back or suppress a strike or arrest the strikers.

The police were used more often by management to suppress labor complaints than they ever could be to support the laboring people. A lot of that happened during the Streater strikes during the 20s and 30s. Police were used and came in and suppressed the workers, so Reub had first-hand experience with police suppressing the workers' needs and so I imagine that's what carried through.⁸⁰¹

The 1965 Streater strike and the police brutality the strikers encountered reconfirmed Reuben's belief that allowing police into the AFL-CIO would simply be bringing wolves into the fold. Still, he was unable to directly oppose police unionization. According to Gibson, Soderstrom believed it was better politically to leave such opposition in Springfield to city and township lobbyists. It was a decision which would cost him (and labor) in the years to come.

"THE FOUNDATION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE"

Although Soderstrom opposed the unionization of police, he strongly supported the expansion of unionism to other professions that had been previously unorganized, particularly white collar jobs not traditionally characterized by manual labor. Such growth was sought not only out of desire but out of necessity. Simply put, the labor market was expanding, but organized labor's number remained stagnant. This was an issue of considerable concern to Reuben, and was a major reason why he sought to unionize public employees. He viewed public employee organization as a gateway to broader unionization. To that end, much of Reuben's rhetoric in 1965 focused on the broad social benefits of union efforts—language aimed squarely at courting the middle class. The improvements generated by organized labor, he argued, improved daily life and the standard of living for all working people, not just union members. Unions were not antithetical to the middle class, Reuben maintained; they *created* the middle class. As he told the assembled delegates that year:

Our great organization works not only for its own members to secure legislation, better hours and better working conditions and better wages, but we work in the interest of all people. This great organization of ours helps the young, it helps the old, and the middle aged; this organization of ours believes in education and in housing and in the anti-poverty program. It has done as much good for the millions who are not members of the labor movement, as it has for its own members. Friends, this is my conception of a great organization that really works in the public interest.⁸⁰²

In his Labor Day address, Soderstrom gave special attention to the broad impact of unemployment compensation and workmen's compensation, writing:

Only one third of the millions of dollars paid to the beneficiaries of these laws are union members. Two thirds of the benefits will be collected by wage earners who belong to no union. This emphasizes the fact that the legislative work of the Illinois labor movement affects the organized and unorganized alike, with those riding 'deadhead' getting the lion's share. Some of them seem to think that paying dues into a union is an unnecessary expense.

They should realize the union deals with the things that uplift humanity, that everything, every step that has been taken to bring about improvement for wage earners and workers generally has been brought about through the pressure of the movement of labor. And they pay dues. They pay their dues to the employer by accepting a pay check much below what it would be if such non-union wage earner was a union member.⁸⁰³

These sentiments were echoed by many of the religious institutions and organizations of the day, several of which Reuben highlighted in his *Weekly Newsletter* and the Illinois AFL-CIO convention. Rabbi Richard G. Hirsch, director of the Religious Action Center, Union of Hebrew Congregations and Central Conference of American Rabbis wrote in support of unions:

A strong democratic labor movement is essential to the well-being of American society and the American economy, because it is the primary means for giving workers the opportunity to deal with their employers on an equitable basis. Responsible employers and responsible unions engaged in free collective bargaining offer the greatest possibility for achieving the economic justice which is the foundation of social justice.⁸⁰⁴

Other religious leaders focused on the dignity of labor, especially those within the Catholic Church. Rev. John Brockmeier, a union printer, attorney, and chaplain of the Springfield Federation of Labor addressed labor annually as a featured convention speaker, throwing the Church's full weight and moral authority behind labor's cause. 1965 was no exception; as he told the delegates that year:

There are some who consider labor to be beneath capital and management. Labor and capital are equally important; the one cannot exist without the other. Organized labor is not anti-capital. Labor is for humanized capital. We want men and women who are fair to both labor and capital. Under our form of government and in our industrial system a man can be pro-labor and pro-capital at the same time if he practices the virtue of social justice. Labor says to lawmakers, "Don't ask who is right, ask, what is right."⁸⁰⁵

It was one of his finest statements, a distillation of decades of thinking around labor issues and the great global battle in the 20th century between competing economic systems. His position had remarkable insight, understanding and clarity.

MARTIN LUTHER KING ADDRESSES ILLINOIS LABOR

While labor benefited from such arguments, no one in 1965 spoke with greater moral authority to and for Illinois labor than the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. To have the famed civil rights leader address the crowd was an incredible coup for Reuben, who had been trying to bring the dynamic speaker to his convention since he'd first heard him speak at the National AFL-CIO gathering in 1961. Unfortunately, circumstances had previously intervened; the 1963 convention came too close on the heels of King's March on Washington, while the 1964 slot had been filled by President Johnson. As the fall of 1965 approached, however, Soderstrom excitedly received word that the Nobel Peace Prize winner would be honored to attend.

King's arrival was a celebration not only for labor but for the entire city of Springfield. Mayor Nelson Howarth welcomed the Reverend upon his arrival. "All of us live just perhaps a flash of an instant in the history of recorded time," Howarth said as he presented Dr. King a key to the city, "and few of us have an opportunity to do much for mankind in that instant. One of the few who has been so fortunate is Dr. Martin Luther King, who is fighting for a cause."⁸⁰⁶ By far the most eloquent welcome Dr. King received, however, came from Soderstrom himself, who beamed as he introduced MLK to the delegates as:

A man whose voice rings loudest and clearest in this great civil rights movement, whose words peal and thunder through the minds and hearts of people, whose tremendous broadsides of facts and logic and rhetoric have brought nearly every Negro hurrying to his standard from far and near and have put into motion, into patriotic motion America's mighty columns of freedom. He is a man who throws into the struggle not only the best and deepest longings of his heart, and pleads for the uplifting and regeneration of the masses and of labor, as a patriot pleads for his country and a Christian for the salvation of God. He is a man who is, I believe, through all of these multiple and overwhelming labors, animated not by consideration of sordid gain but by the loftier purpose of serving his race and honoring God by uplifting and blessing the toiling millions of His children.⁸⁰⁷

As he rose to warm applause, Dr. King returned the kind sentiment and warm welcome he'd received. He began his speech by eloquently highlighting the shared histories of the organized labor and civil rights

movements:

There have always been two groups who have suffered at the hands of the writers of American history—the Labor Movement and Negro people. School children, from their distorted history books, even today, learn that our social pioneers and heroes were almost exclusively great presidents, generals and captains of industry. The contributions of the labor movement are so slighted that they appear as mere accidental phenomena, if they receive attention at all...

At the turn of the century, women earned approximately ten cents an hour, and men were fortunate to receive twenty cents an hour. The average work week was 60 to 70 hours. During the thirties, wages were a secondary issue; to have a job at all was the difference between the agony of starvation and a flicker of life. The nation, now so vigorous, reeled and tottered then almost to total collapse.

The labor movement was the principle force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old age pensions, government relief for the destitute, and above all new wage levels that meant not mere survival, but a tolerable life. The captains of industry did not lead this transformation. They resisted it until they were overcome...

It is a mark of our intellectual backwardness that these monumental achievements of labor are still only dimly seen, and in all too many circles the term 'union' is still synonymous with self-seeking, power hunger, racketeering and cynical coercion. There have been and still are wrongs in the trade union movement but its share of credit for triumphant accomplishments is substantially denied in the historical treatment of the nation's progress.

The other group denied credit for its achievements are Negroes. When our nation was struggling to grow in the 18th and 19th centuries, our place in international commerce was finally secured when cotton became king and the mills of Europe turned our abundant raw material. That white gold was the product of Negro labor. Even beyond that, the very bodies of Negroes, then called black gold, built the economies of many nations through the nefarious but immensely profitable slave trade. The clearing of the wilderness, the productivity of the plantations, the building of roads and ports all emerged from the toil of the grossly oppressed Negro, and on these foundations a modern society was built. None of this, however, finds constructive expression in our history books.

It is not a coincidence the labor movement and the civil rights movement have the same essential origins. Each is a movement that grew out of burning needs of an oppressed poor for security and equality. Each was denied justice by the dominant forces of society and had to win a place in the sun by its own intense struggle and indescribable self-sacrifice.

With the kinship of these two movements clearly established, however, MLK turned to highlight the hard truths that labor had to confront—truths that kept these sibling movements from achieving their true potential:

My brothers and sisters of the labor movement of this great state: I want to discuss with you this morning, honestly and frankly, some of the challenges facing the labor movement and some of the challenges facing the civil rights movement, and the opportunities that we have in the days ahead. And I say, I want to discuss the problems with you frankly and honestly because I think if we are to be friends, we must be honest with each other; and if we are to meet the challenges in the days ahead we must speak frankly to the issues involved...

Despite the striking similarities in the origins of the labor movement and the civil rights movement, there are

features today that are markedly different. The civil rights movement is organizationally weak, amateurish, and inexperienced. Yet, it has profound moral appeal; it is growing dynamically, and it is introducing basic democratic reforms in our society.

The labor movement, on the other hand, is organizationally powerful, but it is stagnating and receding as a social force. As the work force has grown substantially in the past twenty years, the ranks of organized labor have remained stationary, and its moral appeal flickers instead of shining as it did in the thirties.

With all its power and experience, labor has been on the defensive for years, beating back efforts to outlaw the closed shop, interference in its internal affairs, and restrictions on organizing activity. Where once the anti-poverty fight was a product of labor's creativity, now the federal government conducts it through agencies essentially apart from labor...Apart from this loss of influence and leadership the new technology is undermining its strength. The advance of automation is a destructive hurricane whose winds are sweeping away jobs and work standards...

I have attempted in this discussion to point up the common interests of labor and the Negro and to sincerely express the respect labor deserves for its creative role in history. Yet, I would be lacking in honesty if I did not point out that the labor movement thirty years ago did more in that period for civil rights than labor is doing today. Thirty years ago labor pioneered in the mass production industries in introducing new equal employment opportunities. It was bold when general support for equality was timid.

King's truths were painful ones, ones that Reuben had been calling attention to with growing concern for years. Labor was growing stagnant, the victim of its own success as it became vested in the political and industrial order it was birthed to challenge. The events of the last few years alone—from the failed attempt to reform the work week to the political betrayal of labor by the Democratic Party on the state and national level—had exposed labor as increasingly unwilling or unable to meet the drastic challenges facing the nation today. This pernicious poverty and unemployment, Dr. King said, hit the Negro community the hardest, and if the forces of complacency failed to address these issues with the urgency they demanded the result could be bloody:

There were always people to tell labor that it should wait and be patient...Waiting submissively has always meant standing with an empty cup in one hand while the cup of misery overflows in the other hand. Negroes today are deafened with advice to wait, but they have learned from the experience of labor that to wait is to submit and surrender...

I am convinced that there are nonviolent solutions to these problems, but our experience in government and throughout this nation has been that nothing will be done until the issues are raised so dramatically that our nation will act. This was the lesson of both Selma and Birmingham where inhuman conditions had been allowed to exist for hundreds of years. Negroes in the north are not so patient. If a coalition of conscience between the forces of labor, the church, the academic community and the civil rights movement does not emerge to make these issues inescapably clear and demand their solution, then I am afraid that hostility and violence will breed a crisis of nationwide proportion. Anyone who remembers how quickly the nonviolent movement spread across the south, first in the bus boycotts and then within a year to almost 200 cities in the sit-ins, will shudder in horror at the thought of violence spreading with similar speed.

King's message to the delegates that day, however, was not one of doom or dire prophecy, but of hope. Like Soderstrom, he was an optimist, filled with the conviction that the best days of both movements laid not behind but ahead. With an honest and infectious passion, he fired up the labor faithful as he called on them to join his "coalition of conscience" to seek their shared dream in solidarity:

The two most dynamic movements that reshaped the nation during the past three decades are the labor and civil rights movements. Our combined strength is potentially enormous. We have not used a fraction of it for our own good or for the needs of society as a whole. If we make the war on poverty a total war, if we seek higher standards for all workers for an enriched life we have the ability to accomplish it, and our nation has the ability to provide it. If our two movements unite their social pioneering initiative, thirty years from now people will look back on this day and honor those who had the vision to see the full possibilities of modern society and the courage to fight for their realization...

With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. Yes, with this faith we will be able to speed up the day when men will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and nation will not rise up against nation; neither will they study war anymore.

With this faith all over America of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

“Free at last; free at last,
Thank God above, yes, we are free at last!”⁸⁰⁸

The speech elicited a long, loud ovation. “Oh Jesus, they tore the place up when he was finished,” one observer later remembered. “Everybody! I’d say he had a 15-minute ovation afterward.”⁸⁰⁹ Reub rose to the podium to thank Dr. King, speechless:

The eloquence of Dr. King was of such a nature I actually forgot to think up something to say in reply. It was the most entrancing and attractive address we have ever heard in this great convention. I want to assure him the civil rights movement and the labor movement of Illinois will work together in closer unity than ever before to attain the goals he has outlined. And in order to help him, labor unionists are the kind of people who hate to go through the world without helping somebody, I will present to him a check for \$1,500.⁸¹⁰

Soderstrom then pinned a labor badge on the coat of Dr. King, seating him at the convention with full rights and privilege. It was a glorious day, a brief respite from the trials of the year. Still, the painful truths that MLK so forcefully articulated remained, glaring and dangerous. How would Reuben lead an organization through the great civil rights era? As the twilight of his leadership approached, the storied leader turned with greater urgency than ever to face the issue of racial acceptance and integration in union halls across Illinois, from Chicago in the north to Cairo in the south. It would be a bumpy ride.

PILLAR XII

FAMILY: REUBEN'S FOUNDATION

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. It was paramount to his being and vital to his soul to share large Sunday dinners with the Merriners, walk with his wife and daughter to the park, or playfully interact with his five active grandkids at the home of his son Carl Sr. and daughter-in-law Virginia. He was a family man.

It can be surmised that Reuben's role within his family—energetic, supportive and reliably strong—was his own creation. His father was a quiet, isolative man who could not pay the family bills. His mother struggled with “melancholy” and limited her community to a handful of friends. But even as a young boy Reuben had a sunny, energetic disposition and would soon grow into a man who loved being around people, actively providing guidance and loving support to the growing family around him. He would be amazed to see the greater Soderstrom family that has married and multiplied over the decades since he died. His spirit is alive and well.

He never seemed to hold resentment for the demands put on his childhood. As the second oldest son, he—not his older brother Paul—was sent away at age nine to work in a faraway blacksmith shop. His father's tax bill accumulated to the point that the industrious young Reuben was the one who tackled it. He was so responsible that he was sent away from the family a second time as a teenager, this time to the faraway town of Streator, Illinois, where he worked on the trolley car lines and in the bottle factories. After he sent a steady stream of income back home to Minnesota, his parents uprooted the family and followed him to Illinois. In that regard, the sturdy teenager version of Reuben Soderstrom had already become the de facto leader of the Soderstrom family. He was the primary income-earner, steady and rational thinker and vibrant spirit that filled the family's sails and propelled them forward.

He was best friends with his young brother, Lafe. Photos show an obvious and easy energy between the two; they clearly enjoyed attending a baseball game together as much as plotting victory in a local labor dispute. It was Lafe who worked side-by-side with Reuben to run for the presidency of International Typographers' Union (Reub lost), and then pivoted attention to the presidency of the ISFL (Reub won). They shared a loving correspondence—with Reub based in Streator and Lafe based in Chicago—as well as political alliance based on inside information of upstate versus downstate labor politics.

1953, Reuben was devastated when Lafe died in a car accident. He lost too many family members to death, including two siblings in birth, his own son Robert at age two, his brother Paul, his parents, and, later in life, both his wife and daughter. It is perhaps this tragic collection of family deaths that brought him so lovingly to embrace those who were alive. The biggest smile on his face was the day his son Carl married Virginia Merriner; in a life full of too-frequent funerals, he presided over only one wedding. And what a union that turned out to be, yielding five terrific grandchildren to populate the subsequent decades with vacations, paper routes, science projects, sporting events, Christmas celebrations, birthdays, university studies, marriages and great-great grandchildren. His role as grandfather was to interact with the grandkids with playful poems, a regular presence at weekend dinners, and strong academic encouragement to learn about the world and obtain

professional respect and independence.

His warm heart is on display in the letters he sent his grandchildren as they studied their way through college. He always sent \$20, but more importantly took the time to write entertaining and insightful letters with political news, family news, and more. These letters hearken back to the early 1900s when he helped pay for his younger sister Olga's tuition in nursing school. He was the leader of the family, and in a way played both the role of brother and father to her. As she reminisced in her biography of him:

I had seen a fake fur coat that I wanted so badly. I asked Mother if I could have it, she said to ask Reub. I remember I went to where he worked, he was running the linotype machine there and he was working right in front of the shop. Both the machine and Reub were in full view right behind the huge glass pane window that made up the store front. I went in, and I remember he put his arms around me and I asked him for the coat. He took his purse out, gave me the ten dollars, and I went home a happy girl.⁸¹¹

One of the sources of his greatest pride was the Springfield alliance with his son, Representative Carl W. Soderstrom, Sr. For 26 years, this father-son combo shared home life in Streator and work life in Springfield, where they stewarded formidable bills for labor, education, pensions, and many, many more. It was a delicate alliance that balanced local issues in the Republican district with Reuben's increasingly progressive positions as a leader on the national stage. The political campaigns to elect Carl to office were colorful family affairs directed from the bustling Soderstrom home on Riverside Avenue in Streator, with every set of hands pitching in.

Many of Reuben's legislative victories and labor policies were driven by a commitment to the values of family. This began with his desire to liberate workers from the old model of the company store, where many generations of workers were beholden to multi-generational family debt. It was also evident in his passionate pleas for retirement pensions that kept husband and wife united in old age, rather than separated in the county poor house. He also imbued the primacy of family into other bills, like "one day rest in seven," the women's eight hour work bill, pensions for widows, overtime and workmen's compensation. No doubt this was all heavily informed by the poverty of his own parents as they aged, the struggles of local widows after the Cherry Mine disaster, itinerant workers and poor townspeople in his father's congregations, and his own childhood lost to loneliness and long hours of back-breaking work. He set out in life to keep families together. His labor policies flowed from that principle.

Perhaps Reuben's fondest family experience was Christmas, where he honored Swedish traditions, joyfully recited poems and celebrated the people around him: his wife, daughter Jeanne, Carl and Virginia and their five active grandchildren, and the always present and loving Merriners. One can imagine Reuben at the end of the year—with political reflections of the year behind him—settling in to his big white chair on a snowy evening to spend with his family. If he were to fall asleep into a deep Christmas dream, he may have had a future vision of the family; these grandchildren growing up, attending professional schools in medicine, law and education, marrying, having many more children who, too, would achieve admirable university education, a myriad of modern day experiences, travel, marriages and great-great grandchildren. The Soderstrom family is growing and expanding, all informed by the great compassion, energy, close-knit togetherness and strength of his making. He would wake up from this inspiring and curious nap to the sound of stomping feet on the front porch; he would look out the big window to see snowflakes falling outside on the evergreen trees on Riverside Drive, with his grandkids knocking snow off their boots on the front porch, and coming inside to open gifts. Carl and Virginia and Arley and Verna would come out from the kitchen and Reuben would rise and walk to the jolly huddle of grandkids with cold red cheeks. He would survey the festive scene and say, "Merry Christmas!"

CHAPTER 55

1966

REUBEN G. SODERSTROM, “LABOR’S ONE OF A KIND”

“If we had paid attention to the politicians and editorial writers, columnists and commentators, and the economists, none of us would be earning more than one dollar an hour. Everyone would be so poor that business would be bankrupt, and half of us would be walking the streets, hitting the bricks, looking for a job.”

-Reuben Soderstrom, 1965 Illinois AFL-CIO Convention

“SHE IS JUST AWAY”

The greatest fear of any parent is to lose a child, to bring her into the world and send her out. To see her life as a finite set of books on a shelf, from beginning to end, a mere subset of her parent’s. But in 1966, that was exactly the sad fate that befell Reuben Soderstrom.

By this point our protagonist had buried both parents, three brothers, an infant son, and most recently his wife. Still, through all that pain and bereavement he swallowed the hurt, tucked his chin, and pushed on. He was a fighter, a survivor focused on the future.

But the passing of his daughter Jeanne was different. Perhaps it was because her death was so sudden. She was otherwise healthy and only in her early 50s; no one could have anticipated the unexpectedly severe asthma attack that took her on that cold February morning. Perhaps it was the guilt he felt at being gone, toiling away in Springfield on the day she died. Most likely, however, it was the fact that, out of all the people in Reuben’s long life, none had been closer to him than his daughter. After his wife’s death, it was “Jeannie” who cared for him, sharing his life and home for fifteen years even as she worked at the local Streator High School, first as a teacher and then as a counselor, foregoing a path as wife and mother. She was pursuing her Master’s degree, completing her coursework shortly before her death (she was awarded her degree posthumously that May).⁸¹² For a man to whom family meant everything, nothing could cut deeper than the death of the one member who’d always been there for him, his pride and joy. “He never recovered from her death,” his sister Olga recounted years later. “He found it most difficult to accept.”⁸¹³

The depth of Reuben’s loss is most powerfully expressed in his eulogy for her, a beautiful piece of writing that truly stands alone and above all the other obituaries he had written before. In all of those, Reuben had maintained a certain distance. They were written in third person, short and sincere. Reub’s tribute to Jeanne, in contrast, was a raw first-person display of sorrow:

On Wednesday, February 16, 1966, my precious and only daughter, Jeanne Soderstrom, joined her sainted mother in the great beyond. Even the comforting Christmas greetings of today and the melodies sung by the Angels of Bethlehem in that sweet long ago seemed to be matched by the mutual understanding and the kind words of condolence which I have received from my co-workers in labor’s great cause during this hour of

terrible sadness.

At times these glowing comments seemed to vaguely mingle with wonderful memories. Amidst my grief and sorrow I seemingly envisioned her name, flashed on the skyline of eternity, which left me with a proud, warm, comfortable feeling that she really was what my kind friends and neighbors inferred, a credit to her quality!

This heart-warming friendliness of touched co-workers strengthened my belief that at the end of this existence it is the beginning of something else, something finer, something better. Our Heavenly Father had other plans for my gracious and beloved Jeanne and she seemingly was needed more in that land beyond the grave than in the interesting and important earthly educational world in which she served so well.

Like all other people, a labor official is permitted to convey to friends his appreciation of the sympathy that hearts can feel, but somehow words can never say. This I have now done. While words seem to be inadequate, the Hand of the Almighty rules and He knows, and I believe that my friends understand, how much I have lost. I pray for God's help in this ordeal, this sorrowful agony, and I do find some buoyancy of the spirit in the proud thought that my daughter did not struggle or teach in vain, that the lives of many men, women and children were made happier because she lived.

Loving poetry as I do, it seems fitting I should conclude my farewell tribute to a dedicated and wonderful daughter by joining James Whitcomb Riley in the sentimental departure scene portrayed in his beautiful poem, "She is Just Away" which follows:

I cannot say, and I will not say
That she is dead—she is just away!
With a cheery smile, and a wave of the hand,
She has wandered into an unknown land,
And left us dreaming how very fair
It needs must be, since she lingers there.
And you—O you, who the wildest yearn
For the old time step and glad return,
Think of her faring on, as dear
In the love of There as the love of Here;
Think of her still as the same I say:
She is not dead—she is just away!⁸¹⁴

Months later, Reuben was still struggling with Jeanne's death when he learned that fellow Illinoisan and Republican candidate for U.S. Senate Chuck Percy lost his own daughter (also named Jeanne) that September. His message of consolation provides a valuable window on the depth of the loss he still so clearly felt:

It is with a heavy heart that I extend the sincere sympathy of all branches of labor to you and your family in this your sad hour of devastating grief caused by the shocking death of your sainted daughter Valerie Jeanne. I can understand grief and how much you have lost because my only daughter who also bore the name Jeanne passed away last February. I know how sad and terribly frustrating bereavement can be to you and those who mourn.⁸¹⁵

REUBEN STUMPS FOR SENATOR DOUGLAS

Labor's Agenda and the Vietnam War

Reuben's letter to Chuck Percy is notable not only for its emotion but for the human and gentlemanly role it played in an otherwise fiercely contested campaign for the U.S. Senate, which saw Percy challenging Reuben's longtime friend, Senator Paul Douglas. A lot was on the line: 1966 was shaping up to be a rough year for labor, which was becoming increasingly divided over the U.S. role in Vietnam. The AFL-CIO leadership was primarily focused on a domestic agenda that included a rigorous defense of Johnson's Great Society. Of all the President's programs, Medicare—the national health care program for citizens over 65 which had just been passed—was of paramount importance. While some viewed the expansive national program as an infringement on state and local governance, most progressives considered it vitally important. Soderstrom was no exception; as he wrote in the CFL's *Federationist* that year:

Medical care as a part of the Social Security Act was first recommended by the labor movement in 1935. The labor movement can be proud of the expansion of the Social Security Act to include Medicare for those over sixty-five. For the senior citizen it can be the difference between suffering alone to the end, or being able to seek the services of a nurse or a doctor. Under the leadership of the president of the United States, Medicare was placed on the statute books after thirty years of effort by labor officials, senior citizens, health officers, social workers and hundreds of others.⁸¹⁶

Labor leadership also trained its legislative sights on the repeal of Taft-Hartley provision 14b, which allowed states to implement "right to work" laws outlawing union shops. For years, they had been building support among lawmakers and politicians for the provision's removal, support that now, saliently, included the Johnson administration. As Vice President Hubert Humphrey told the National AFL-CIO at the 1964 Convention that December, "This administration is determined to fight, and this administration and its leadership from the President down is determined to fight win—I repeat, to fight and win—the repeal of Section 14b of the Taft Hartley Law."⁸¹⁷ Labor now had a majority of the vote in Washington; however, a coalition of conservative legislators led by Illinois Senator Dirksen was blocking a vote on the measure through filibuster.

To defeat the Dirksen camp, labor needed every vote it could get in the Senate. A conservative rout at the ballot boxes could mean not only an end to reform but a reversal of so many nascent victories. In a Chicago speech that year, AFL-CIO Secretary William Schnitzler put the race in stark terms, warning the audience that recent reforms like Medicare and the Civil Rights Act "are in real danger...The labor movement insists that the new programs we helped initiate in this most affluent period of our nation's history cannot be shelved or dismantled because of the fears of a few who did not want the programs to begin at all."⁸¹⁸

In Illinois, the pro-labor political fight centered on the re-election campaign of Reuben's old pal Paul Douglas, a senior pro-labor U.S. Senator. Reuben and Douglas quickly became friends when Douglas, then a University of Chicago economics professor, served as a progressive on the Chicago City Council. After joining the Marines as a private at age 50 so he could fight in World War II, Douglas returned to Illinois to run and win a U.S. Senate seat as a progressive Democrat. At age 74, he was running for a fourth term as the incumbent against Republican businessman Charles Percy. Working for Douglas campaign that year was a young college student, Richard Durbin.

Reuben and the AFL-CIO stumped hard for Douglas, who was a staunch supporter of Lyndon Johnson. Reuben became especially involved in his friend's campaign, serving as a Vice Chairman of the Senator's Citizens Committee, and regional manager in La Salle County.⁸¹⁹ That September, the Illinois AFL-CIOO gave its ringing endorsement of Douglas at its annual convention with a vote of support Reuben characterized as unanimous.⁸²⁰

But the endorsement was complicated by Douglas's continued support of military action in Vietnam. While all of labor favored Douglas's domestic agenda, a growing number of rank and file members began to protest the Senator over his support of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Many of the delegates opposed the endorsement. "I feel that Sen. Douglas is undoubtedly representative of this convention," said UAW delegate Mark Clark after the pro-Douglas resolution passed. "But maybe we should not give our unqualified support. We may not want to back him at all because he is very much like Sen. Goldwater [regarding Vietnam]."⁸²¹ "I'm in support of the stand Sen. Douglas takes on all the labor and on all the domestic issues," shared Jack Spiegel, another convention delegate. "But we see certain dangers...we are concerned...when he starts lining up with the most hard-lined of pro-war reactionary forces. If we cannot tell our friend he is going to lose votes, who's going to tell him? His enemies?"⁸²²

Comparing the fight in Vietnam to the struggle against fascism during World War II, the senator responded, "I understand the emotions in this situation. Life is sweet to the young folks, and to their parents, and South Viet Nam seems far off. But we're not fighting for South Viet Nam. It just happens to be the place where the struggle is occurring."⁸²³ Reuben dismissed such dissent, asserting "the hue and cry raised by reactionary elements that the people cannot have both 'guns and butter' has died down. Assurances from the Washington Administration, followed by statements of state officials, indicate that labor's gains will not become a Viet Nam war casualty."⁸²⁴

Such overconfidence would prove costly, both to the senator and to organized labor. Douglas was one of two sitting Democratic senators to lose their seats in that year's general election. Another two—both in the south—lost their seats in the primaries. The results were a mixed bag for labor; the Democrats retained their majority in the Senate, ensuring the safety of Johnson's Great Society. However, the lackluster performance put liberal politicians on the defensive, leaving them with little appetite to take on potentially costly issues like the repeal of Taft-Hartley. More importantly, the split within labor and the Democratic Party over Vietnam showcased in 1966 was just a taste of the chaos and turmoil to come—a chaos that would soon fully envelop the Illinois AFL-CIO and its 78-year-old leader.

CARL SODERSTROM ON THE HOTSEAT IN AN AT-LARGE ELECTION

Reuben's active support of Douglas also carried costs for another of the Soderstrom clan. Carl Soderstrom, Reuben's son and a Republican State Representative, faced a rough primary challenge in 1966. As the *Chicago Tribune* reported that June:

Rep. Carl W. Soderstrom (R, Streator), son of Reuben G. Soderstrom, president of the Illinois state AFL-CIO, has a 50-50 chance of surviving the June 14 primary...Populous La Salle County is divided between Soderstrom, an attorney who has been in the House 16 years, and Clayton C. Harbeck of Utica, a motel owner who twice has been sheriff and formally served eight years in the House. Harbeck has been one of La Salle County's best vote getters and has been campaigning also in the district's two smaller counties—Marshall and Putnam.⁸²⁵

Harbeck's principle weapon in his fight against Carl was his father's support. The *Chicago Tribune* wrote Reuben was "his son's chief supporter and biggest handicap in the campaign. The four-county district is traditionally Republican, but the labor leader is La Salle county manager for Sen. Douglas, the No. 1 Democratic candidate."⁸²⁶ Reuben's message on his son's behalf for the 1964 election—which, due to the General Assembly's failure to craft fairly apportioned districts, required citizens to vote for all state representatives on an at-large basis—proved particularly damaging. That April Harbeck's supporters circulated a letter Reub sent during that campaign recommending voters cast ballots for all 118 Democratic candidates but only one Republican—his son. The letter ended with Reuben warning that "(Carl's) defeat

would be a tragic blow to liberal legislative support in Illinois as well as to me personally.”⁸²⁷ It was a revealing window into the modern realities of labor; the Democrats were pro-labor and Republicans were not, save for the unique outlier in LaSalle County, Carl W. Soderstrom, who every two years scrapped and fought and clung to his seat through the primaries by convincing weary Republicans he would adequately represent them. There is no mystery in why he sometimes considered running as an Independent, should he lose the primary.

It never came to that. Carl again won his scrappy primary fight, defeating the wily Harbeck and holding on to his seat. However, the incident left a bitter taste in Reub’s mouth. Long an advocate of the Samuel Gompers edict to “elect your friends and defeat your enemies” regardless of a candidate’s political party affiliation, Reuben finally came to the realization that, in an era of hyper-partisanship, such a rule might no longer apply. What party politicians belonged to had increasingly become a predictor of how they would vote on labor issues.

REUBEN DEFENDS JOHNSON’S GREAT SOCIETY

Welcomes Federal Support of Labor

Partisanship wasn’t the only issue Reuben would radically re-evaluate that year. The role and relevance of state government was a topic Soderstrom took head-on at the start of 1966. Many opponents of Johnson’s social policies, which Reuben viewed as pro-labor, argued against them on the grounds of state’s rights. They attacked programs like Medicare as government overreach, an encroachment on what should be decided by local legislatures. Reuben forcefully countered that, by failing to enact meaningful reform, states like Illinois had abdicated their right to local rule. In an essay for the *Weekly Newsletter* titled “Is Centralized Control Bad?” Soderstrom drew upon a lifetime of experience:

Sincere attempts on the part of official labor to secure needed legislation on the State level have frequently resulted in flat failure. Either the State Legislature wouldn’t do anything or could not do anything to remedy the situation complained of, with the result that the union people in their disappointment and frustration during the past two decades have turned to the Federal Government for relief.

Although Organized Labor is inclined to support and believe in the principle of local self-government, the repeated rebuffs to their State level legislative projects forced them many times to turn their attention to securing needed enactments in the national field.

In the belief that the employers were opposed to centralized national control, labor spokesmen frequently pointed out to those who represented management that unless favorable action for needed legislation was enacted by the State, the Labor movement, whipped by necessity, would appeal to the Congress of the United States.⁸²⁸

Reuben then went on to list a series of issues—including lie detector bans, minimum wage, infrastructure, education spending—in which the federal government had stepped in to fill the governance gap left by the Illinois General Assembly. At this rate, Reuben said:

It may well be that another twenty years will see some State Legislatures fold up. It could be Illinois! Many lawmakers dread roll calls on controversial bills and the point of ‘no quorum’ is frequently raised in committees to keep needed social legislation from advancing out of the hearing stage...the practice of vacating a committee room of committee members, and then raising a point of ‘no quorum’ is rather crude, especially if the legislation has passed the House and this kind of opposition repeatedly occurs in the other. This is what happened to much of our social legislation in the 1965 session. A favorable functioning State Legislature is

worth retaining. Any other kind might be heading for oblivion.⁸²⁹

In the great 1960s debate of federal versus state power, Soderstrom had no doubt concerning the necessity of a strong national government empowered to overcome state-level resistance. After decades of endless wrangling in the hot and humid Illinois statehouse over progressive legislation, he must have been relieved and triumphant to feel the power of the federal government at his back.

In Illinois, the problem lay with the Democratic governor's office as well as the General Assembly. The previous year, Otto Kerner had personally interceded to stop pro-labor legislation giving public employees the express right to unionize. The move had earned Reub's ire, and he had written to Kerner demanding he make things right. Kerner originally answered in a conciliatory tone, writing to Reub in January of 1966 that his office was "currently studying the broad question of effective legislation with regard to collective bargaining for government employees," and promised to find a solution that would meet with Reub's satisfaction. He even invited Soderstrom to help his administration write the bill.⁸³⁰ When the legislature proved unable to act, however, the wily governor refused to intervene. Soderstrom implored Kerner to conduct negotiations regarding the pay, hours, and working conditions of employees, but the governor demurred. "As you know," he wrote, "we have discussed this possibility on numerous occasions, and I do not see how it would be possible through the Executive Order procedure that we had discussed in the past. The subject matter was one of public policy, and in my opinion would require legislation."⁸³¹ Kerner's position left public employees without the legislative protection to unionize that they enjoyed almost everywhere else in the industrial north.

One good thing came out of these discussions, however. Although Kerner refused to budge on the issue of public employees, he did seek to put together a "Labor Committee Task Force" to discuss economic problems, giving Reuben his choice of appointees (Reub selected six labor heads, himself, and the Illinois State Director of Labor).⁸³²

The Lincoln Academy Appoints Reuben

Soderstrom soon received an even higher accolade when Michael Butler, Chancellor of the Lincoln Academy of Illinois, wrote to Reuben in November that year with some very special news. "It is my pleasure and privilege to inform you that you have been appointed to the Faculty of Labor of The Lincoln Academy of Illinois," the Chancellor declared, noting that he would serve with Dr. Carroll Dougherty, Dean George Schultz, and Professor Martin Wagner of Northwestern University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Illinois, respectively, on the non-profit, non-partisan body.⁸³³ Reuben excitedly replied that the invitation to serve on the Lincoln Academy Labor Faculty was "a source of delight," accepting the appointment with pleasure.⁸³⁴

Perhaps the greatest and most unexpected of the honors Reuben received that year, however, came in the form of an interview with columnist Robert Lewin, a labor writer for the *Chicago Daily News*. The piece, which celebrated Reuben's 36-year presidency, gave a full profile of the prolific leader, from his humble origins on the farming fields of Minnesota to his youth as a bottle-boy in Streator's glass factories on through to his training in the printing trade and entrance into the world of organized labor. As Lewin described:

There's never been anyone else in the labor movement quite like Reuben George Soderstrom. For 36 years, he had been president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor and its merged successor—Illinois State Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations. In the 80 years since the old American Federation of Labor was organized, no other union chief anywhere has led a state federation so long.

No one ever has run against Soderstrom, either.

He is the full, rolling resonant, needs-no-microphone voice of the 1,300,000 Illinois workers who belong to 3,900 AFL-CIO unions and city and county central labor organizations...

Soderstrom is a 5-foot-9-inch man who, by not eating between meals for four years, has slimmed from 217 to 176 pounds. His gray eyes sparkle behind spectacles that have a thin silver edge on top. His long and unruly gray hair gives him the appearance of an old-time orator, which he is when he gets going. He hands out mimeographed texts of his speeches to newsmen and then talks from memory, with virtually no change in words.⁸³⁵

Lewin detailed Reub's long list of victories, from his injunction limitation act to securing state financial aid for the blind and widowed mothers to the \$83,000,000 in federal funding for low-rent housing he helped secure. It covered his time as a state representative and labor president, without failing to mention that through all these works and accomplishments Reuben remained true to his hometown, living there his entire adult life.

The praise continued at that year's Illinois AFL-CIO convention. Special Counsel Irving Greenfield cheered Soderstrom for the improvements to workman's compensation and occupational disease, noting that the pioneering Agreed Bill process that secured those gains was "originally the brainchild of your great President, Reuben Soderstrom, and it grew into maturity under his wise and dedicated guidance."⁸³⁶ State Senator Paul Simon joked during his speech to the delegates, "Reub doesn't age a bit does he? And in twelve years in the general assembly, he looks exactly like the day he walked into the general assembly. Whatever you are drinking there, Reub, I want to get some of it too."⁸³⁷ State Senator Fred Smith, then the only African-American member of the Illinois Senate, gave Soderstrom high praise during his remarks, noting:

For many years, my friends, I have known your President, Brother Soderstrom. And I need to say you have ability, you have competency, you have character of and for which you may well be proud. Yours has been a struggle to free the working man and the working woman from the tyrannical and impoverished conditions... and God be thanked, you have not faltered, you have not hesitated, you have not quit nor given up.⁸³⁸

Perhaps the sweetest tribute came from guest speaker Carl Muller, former president of the Indiana State Federation of Labor, who visited the Illinois convention and confessed:

Reub Soderstrom does not know it, but I have been one of his students for many, many years, and in the national conventions, not only the conventions in Illinois and the activities in Illinois, but at the national conventions where he was actually writing the national program, I was sitting someplace close to him in the hopes I might glean some knowledge from Reub's ability so I might again go back home and carry on in the interest of the labor movement in my state.⁸³⁹

The 78-year-old Reuben had reached the seeming apex of his career, a point where most men would retire to reflect on their accomplishments and relish in the praise and accolades of admirers. Reuben, however, was not most men, and he wasn't about to relinquish the reins, especially at such a dynamic time. He was too stubborn, too smart, and too controlling to retire. And perhaps most important, he loved what he did. This decision would ruffle feathers, draw retaliation, and even generate mutiny in the years to come. But there was no sign that he regretted the choice, even for a minute. Reuben felt at home in the eye of the storm, and he wasn't about to surrender when he knew challenging days lay ahead.

CHAPTER 56

1967

SODERSTROM DEFEATS NO-STRIKE “RIGHT TO WORK” BILL

“The history of organized labor is plentiful with examples of battles engaged in just to win the right to strike in this country, and labor historians have filled volumes with the benefits which the working men and women have gained because they were willing to walk out and set up picket signs informing the public of their grievances.”

-Reuben Soderstrom, 1965 Illinois AFL-CIO Convention

ROAD TRIP WITH OLGA TO MINNESOTA

For decades Reuben made a beloved summer pilgrimage back to Minnesota with his daughter Jeanne. Now, still stoically struggling in his own grief from her death, he briefly considered not making the journey at all, unsure if he could bear it. Ultimately, however, Olga convinced him that the trip would be good for him, and that they should travel together. Olga later explained:

Now, Reub always had a schedule on these trips and year after year when he went to Duluth with his daughter, they made the same tours. So everywhere we went this first trip, he did nothing but talk about events that happened with Jeanne. I felt this was doing him no good, so I decided there should be a change. I suggested we visit three distant cousins we had not seen for so long.⁸⁴⁰

Reuben would have none of it. This is how the trip had always been done, he said, and he saw no good reason to change it. Olga remained determined, demanding they go see their extended family. Her insistence annoyed Reub, who rejected any change to his traditional schedule. At one pit stop, Olga refused to get back in the car, telling her brother, “All right, you do as you please for a couple of days and I’ll take the train or bus to Thief River Falls to visit Myrtle and Ted Mills, for I’ll never be any closer.”

“Well, you’re not very close now!” Reub exclaimed.

“Well, I’m closer than when I’m in Kankakee,” Olga shot back.

Unable to coax her back into the car, Reub finally submitted. “OK, we’ll go,” he sighed. “Call them and see if they’re home and we’ll go tomorrow.”

As they started out the next morning, it seemed as though Mother Nature herself was putting up a fight. Again from Olga:

What a day we picked—there was a dense fog and it rained so hard—I figured he’d back out, but no, we started, and after a couple of hours we were back in clear weather. The visit was marvelous. Myrtle and Reub

conversed in Swedish and he loved it...We stayed overnight and had such a delightful visit. Reub was so glad we went.⁸⁴¹

The trip was good, a return to hearth and home, a reminder of how far he'd come in life. One can only imagine that when driving across Minnesota in a new Buick, the 79-year-old's mind raced back to the days when his family sent him away as a 9-year-old child to work in a faraway blacksmith shop to help his father pay the household bills. Or the cold, windswept days when the family struggled to find meat and eggs during the Minnesota winters, trudging to church most days of the week. And the time he was again sent away to work as a child laborer, placed alone on a train by his mother to travel to Chicago and beyond, to meet a family relative in faraway Streator and to carry water buckets for immigrant workers on the trolley cars.

The year 1967 was a far cry from the late 1890s. It was full of challenges for the veteran Reuben G. Soderstrom, filled with personal attacks and organized attempts against his leadership. He faced angry editors, venomous politicians, and former friends, all with the same whispered accusation—that he was too old to lead, a relic of an era long gone by. But Reub was certain that he and only he could properly guide the ship of Illinois labor through these trying times, as he had done successfully for decades. There is no question that he spent very little time pondering retirement, and focusing instead on the trails at hand. He was needed more than ever.

WRESTLING WITH THE REPUBLICAN STATEHOUSE

The Changing Role of the Working Woman

The 1966 elections had been dismal for both the Democrats and organized labor in Illinois. In the US Senate, Reuben's longtime friend and ally, Paul Douglas, lost his seat to Republican challenger Chuck Percy. In the Illinois General Assembly, meanwhile, Republicans scored a resounding win with an overwhelming majority. The reversal was dramatic; just two years prior the Democratic Party had won a full two-thirds of the House; now the Republicans enjoyed a 21 seat majority—a win so large that they needed no Democratic support to pass any bill. In response, the Democrats reacted as a party in exile, refusing to play any part in what they considered a radical Republican agenda. As Reuben described the situation later that year:

The clashing for supremacy between major political parties did not produce good government. It created an antagonistic, rancid to sour atmosphere, which stifled the efforts to properly solve the minimum wage, taxes, housing, and other problems vital to the working people in Illinois. The Senate Republican majority leadership was particularly obstinate, stumbling, bumbling, and fantastically persistent in an effort to drive back and kill the spirit of humanity and equality in its opposition to the minimum wage and civil rights and other forward-looking proposals.⁸⁴²

Labor's opponents didn't waste any time pressing the advantage. They introduced bills to take pension rights from and impose compulsory retirement on public employees. They again tried to pass a "right to work" bill emasculating unions. They attempted to create a legislative commission to study, codify and revise Illinois labor laws. But of all the anti-labor bills the Republicans attempted to pass in 1967, a select few earned Reuben's greatest scorn. The first was a bill attempting to undo portions the Women's Eight Hour Bill. Rep. Charles L. Hughes, R-Aurora, and Senator William Harris of the 37th Senatorial District introduced the legislation with arguments of equality, calling the existing law archaic and oppressive to women who wanted to work more hours and earn more money. He and his proponents claimed it violated Title VII of the Federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination because of, among other things, gender. Moreover, he claimed, the repeal was only partial—it would affect only female professionals, not factory workers.

Reuben firmly opposed the effort, rejecting the premise that the protections—originally written by women’s groups, long advocated for by female activists, and designed explicitly to serve the interests of working women—was harmful. He further rejected the idea that this bill was intended to target only professional women in search of career advancement. As he wrote to the Senate that May, “Under (Hughes’s) HB No. 393 an endless array of office and factory workers, cloaked or designated at 20 to 40 percent assistants to executives, etc., would be removed from the provisions of the Illinois Women’s Eight-Hour Day and Forty-Eight Week Law.”⁸⁴³

Despite rhetoric to the contrary, this was a bill targeted at women wage-earners, not female salaried workers. It would harm both their quality of life and overall productivity. Reuben continued:

During a recent hearing antagonistic to wage-earners in the House of Representatives, designed to repeal the Women’s Eight-Hour Law, State Senator William C. Harris jumped into the anti-working women tirade and introduced SB No. 587 in the Upper House...This proposed legislation is not only miserable and degrading, but positively destructive even in the interest of production. It was found during the stress and emergency of the First and Second World Wars that wage-earners working 8 hours a day and 6 days a week produced more than they could working 10 hours a day and 7 days a week...Labor’s enemies are concentrating on shamefully exploiting and victimizing our employed women and Senator Harris is leading the way.⁸⁴⁴

Soderstrom used his political skills to quickly kill this effort in committee. He openly told the press he had assurances from Governor Kerner that he would veto such legislation in the unlikely event it was ever passed. “They had [Kerner] befuddled for awhile,” Reub said, but after a conversation with the Governor’s administration the matter was properly sorted.⁸⁴⁵ The Democratic Party was also in step; the bill overwhelmingly failed in committee—all nine Democrats and five of the eleven Republicans voted against it.

Of course, the argument against the eight-hour law—that it unfairly discriminated against women—was as old as the law itself. As far back as 1893, when Illinois passed its first eight-hour bill, the Illinois Manufacturers’ Association brought cases against it on the dubious grounds of equal rights. In a hallmark case argued on behalf of employer William C. Ritchie & Co. of Chicago, IMA counsel Levy Mayer cloaked his opposition in the due process clause of the 14th amendment, arguing—just as Rep. Hughes did decades later—that the eight-hour bill violated the rights of women. Mayer centered his presentation in *Ritchie v. People* on testimony from female employees who charged the law made it impossible for them to support themselves. Ignoring the defense’s (and the Illinois legislature’s) argument that the inability to earn a living on a 40-hour week pointed to a problem with wages, not worker protections, the Illinois Supreme Court found in favor of Ritchie and the IMA. It agreed with his assertion that the law “deprives women of the right to work for more than eight hours in one day... (It) springs from the seeds of paternalism and socialism, which have no place in our government.”⁸⁴⁶

Female activists like the famed Florence Kelley were outraged by the court’s decision, especially at what she viewed as the duplicitous use of equal-rights law. “The measure to guarantee the Negro freedom from oppression has become an insuperable obstacle to the protection of women and children,” she fumed in the wake of the court’s decision. Famed female Chicago lawyer Myra Bradwell likewise attacked the Illinois Supreme Court for its “false equality,” warning “Antipaternalism may pretend an equality between people that does not exist. The pretense of equality may facilitate the continuation of actual inequality.”⁸⁴⁷

But while the industrialists’ argument hadn’t changed, those agreeing with it had. By the mid-1960s, many advocates for women’s rights had rejected (or forgotten) Ms. Kelley’s and Ms. Bradwell’s admonition, siding with industrial interests to undo eight-hour protections across the country. As the mid-century feminist movement took shape, it shifted its focus from the protection of vulnerable working women to the

professional and social advancement of middle and upper class women—a change that had a profound impact on the movement’s view of the very laws it had helped create. In 1965, Velma Mengelkoch, an employee of North American Aviation of California, sued her employers when she was denied a promotion because, they claimed, the state’s Women’s Eight-Hour law rendered her ineligible. As she wrote to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), “We women of California and 25 other states with so-called protective legislation are finding these laws to be discriminating against us instead of protecting us. They are being used to hold our pay checks at a minimum and our job advances to a nli.”⁸⁴⁸ When EEOC Commissioner Aileen Hernandez’s finding of reasonable cause was set aside by the full commission (chaired by none other than Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr.), Hernandez resigned her post and cofounded the National Organization for Women (NOW) with feminist Betty Friedan, a native of Peoria, Illinois. They immediately filed the case of *Mengelkoch v. Industrial Welfare Commission of California* in late 1966, making the end of protective labor laws for women a primary goal of the newly-formed NOW legal team.

As the 1960s’ feminist movement continued to take shape, Reuben and his peers were fast finding themselves on the losing side of the argument. Despite his defeat, Rep. Hughes and his supporters were buoyed by the *Mengelkoch* case, believing the court could well do their work for them. As the *Southern Illinoisan* noted:

Hughes has indicated he does not plan to seek (another) vote on his motion until late in the session because of a case pending in U.S. District Court in Los Angeles. In this case a California woman is asking the court to declare unconstitutional California’s eight-hour law for women. A ruling like this in a federal court soon would make invalid similar laws in Illinois and 39 other states.⁸⁴⁹

Most importantly to Reuben, an overturning of the women’s eight-hour law would bring an end to his push for broader work-week reform. Soderstrom, like others in labor, had supported legislation limiting the hours of women and children not only because they believed in protecting society’s most vulnerable, but because they viewed it as a gateway to legislation supporting universal hour limitations. Soderstrom had for years pushed for legislation making the protections currently afforded to women applicable to all workers, specifically a law that not only created a universal hour limitation but set it far lower, at 35 or even 30 hours. To him, only sweeping government action could effectively limit or decrease the working day. As he declared at the start of the decade:

Government can do anything. 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 any reduction in pay . . . (A)s a matter of fact the 40-hour work week is no more sacred than the 60-hour week or the 44-hour week. After almost a quarter of a century it has become necessary, once again, to adjust the work week to the realities of the economic and technological situation.⁸⁵⁰

In the early 1960s, national unions had in fact used women’s protective legislation as the model for universal worker reforms. In 1961, for example, they supported legislation which would have made a right to 10-minute rest breaks every four hours—already afforded to women under gender-specific legislation—universal.⁸⁵¹

These efforts met with failure, however. In this regard, unions were largely a victim of their own success. By the 1960s most unions had been able to secure very favorable terms, including a 40-hour week with overtime pay, in major industry contract negotiations, thus removing the impetus for statewide or national protective laws. Still, such gains were piecemeal and impermanent, and Reuben remained concerned that workers in Illinois and the nation were still vulnerable. He worried that without protection under the law, just one well-publicized breaking of a national union by a major industrialist or political figure could wipe out all the advances they’d worked so hard and sacrificed so much to achieve.

Sadly, he would eventually be proved right.

Return of the ConCon

While Reuben was able to stop the rollback of the Women's Eight Hour Act, he was less successful in stopping another bill he found contrary to labor interests—a proposal to place the question of whether or not to hold a constitutional convention to rewrite the Illinois constitution (an event commonly referred to as “ConCon”) on the November ballot. Reuben loudly criticized the effort, telling a reporter from the *Chicago Sunday American* that “there are some things you just don't change; the Lord's Prayer, the Sermon on the Mount, the Ten Commandments, and the Illinois Constitution.”⁸⁵² He was concerned that the legal successes, protections, and advancements he'd secured over the decades, rooted in the state's constitution, could be unmoored by a convention. “No one, of course, knows what the recommended changes will be,” he lamented. “Depending largely on the kind of delegates sent to the convention, the recommendations might be very good or very bad; a constitutional convention that resembled our state senate, for instance, would be a scary prospect indeed.”⁸⁵³

Reub was right to fear what the delegate composition might be. If these constitutional designers were elected from the present senatorial districts (which were heavily gerrymandered to support Republican interests), the will of the general public (which the 1964 election had shown to be overwhelmingly Democratic) would be thwarted. He warned the delegates at the Illinois AFL-CIO convention that fall, “I say to you that we'd better be mighty wary of what might happen. I take a look at the state constitution and it says to select delegates to a constitutional convention from the senatorial districts. Well, the Illinois senate is not a liberal senate.”⁸⁵⁴

Not only was labor's legislative legacy at risk; its court precedents were also at stake. As Soderstrom explained to his hometown press:

All of our court decisions are consistent only with the Illinois constitution. If it is discarded, many of our laws will fall with it. Dozens of special sessions would be needed to re-enact laws already on the books. Labor opposes a program which would require re-enactment of many of our labor laws and retrieving good decisions already handed down by the courts⁸⁵⁵

Yet Soderstrom's was the only major voice calling out against the ConCon. A bill to place the question on the November ballot passed unanimously in the Senate and nearly unopposed in the House. Governor Kerner made a large appeal to labor at Reuben's own convention on behalf of the effort, pleading that the labor delegates vote in favor of the ConCon. He told the delegates to “overrule Mr. Soderstrom,” saying:

We are trying to run the nation's No. 1 state and achieve progress and opportunity while we are shackled by a constitution that was written and adopted six years before Custer fought the Sioux Indians at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. This is no longer a horse-and-buggy constitution in a motor age. It is a bow-and-arrow constitution in a nuclear age.⁸⁵⁶

In response to Reub's prediction that the selected delegates would be overwhelmingly conservative, the Democratic Governor stressed that he would personally prevent such an outcome, promising:

I know your good president and my good friend Reub Soderstrom, and some of your other leaders are concerned the voice of labor would be excluded from any convention. So long as I am governor, the views of the trade unions will be sought in the formulation of legislative programs and policies. After the call is approved by referendum, representatives of organized labor will have ample opportunity to help work out a fair and

equitable method of selecting delegates. I can and will sit down with members of the Illinois labor movement, your position in a convention will not be disregarded. I pledge this to you.⁸⁵⁷

Most newspaper editors also sided with Kerner against Soderstrom. The *Peoria Journal Star* warned that “Soderstrom’s attitude, if it remains the avowed position of the AFL-CIO, will leave labor out in the cold. It is simple enough to figure that anyone who is blindly against a new structure is not likely to be seriously consulted when it comes time to plan the footings on which it will be built.”⁸⁵⁸ The *Freeport Journal-Standard* went even further, accusing Reuben of “a severe case of myopia.” Combining it with his opinion on other issues, they accused Reuben of being essentially outdated. They wrote:

The Illinois AFL-CIO is clinging desperately to an outlook developed in the 1930s. At that time, the outlook on the whole was sensible and farsighted. Today it is outmoded and harmful to the interests of (the) majority of the rank and file that the leadership is supposedly serving.⁸⁵⁹

The recalcitrant Reuben ignored such critiques. His executive board voted 17-0 to oppose any attempt to call a convention, warning any convention created under the current conditions would be Republican controlled and very reactionary. Again, papers throughout the state ridiculed the AFL-CIO’s position. As the editorial staff of the *Bloomington Pantagraph* opined:

Add 80 to 100 and normally you get 180. When you add the age of the AFL-CIO leadership in Illinois to the age of the ideas they want to keep, those same figures produce a big nothing...President Rube Soderstrom said that labor would lose all its gains. No constitution can erase the gains that labor has made and the changes that labor has created in our society in the past 100 years...Labor’s gains are too deeply rooted in the present day economic picture to be subject for constitutional debate.⁸⁶⁰

Like the *Freeport Journal Standard* staff, the *Pantagraph* editorialists centered a considerable amount of their fire on Reuben’s age (even the article’s title, “80 Plus 100 Equals Zero,” was a swipe at Reuben’s years).

The Right to Strike!

Attacks on Reuben’s age played an even bigger role in the fight over public employee unions. In the 1967 session Soderstrom tried once again to pass legislation formally allowing public employees to join unions. While most Republicans were willing to concede the legal recognition of such unions, they had one central, devastating demand: they wanted an amendment making strikes by such unions illegal. On the surface, such an amendment might appear a minor sacrifice, as the Illinois State Supreme Court had already ruled that public employees could not strike. However, the amendment proposed to go much further, outlining penalties for striking that then did not exist. Under the new law, the attorney general could seek injunctions against striking employees, and taxpayers could sue unions for “damages” (i.e. lost profits) incurred.⁸⁶¹

Furthermore, the bill itself actually gave little to public employees. While there was no law allowing public employee unions, there was no law forbidding them either, and several public employee unions, including two powerful teachers’ unions, already existed. The bill also made membership in any public employee union strictly optional, effectively making it, in the words of one legislator, “a right-to-work bill.”⁸⁶²

None of this stopped Rep. Ed Madigan, R-Lincoln, from attempting to cast the legislation he helped craft as a pro-labor bill. The anti-strike measure, he claimed, was the only way unions could ever get such a bill passed. “Collective bargaining bills have been pending in the last three sessions,” he told a reporter at the *Bloomington Pantagraph*, “and have never been passed.” He also claimed to have the “full approval” of both the governor and Illinois AFL-CIO President Reuben Soderstrom.⁸⁶³

Reuben quickly took to the press to deny any support of the measure. He called it:

A frightfully bad anti-union proposal which outlawed the right to strike, and outlawed any union security clause in any union contract between public employees and public officials. It also construes picketing as striking, emphasizes the right not to join a union, which is designed to keep the union from having a majority of employees enrolled. This would be a company union that couldn't strike, picket or even have a proper number of employees enrolled to constitute a majority of employees. This bill nullifies all contracts that public employees already have and would provide legalized nonunion or scab conditions for the largest group of employees in Illinois. We just can't have that in our state.⁸⁶⁴

That June he went to the Executive Committee of the Illinois House to give testimony against the bill, telling legislators:

We have found out of a lifetime of experience that the surest way to destroy collective bargaining is to repeal the workers' right to strike every time negotiations reach an impasse. When that right is threatened by state and federal legislation, as is happening today, collective bargaining will not work. Bargaining can only take place when both sides have a reason to bargain. If labor has no right to strike then management has no reason to bargain. All of this indicates to me that the real way to prevent strikes is to allow wage earners to negotiate union contracts in the regular way...

The labor movement would like to have public officials and public bodies enter into a contractual relationship with local unions just as private contractors and employers do now. Legislation prohibiting strikes makes it difficult to get a reluctant employer or public official to sit down and bargain in good faith, He knows labor is powerless to do anything about it. He can thumb his nose at negotiations and he does! Once a contract is signed it becomes a no-strike document during the life of the contract.⁸⁶⁵

To defeat the bill Reuben teamed up with Rep. Thomas Hanahan Jr., D-McHenry, a pro-labor legislator and union man who believed the no-strike amendment "would completely emasculate the bill," to add an amendment of his own permitting public employees to strike if their contract expired. It passed, effectively killing the entire bill.⁸⁶⁶ Hanahan took pride in the results, telling his constituents and fellow union members:

Under no circumstances will I support legislation that will be a detriment to the AFL-CIO, or any union. You know, it is very easy these days to be wishy-washy. I truly believe that what my actions were and the actions of your executive board, and in particular, our revered President Reuben Soderstrom, that the actions taken...in the last session of the general assembly was not only courageous, but miraculous that we have succeeded.⁸⁶⁷

Not all in labor were pleased at the outcome, however. Public employee union officials had been in support of the bill, believing it to be the surest path to official recognition. That summer the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees Union (AFSCME) attempted to press the leadership in the House and Senate to renew their activities to pass the bill. Reuben cut short his vacation with Olga as soon as he received the news, racing back to Illinois to squash the attempt. The union, angry and resentful, threatened to undo Reuben at the convention that fall. Soderstrom was furious, writing in a letter to the Illinois AFL-CIO Executive Board that September:

Their conduct has been reprehensible and dishonorable. They would like to impeach the state federation officers for defeating legislation which was not only out-of-line with the aims, purposes and objectives of the labor movement, but actually would have brought self-destruction to all public employees and irreparable harm to all other unions as well.⁸⁶⁸

STUBBORN TRADITIONALIST OR INSPIRED VISIONARY?

Later that month AFSCME attempted to make good on their threat. The first shot was fired during a “stormy session” of the Illinois AFL-CIO convention. Some 68 labor officials and public employee union delegates walked out before a speech by State Rep. Thomas Hanahan, who drafted amendments which killed the collective bargaining bill. They returned after his speech.

The 79-year-old Reuben was energized, active and alert. He and his lieutenants spent several hours that night working with public employee union officials, trying to find agreement on how strong a collective bargaining bill should be. They failed. Reuben emerged from the meeting late that night and told the press “All we want them (public employees unions) to do is bargain collectively like the rest of us do.”⁸⁶⁹ AFSCME officials, meanwhile told reporters that they considered the demands of Soderstrom and Executive Board wholly unrealistic, noting that 11 states had public employee collective bargaining laws, and all contained “no strike” clauses.⁸⁷⁰

The next day delegates from the unions of public employees introduced resolutions critical of the Illinois AFL-CIO leadership. They called for an investigation of the lobbying practices of the Federation and its actions during the last General Assembly session, accusing the executive leadership of “malfeasance and maladministration of office.”⁸⁷¹ Even more biting, for the first time in his 37 years in office, Soderstrom’s stewardship of the Illinois AFL-CIO came under serious attack when AFSCME officials submitted a second resolution calling for a prohibition against anyone over the age of 65 from holding office at the state federation. While the vote on these propositions failed, they made front-page news across the state.⁸⁷²

Newspapers also largely attacked Reuben for his resolute position on a “no strike” clause. The *Freeport Journal Standard* wrote:

Mr. Soderstrom maintains that any legislation which contains a “no-strike” provision is on its face unacceptable. Such a position is unrealistic. Quite obviously there is some difference between a policeman or a school teacher striking and an auto worker or hod carrier walking off the job...The public employees section of the AFL-CIO itself recognizes that demanding a right to strike provision above all else is nonsensical, as it displayed by walking out of the convention in Peoria when the AFL-CIO leadership tried to tell the group otherwise. The real need is not for an ideological battle over the right to strike, but for enactment into law of provisions that will allow fair, intelligent resolution of differences between public employees without disrupting essential governmental functions.⁸⁷³

Across all the battles Soderstrom faced in 1967—the ConCon, the right to strike, and protective laws for female workers—he faced one consistent critique throughout: that his positions, once forward-thinking and in the mainstream of progressive thought, were now dated and out of step with the current needs of labor and the State. For labor to face the future, they claimed, they had to leave behind a leader who was mired in the past.

Was this an accurate assessment? From the beginning of his political life during the Progressive Era on through the Great Depression and World War II and into the age of the Great Society, Soderstrom consistently maintained his position on most of the seminal topics of his time. However, it would be highly inaccurate to label his opinions on these matters as static products of the times in which they were formed. Quite the opposite; when Reuben opposed the ConCon in the 1940s, for example, his position was as unpopular and out of the mainstream then as it was in 1967. In both eras, Reuben was virtually the only major force in Illinois politics opposing a new convention, and was mercilessly thrashed by editorialists and

politicians alike. His opposition to the ConCon could not faithfully be described as old-fashioned, as it was never in-fashion; nor could his intent be described as reactionary, as he largely shared the progressive goals of the reformers, disagreeing more on tactics—Reuben preferred amending the existing constitution over a constitutional convention—than outcome.

Likewise, Soderstrom's fight over a public union's right to strike is a powerful example of Reuben being ahead of the times rather than behind them. While the Illinois AFSMCE leadership may have considered strikes antiquated, Reuben's stubborn insistence on their value proved prescient. In May of that year, New York public employees swarmed Madison Square Garden to protest the proposed Taylor Law, which would deny public employees the right to strike. Despite its passage, NYC teacher and transit unions violated the act multiple times in the 1970s and 80s, asserting that "no one, no body of legislators or government officials can take from us our rights as free men and women to leave our jobs when sufficiently aggrieved: when a group of our members are so aggrieved, then indeed they will strike."⁸⁷⁴

The NYC protest was just the tip of the iceberg; as labor researcher Dr. Dane M. Partridge later noted, "Public sector strike activity increased dramatically during the 1960s and 1970s, despite the fact that such strikes were illegal in most states. Furthermore, public sector work stoppages increased to record levels at a time when strike activity was decreasing in the economy as a whole."⁸⁷⁵ Public worker strikes were labor's greatest success stories of the 1960s and 1970s, a time that (not coincidentally) corresponded with record growth in public sector unionization even as overall unionization numbers remained flat. In his groundbreaking work *Strike Back*, historian and former labor attorney Joe Burns covers the public sector strike movement in detail, noting that teachers, sanitation workers, air traffic controllers, and social workers combined to create an "explosion of strike activity (which) spanned the breath of the country, from major northern cities to rural western towns to southern 'right to work' states."⁸⁷⁶ In insisting on the right of public employees to strike, Reuben proved himself to be more forward-thinking than his opponents—yet another example of how, even at 79, Soderstrom kept his finger on the pulse of labor.

While the issue of the Women's Eight-Hour Law is more complicated than the ConCon or the right to strike, Soderstrom was far from the only figure or thinker to grapple with the feminist movement's change in focus. Truthfully, it is simplistic to describe the women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s as monolithic and single-issue. Not all women's groups were supportive of NOW's efforts. A sizable number of advocates—particularly those representing women of color and of lower socio-economic status—didn't approve of NOW's approach, which they viewed as primarily concerned with the desires of white, upper-class and middle-class women. As the Reverend Dr. Anna Pauline "Pauli" Murray, an American civil rights and women's rights activist, pointedly complained after NOW's first conference in Washington D.C., "I saw no Catholic sisters, no women of ethnic minorities other than about five Negro women, and obviously no women who represent the poor."⁸⁷⁷ She and others sought to avoid Title VII fights, choosing to fight discrimination on 14th Amendment grounds because, as historian Robert Self notes, "This approach meant the broadest possible protection for women because it would require not the abrogation of all laws making distinction by sex, but only those that could be proved to materially harm women."⁸⁷⁸

Many female labor leaders—particularly those who represented blue-collar working women—agreed with Reuben's position on Title VII challenges to eight-hour day laws. Laura Gabel, who represented over 8,500 women in the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union in Los Angeles, argued "retention of the 8-hour day for women is vital to maintenance of a humane labor system...(it) represents a great advance (which) come about only after years of struggle on the part of labor."⁸⁷⁹ California's Status of Women Commission Chair Ruth Miller likewise noticed the economic discrepancy between those seeking to keep hour protections and those seeking their removal. She aggressively questioned several employers during her commission's hearings on their true motives and implications, asking one "Has it occurred to you that there might be some rather

unpleasant results of the removal of the eight-hour restriction for [women in] less advantaged industries?”⁸⁸⁰

It is clear from Reuben’s letters on this subject that he was supportive of the professional advancement of women, but he did not believe it should come at the expense of those women who were economically disadvantaged or remained in traditional laboring jobs. He viewed bills like the one proposed in the Illinois House (a partial repeal) as “false flag” legislation aimed at pitting women against each other “No employer has ever been denied or refused a relaxation of the Act to meet a tight or urgent situation,” he maintained. “No employer or professional employee has ever been prosecuted or brought into a court of law because of alleged violations with respect to professionals.”⁸⁸¹

When taken as a whole, there is far more evidence that the 79-year-old Reuben was more of a visionary than a reactionary. His opponents were not youth in revolt, but a mix of generally older officials and movement leaders who disagreed with him not over the old-fashioned nature of his views but on his uncompromising insistence on first principles, solidarity, and a deferential preference for the poor. For him, the past was not a golden age but prologue. It was a dark age from which labor had emerged—a progression from which today’s leaders could draw instruction and inspiration:

During this period of darkness and crisis labor unions and this state became an island of hope so that future generations might live in a better world. As we sit here today enjoying the efforts of the pioneers and enjoying prosperity, I think we ought to offer a silent prayer of thanksgiving for men like John Walker, Victor Olander, and John Fitzpatrick and all of the charter members of our local unions. Fifty years ago the world, as it is today, was a troubled state. Low wages and long hours and intolerable working conditions existed everywhere, in mills, mines, factories, and in the trades until workers banded together into unions.

The eight-hour day was the paramount issue around the turn of the century. It took thirty years of sacrifice, struggle, strikes and picket lines to firmly establish the eight-hour workday in the State of Illinois. If the unions had done nothing more for their members than to establish for them the eight-hour day they would have justified their existence.

As I look back over the sixty years of labor history, when I think of the hours of toil that have been lessened and the wages that have been increased, and the working conditions that have been improved, when I think of the joint safety Labor-Management Committees and the accidents that have been prevented and the lives that have been saved, when I think of the sum total of human misery that has been avoided and the happiness extended to millions of workers, I search my mind for words to describe the debt we owe the pioneers of the Illinois movement of labor!⁸⁸²

Illinois’s Lion of Labor was feisty, defensive, thoughtful and brave. It was a good thing, because the next year would be one of the most active in his long and storied career.

CHAPTER EXCERPT

CONSTITUTIONAL IMPACT

While the Illinois constitutional convention did not produce the catastrophic effects Soderstrom feared, he was proven correct in his assessment that the changes reformers most desired would remain unsolved. The two highest-priority reformist goals—the appointment of judges and the election of one state representative per district—were not adopted into the 1970 Constitution; they were instead eventually passed by subsequent constitutional amendments (as Reuben had originally advocated). Many of the other issues the convention was originally called to address were eventually solved through federal reform. In the words of historian Ann Lousin, “The United States Supreme Court decisions and the 26th Amendment have rendered many other [Illinois State constitutional] issues almost moot. Restrictions on the death penalty, suffrage for 18, 19, and 20-year-olds, aid to parochial schools and the payment of criminal fines in installments are prime examples of issues now considered relegated almost entirely to federal action. Even if Illinois voters had rejected the 1970 Constitution, federal action would have made these changes anyway.”⁸⁸³

CHAPTER 57

1968

REUBEN WEATHERS TURMOIL FROM WITHOUT AND WITHIN

“What labor is trying to do is build good government and make progress – legislative progress, political progress, and above everything else, economic progress. The greatest tragedy, of course, is the fake promise of some lawmakers who are in such a hurry to do nothing.”

-Reuben Soderstrom, 1968 Illinois AFL-CIO Convention

ASSASSINATION IN MEMPHIS

The Attempt to Unionize Sanitation Workers in Tennessee

Managing the roiling waters of race within his own membership rolls, Reuben often read the newspapers to follow his friend and colleague, Dr. Martin Luther King. In early 1968, his attention turned toward Memphis, where the city’s sanitation workers—almost all of whom were black—were waging a desperate and largely unnoticed struggle for basic labor rights. Their trucks were dilapidated; junior workers often had to stand in the back with the garbage when it rained, knee-deep in putrid mash. While not as offensive to the senses, many other insults—meager pay, no sick leave or vacations, and dilapidated equipment—were no less injurious to the body and spirit. Their union, granted a charter by the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), was still not recognized by the city. The workers had attempted a strike two years earlier but with no success, mostly due to the indifference of the city’s religious and middle-class white communities. Things had only gotten worse under Governor Henry Loeb, who refused to even acknowledge their grievances.

Loeb’s indifference eventually incurred great cost. On February 1, 1968, an electrical wire on the garbage truck carrying sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker shorted, triggering its compressor. Crewmate Elester Gregory, riding in the cab when he first heard the gut-wrenching whirl, described what happened next:

The motor started running, and the driver stopped and ran around and mashed that button to stop that thing. I didn’t know what was happening. It looked to me like one of them almost got out, but he got caught and just fell back in there.⁸⁸⁴

Cole and Walker met a gruesome end, their bodies crushed by the defective compressor. Their deaths devastated the community and left their families destitute. As author Emily Yellin notes:

The men’s families received no workers’ compensation. The men had no insurance and no pension. The city gave their families back pay, one month’s salary and \$500 toward burial expenses. But that was not a legal requirement, only what then-Mayor Henry Loeb saw as a “moral obligation.” It was the way things had always been done in the paternalistic plantation culture of Memphis’s city government. Black workers never got legal

assurances. The white boss simply “took care” of his black workers, who did not complain—at least not to his face.⁸⁸⁵

This time, however, the workers would not keep silent. Maybe it was the grotesque nature of the men’s deaths. Maybe it was the early successes of the civil rights movement, or the string of racially-charged riots that had gripped America’s cities. Maybe it was the steady work of brave men like T.O. Jones, who organized the sanitation workers of Memphis. These men—over 1,200 in all—refused to let the deaths of their friends be in vain, using the event as a catalyst to spark a strike for union recognition, better safety standards, and decent wages. The NAACP joined the unions a few days later, and on February 22 the City Council finally voted to recognize the union and approve wage increases.

Mayor Loeb, however, refused to submit to the will of the City Council. He loosed the police on a group of nonviolent protestors in front of City Hall, who used mace and tear gas to instill fear. The attack only made the movement stronger, with ministers and students swelling the ranks. Reverend James Lawson, the leader of 150 local ministers who had formed the Community On the Move for Equality (COME), appealed to Martin Luther King Jr. for support. By the time Dr. King arrived in Memphis on March 18, he was met by a crowd of over 25,000.⁸⁸⁶ After an initial delay due to a snowstorm, a nonviolent March was planned for March 28.

But other forces had agendas of their own. Twenty minutes into the march, some in the crowd turned to violence. Just who started the riot remains unclear. According to Taylor Rogers, a striking sanitation worker and future president of the Memphis AFSCME:

Well, the march got violent. Once we turned off Beale Street on Main Street, they started breaking windows—but it wasn’t the marchers. It wasn’t the workers. We was nonviolent, as Dr. King wanted us to be. We don’t know what happened or why it started. But I believe some outside group or someone started it to discredit Dr. King, because he was planning to march on Washington, and they really wanted to stop that. So I think a lot of that was to discredit Dr. King, so that he would turn back and not talk about going to Washington.⁸⁸⁷

The marchers’ vandalism was met by unprecedented brutality, culminating in police chasing demonstrators into churches, releasing tear gas into the sanctuaries and clubbing them as they lay on the ground gasping for air. By the end of the bloody beat-down at least one protestor was dead and Mayor Loeb had called in 4,000 National Guard troops to institute martial law.⁸⁸⁸

While some accuse racist agitators, others believe the Invaders—a black power movement “conditioned by the Vietnam War”—were to blame. While they denied direct involvement, they did not condemn the violence. As Invader leader Coby Smith told a reporter when asked if his group had organized the burnings, “We don’t organize burnings, essentially. We organize people. If people burn, they burn.”⁸⁸⁹ After a decade of racial violence at home and war abroad waged disproportionately by black draftees, many young men and women of color had come to reject King’s message of nonviolence, believing him out of touch with their trials and needs.

Dr. King believed the Invaders were the key to ending the violence. He refused to attack them in the press, telling reporters, “We don’t have any problems with many of the young militants who talk in terms of violence. Our method is to communicate with them.”⁸⁹⁰ On April 4, King invited their leadership to a meeting at the Lorraine Motel. His Southern Christian Leadership Conference agreed to help fund their “community unification” programs if they would act as marshals for the next march, actively guarding against violence.

Fifteen minutes after their meeting, Dr. King was killed by an assassin's bullet.

As the news spread, mourners across the nation reacted with anguish, anger, and confusion. Protestors in cities throughout the country took to the streets to vent their rage, violent demonstrations that left more than 40 dead. President Johnson called for a national day of mourning two days before Dr. King's funeral on April 9, 1968. More than 100,000 grief-stricken citizens filled the streets of Atlanta as his coffin slowly wound its way along the three-mile journey from Ebenezer Baptist Church to Dr. King's alma mater, Morehouse College.

In the decades since his death, the American public has never forgotten the emblematic leader or his dream for America. Far less well-known or recognized, however, is the fact that in his final fight Dr. King was battling not against the obvious racism of segregation laws but the subtle, pernicious bigotry found in the war against the working poor, struggling to unionize for basic rights. As Coby Smith described many years later:

It wasn't the police necessarily beating everybody over the head and turning dogs loose, but it was doing the same thing with sanitation workers, because they were living the absolute worst life in this community. Here were men who worked all day every day who could have still qualified for welfare, and they were willing to put everything on the line, to give up their jobs. And they didn't have much of jobs to start with.⁸⁹¹

In Illinois, Reuben Soderstrom read the newspaper and found it no coincidence that Dr. King's last act was in support of a union strike. Since their inception, unions had struggled not just for better pay or benefits but for the dignity of their members, realized in the conditions of their work and employment. In this, historically black unions like the sanitation workers of Memphis were continuing a tradition that stretched back decades, using the tactics of assembly, marching and negotiation pioneered and defined by the likes of Gompers, Soderstrom, and others.

With the death of Dr. King, the struggle for equal rights grew increasingly confrontational and militant. The end of the decade saw the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO, institutions responsible for some of the most crucial advances in racial equality, come under direct assault for failing to change society (and themselves) fast enough. In many ways, it was a fight for the soul of progress and protest, and Reuben would find himself and the Illinois AFL-CIO at the center of it.

The Kerner Commission on Race Relations

Soderstrom was devastated by the news of Dr. King's demise; MLK's visit to the Illinois Labor Convention just a few years earlier had allowed Reuben to gain powerful sense of the man, and he had remained a friend ever since. Shortly after his assassination, Reuben wrote to Coretta Scott King, Dr. King's widow, to give his condolences, describing the leader he knew and loved:

He was an eloquent Christ-like personality whose heart was beating with the heart-beats of poor and needy people, a gentle and considerate advocate of nonviolence who ironically became a sacrifice to his quality. He was my personal friend. The lives of many men, women and children will be made happier because he lived...In this sad hour of bereavement the members of organized labor of Illinois are extending their heartfelt sympathy to you and your children, and to all of the family members of Rv. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose life's work reflected credit on all the thoughtful people of his race and also on our entire world of Christianity.⁸⁹²

Others in labor quickly followed suit. Reuben's old friend CFL President Bill Lee called on unions to continue Dr. King's work:

Many of us in organized labor shared the privilege of working with Dr. Martin Luther King in his efforts to make life better for those millions to who he was a voice of hope. He was genuinely a man of God...Labor will join all others of good will to take up the burden and the challenge he has left us...to eliminate poverty, blight, and discrimination. The unfinished business of American society and the realization of the American dream for all people is the monumental legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King.⁸⁹³

Action regarding the sanitation strike was swift and effective. Even before Dr. King's death, organized labor had started a committee called "Memphis U.S.A.," headed by Sleeping Car Porters President Phillip Randolph and Seafarers International President Paul Hall, to coordinate relief efforts. "These 1,200 workers in Memphis . . . are fighting for the most basic of trade union objectives," said AFL-CIO President George Meany. "They deserve and will have the support of their brothers and sisters in the American labor movement. Their fight is the fight of all American labor."⁸⁹⁴ On the same day that Coretta Scott King led 42,000 on a silent march through the streets of Memphis the AFL-CIO contributed \$20,000 to the effort.⁸⁹⁵ Eight days later the Mayor relented, agreeing to a deal that allowed the City Council to recognize the union and guarantee a higher wage.

In 1967, Illinois Governor Otto Kerner had been selected by President Johnson to chair a Commission tasked with examining the causes of the race riots sweeping the nation. Published in 1968, the Kerner Commission's report was direct and explosive, clearly identifying the root problem to be that "our nation is moving towards two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal."⁸⁹⁶ Kerner's report concluded:

The summer of 1967 brought racial disorders to American cities, and with them shock, fear and bewilderment to the nation...Reaction to last summer's disorders has quickened the movement and deepened the division. Discrimination and segregation have long permeated much of American life; they now threaten the future of every American...

What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.

It is time now to turn with all the purpose at our command to the major unfinished business of this nation. It is time to adopt strategies for action that will produce quick and visible progress...⁸⁹⁷

The strategies that the commission called for centered around massive government action, specifically the creation of programs "on a scale equal to the dimension of the problems." These initiatives had to be sufficiently funded, by new taxes if necessary. This, Kerner and his commission maintained, was the only way to alter the current course of the nation.

Soderstrom agreed with the commission's findings, and supported new government action to address the problem. Reuben had long been a supporter of an active, interventionist government. In his estimation, it was the power and will of government, not simply union-management negotiations, that had brought about labor's most enduring successes. He had no reason to believe any less would be required in the arena of civil rights. In his presidential address that year, Reuben told the assembled delegates:

One of the most vital issues of American domestic policy in the Sixties is civil rights. The Illinois State AFL-CIO has always been a strong supporter of civil rights. Our convention has a standing Civil Rights Committee . . . Labor in Illinois can point to a proud record of effective support of programs in the War on Poverty, and School and College building projects. We have constantly backed legislation to provide better education and

participate in programs to educate and train both young and old. We are a progressive-minded organization and with our parent body can justifiably claim credit for almost all legislative and economic progress made in our state and nation.⁸⁹⁸

Soderstrom's faith in favorable legislation and government programs as the primary motivator and measure of accomplishment can be seen in his presidential remarks. This was not unique to civil rights; when it came to old age pensions or working conditions, for example, Reuben looked to legislation passed—not concessions wrought at the bargaining table—as the marker of his successes. Even in the case of workmen's compensation and occupational safety, the innovation of which Reuben was the proudest was his "Agreed Bills" process, a format which brought legislators directly into labor-management negotiations. This outlook melded seamlessly with his role as Illinois AFL-CIO President, where his primary duty and efforts centered on legislative lobbying. As he drove home in his remarks:

What labor is trying to do is build good government and make progress—legislative progress, political progress, and above everything else, economic progress...The greatest tragedy, of course, is the fake promise of some lawmakers who are in such a hurry to do nothing...Why do some lawmakers talk about welfare and then refuse to vote for a cash program, like the one outlined in the Kerner Report which would take thousands of men off relief rolls and put them in meaningful jobs, and make of them tax-paying citizens? Why do some lawmakers want to investigate riots and then refuse to vote appropriations to cities which would prevent riots? Why do some lawmakers want to investigate crime and then refuse to vote for programs which would wipe out the cause of crime? Why do some federal lawmakers vote 73 per cent of the nation's tax money into war programs and space programs and then try to cut down the 1 ¾ percent allocated to prevent poverty? Why do some of our lawmakers go to church on Sunday and pray to the Great Ruler above and then turn their backs on humanity? It is difficult to believe that these kinds of lawmakers are in the Legislature and Congress representing you and me, and it should not be so, but there they are."⁸⁹⁹

Black vs. White in the UAW and Chicago Teachers Union

Soderstrom thought in terms of legislative action and opposition. While this made him a powerful lobbyist, it arguably left him with a limited view to some of the racial problems within his own organization. While the workplace was desegregating, many Illinois unions remained separated along racial lines. While not as obvious or deleterious as the outright southern brand of hostility, the racial biases of northern unions had an enormous impact on the type of jobs and advancement available to workers of color. As author Kevin Boyle notes in his history of the UAW:

The elimination of racial barriers in northern auto plants in the 1950s...had greatly expanded the number of black UAW members in the region. By 1960, African-Americans accounted for 21 percent of production workers in Illinois UAW plants, 20 percent in Michigan plants, and 19 percent in New Jersey plants. Even in the heart of UAW country, however, blacks could still not penetrate the citadel of skilled work. According to local records, although 65 percent of the production workers at the Ford Rouge plant in 1960 were black, only 3.5 percent of the skilled workers were black. The difference was even more pronounced at the Detroit Dodge Main plant, where blacks accounted for 45 percent of the production work force but for none of the plant's 1,500 skilled workers. Nationwide, blacks made up 1.5 percent of the union's skilled members in late 1963.

Even on integrated jobs, blacks continued to experience discrimination and harassment. Officials of Detroit Dodge Main Local 3, for instance, refused to correct management's practice of promoting white workers with little or no seniority ahead of black workers with up to twenty-two years in the plant. When a manager at the GM plant in St. Louis promoted two black workers to the loading dock, the white workers walked off the job...A handful of white workers at the Ford Ypsilanti plant, just west of Detroit and a stronghold of white

southern migrants, burned a cross on the plant lawn.⁹⁰⁰

The struggle within the National AFL-CIO to combat UAW-style discrimination partly led to the rise of the “black power” movement in 1966, which in turn put further stress on the labor-civil rights coalition. The seeming breaking point, however, came in the form of the New York Teachers Strike.

At Junior High School 271 in Brooklyn’s Ocean Hill-Brownsville, a predominantly black neighborhood had been granted “community control” by Mayor John Lindsay in the spring of 1967. The following May, Principal Rhody McCoy fired nineteen teachers, almost all of them Jewish. McCoy claimed he was attempting to fire ineffective teachers who had been foisted on them because they were black and poor. The United Federation of Teachers fought back, charging that many of those fired were in fact good teachers who were terminated because they voiced opposition to the community control plan (and, it was hinted, because of their faith). In the end, what began as an isolated impasse at this local school resulted in a massive strike involving nearly 60,000 teachers that shut down New York City’s public schools for months.⁹⁰¹

Over one million school children were negatively impacted by the strikes, and the damage incurred by the progressive coalition was just as deep and long-lasting. The strike pitted an array of interests against one another—upper-class intellectuals versus working-class labor versus black communities versus Jewish minorities—in a complex, and in many ways irreparable, fashion.

In Chicago, a separate set of teacher’s strikes furthered these divisions when the mostly-black Full-Time Basis Substitutes (FTBs) conducted their own “wildcat” strike after concluding that the leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) was working with the school system to block their certification. Instead of desegregation in labor, new racially-drawn unions, like the Black Teachers Caucus (BTC) began to form.

Reuben had always kept the CTU at an arm’s length. In his personal account of Soderstrom, then-Secretary Robert Gibson noted that his mentor had steadfastly refused to allow the organization—which comprised over 25,000 members—to be represented in union leadership, despite direct and repeated requests by President John Fewkes. The move perplexed Gibson; when he confronted Soderstrom on the matter, the latter demurred that as an Association, the CTU could not be allowed on the Illinois AFL-CIO Board, an answer Robert found unconvincing⁹⁰²

While there are distinctions between unions and associations, they are relatively minor—certainly not large enough to warrant keeping a major organization out of leadership. Gibson’s account hints that other, deeper factors may have been at play. As wealthy as it was, the CTU would have likely hindered the civil rights movement had it been given authority within the Illinois AFL-CIO. As historian John F. Lyons writes, Fewkes and the majority of his board were known to be openly hostile to the civil rights movement, “devotees of segregation to the bitter end...Fewkes used every opportunity to deny that there was a deliberate policy of segregated schooling in Chicago, defended its neighborhood school policy, argued against transferring students, and remained silent on the issue of a segregated teaching force.”⁹⁰³

Even before the 1968 strikes, Reuben had seen the potential divisions that the CTU could visit upon labor, and had actively limited their influence. Now, however, events had finally overtaken him. The fight between the CTU and the FTBs was largely understood as fight between white unions and black workers, pushing both sides to bitter extremes.

POLITICAL MAYHEM AT THE CHICAGO DNC

“If Blood is Gonna Flow...”

This growing divide was on full display in the protests of the 1968 Democratic National Convention. The August Chicago event was ripe for chaos; the sitting Democratic President, Lyndon Johnson, had declined to run, and the popular favorite Robert Kennedy had been assassinated that June. While Johnson's Vice President Hubert Humphrey entered the convention with the most delegates, he had not won a single primary (all his delegates were acquired through caucuses). Eugene McCarthy, a Senator who, unlike Humphrey, was a pro-peace candidate, led the opposition to the traditional Democratic Party leadership. Meanwhile, a sea of demonstrators amassed outside the International Amphitheatre, representing a number of groups including the Students for a Democratic Society, the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (the "Mobe") and the Youth International Party (the "yippies"). The stakes were unbelievably high, and after a year of strikes, riots, and assassinations, tensions were on a razor's edge both within the convention and without.

The days that followed were marred by some of the most horrific violence the city had seen. Mayor Daley, the long-serving boss of Chicago, could not countenance the motley crew descending on his city. Roger Wilkins, Johnson's Director of Community Relations Service, later described the Mayor as "the embodiment of power wrapped up so tightly in its own righteousness that he can't hear any words but those echoing out of his own mouth."⁹⁰⁴ In a show of force, he called in thousands of National Guardsmen to join his police platoons. A force of 23,000 authorities was mobilized to control a crowd of roughly 10,000 demonstrators. For days on end after the 11pm curfew, the armed forces engaged in regular rounds of clubbing and tear-gassing, pushing both protestors and police closer to the breaking point. This mentality of violence even infected security guards on the convention floor, one of whom belted CBS correspondent Dan Rather in the stomach as he reported from inside the event, prompting legendary TV anchorman Walter Cronkite to muse on live television, "I think we've got a bunch of thugs here, Dan."⁹⁰⁵

All this came to a head on August 28, when the police and National Guard, weary and enraged at a protestor who lowered the American flag at a permitted protest at Grant Park, finally converged on the crowd with fury, beating on the demonstrators with seeming abandon. They broke formation and charged into the mass, some of them hunting for the protest leadership. According to later testimony by Mobe leader Rennie Davis:

The police formation broke and began to run, and at that time I heard several of the men in the line yell, quite distinctly, "Kill Davis! Kill Davis!" and they were screaming that and the police moved on top of me, and I was trapped between my own marshal line and advancing police line. The first thing that occurred to me was a very powerful blow to the head that drove me face first down into the dirt, and then, as I attempted to crawl on my hands and knees, the policemen continued to yell, "Kill Davis! Kill Davis!" and continued to strike me across the ear and the neck and the back. I guess I must have been hit thirty or forty times in the back and I crawled for maybe—I don't know how many feet, ten feet maybe, and I came to a chain fence and somehow I managed to crawl either under or through that fence, and a police fell over the fence, trying to get me, and another police hit the fence with his nightstick, but I had about a second or two in which I could stand and I leaped over a bench and over some people and into the park, and then I proceeded to walk toward the center of the park...

Well, I guess the first thing that I was conscious of, I looked down, and my tie was just solid blood, and I realized that my shirt was just becoming blood, and someone took my arm and took me to the east side of the Bandshell, and I laid down, and there was a white coat who was bent over me. I remember hearing the voice of Carl Oglesby. Carl said, "In order to survive in this country, we have to fight," and then—then I lost consciousness.⁹⁰⁶

Yippie leader Tom Hayden, shaken and angry over the brutal beating of Davis, leapt to a microphone and whipped the protestors into a fury of his own making, declaring:

This city and the military machine it had aimed at us won't permit us to protest. . . Therefore we must move out of this park in groups throughout the city and turn this excited, overheated military machine against itself. Let us make sure that if blood is going to flow, let it flow all over this city. If gas is going to be used, let that gas come down all over Chicago...If we are going to be disrupted and violated, let this whole stinking city be disrupted and violated.⁹⁰⁷

Hayden led the demonstrators straight to the Hilton, where the TV crews sat covering the convention. All the cameras turned as the police beat protestors in a seventeen-minute melee. The event, later described in the famous Walker report as a “police riot,” was broadcast on national TV at the very moment Humphrey was securing the nomination. The scene broke the Democratic Party in the eyes of the nation, leaving them to question how a party so divided could possibly manage a country.

At Reuben’s own labor convention that fall, opinions about the debacle were sharply divided. Many Democratic career politicians like Secretary of State Paul Powell decried the actions of the protestors, claiming he had seen “hippies tearing up park benches,” and “protestors with razor blades in their shoes to kick at the police.” He charged that pre-event intelligence from the FBI warned of an assassination attempt. He insisted the American people “owe a debt to the Chicago Police” for their handling of the protestors.⁹⁰⁸ Many union delegates—particularly those of color—disagreed sharply with Powell’s assessment. In the words of one minority delegate:

As for the convention in the city of Chicago, we the black community in Chicago feel that this is some of the tactics the police have been using on the black community for the last 300 years. It is a disgrace, and I am afraid, sir, that you might lose some of the Negroes, some of the black votes...This is the reason some of the people in the labor movement are going to vote for Mr. Wallace. They know the Democratic Party is doing the same thing, and why not go with a man like Wallace, who tells it like it is, and quit playing both sides of the fence.⁹⁰⁹

Reuben Endorses Hubert Humphrey

George Wallace, the former Democratic Governor of Alabama, was now running as a “law and order” candidate for the segregationist American Independent Party. While he knew he couldn’t win outright, Wallace and his supporters hoped to win enough votes to prevent either Humphrey or Nixon from winning a majority in the Electoral College, allowing him to act as kingmaker. Many in labor worried that he would do just that, using white outrage to wring votes from blue-collar Americans only to turn around and implement a raft of southern anti-labor policies. At the Illinois AFL-CIO convention that year, Reuben emphatically called on delegates to reject Wallace’s message, repeating the political and historical connections between the labor and civil rights. As Addie Wyatt, a delegate from Meat Cutters No. 247, told the audience:

We have talked about some of the supporters of Wallace. But as you talk with some of these people, it is not because they think Wallace is going to be favorable towards some of our economic problems. But they will tell you they are in support of him because they think Wallace will halt the speed of the civil rights movement. Now this is very regrettable. I want you to know I didn’t learn to sing “We Shall Overcome” in the civil rights movement. I learned it in the labor movement. I learned from labor leaders singing, black and white together. We feel that our fight is right. We feel that God is on our side and every good intended American person is on our side. It is a struggle for human dignity and decency for all people, no matter whether they are black, white, male or female. And God help us if we can’t understand it.⁹¹⁰

Wallace didn’t get the chance to play the spoiler, but his interference—along with the convention riots—

helped hand the election to Richard Nixon. Interestingly, while Nixon dominated in the Electoral College (301 to 191) he only narrowly won the popular vote (Nixon beat Humphrey by only 0.7%). In fact, in the immediate aftermath of the election it appeared as though Humphrey may have won the popular vote.

To Soderstrom, the entire 1968 election was a sad, sorry mess. He personally liked Humphrey, a man he had known since his days as Mayor of Minneapolis. Reuben keenly felt Hubert's loss, and wrote to him after learning of the election results:

Dear Vice-President Humphrey:

I never did like the Electoral College. It can and did defeat the will of the people in this November 5th election.

Projection of votes rolled up last Tuesday indicate that you have a majority of individual votes cast. That should be the law of the land because it is the will of the people. Maybe with your help the wiping out of the Electoral College can become an immediate A. No.1 project so that today's miscarriage of election returns can never again turn victory into defeat.

I have always admired you. No finer friend of labor and humanity ever aspired for the Presidency of the United States. The fortunes of political warfare in this instance ran against the best interests of wage-earners not only in America but the world over, and labor in Illinois mourns.

The officers and members of the Illinois State Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations are hoping you will be available to run again in 1972 and that our Heavenly Father will grant you the health and strength to carry on. Labor is fortunate to have such a brilliant champion.⁹¹¹

Although Reuben endorsed Humphrey for the Democratic nomination, his personal policy positions by 1968 were more progressive than those of his preferred candidate. Although initially supportive of the war, Soderstrom had grown to believe a military solution in Vietnam was not viable. "Peaceful solutions must be found for Southeast Asia and the Near East," Reuben warned in his annual address that year.⁹¹² He also pushed for a stronger civil rights agenda than Humphrey, particularly after the Kerner report. While Soderstrom broadly agreed with the Committee's findings and call for expanded investment in minority communities, Humphrey came to attack the report as "dangerously close to a doctrine of guilt."⁹¹³

Soderstrom also strongly disagreed with the police tactics employed at the 1968 convention. This was only natural; the labor leader had himself been on the wrong side of a policeman's baton during the labor strikes of his early years. These experiences resulted in a lifelong suspicion of police force—a sentiment that led him to strongly oppose police unions. As former Illinois Senator Paul Douglas reminded everyone from the podium of the Illinois labor convention that year:

I can remember years back, Reub, when you led the fight against a state police force. You were successful in confining the state police in the main to the highways. You prevented it from being used like the coal and iron police of Pennsylvania who were used to break up strikes.⁹¹⁴

Nationally, the Democrats lost seats in the Senate and House. Their losses were even greater in Illinois, which voted in a Republican President, Senator, Governor, and General Assembly. Soderstrom took a fatalistic tone in his private correspondence. More than a month before Election Day, he acknowledged the "rising tide of Republican popularity" that he predicted would hit the state despite labor's "all-out effort" to the contrary.⁹¹⁵ There was simply nothing more that could be done; as he wrote to AFL-CIO President Meany in the election's wake:

Nothing was overlooked or disregarded by labor officials participating in the campaign. The tactics and advertising used by labor campaigners were effective and perfect. The industrial sections of Illinois were for Humphrey and Muskie, in response to your pleadings and our supervision. Defeat is tough to take, but George, in Illinois it really was a good try—superb!⁹¹⁶

Still, the Democratic defeat did not mean political exile for Soderstrom. Just the opposite; as one of the few labor officials still registered as Republican and purposefully nonpartisan in his endorsements, Reuben's counsel was sought after by the new Republican President. In the weeks following his election, Nixon wrote to Soderstrom seeking recommendations to his administration.⁹¹⁷ Reuben dutifully responded, sending the names of three worthy Republicans, including Illinois House Speaker Ralph Smith. Speaker Smith was touched by Soderstrom's nomination, responding, "As always, I am very grateful for the fact that you and I have been friends over the years. Thank you so much for this as well as your other many courtesies to me."⁹¹⁸ While Nixon did not select Smith for his administration, the new Republican Governor Richard Ogilvie did heed Reuben's advice, selecting him to replace Everett Dirksen in the U.S. Senate when the latter died in office on September 7, 1969.

ConCon and Convention Contest

The chaos and upheaval that defined 1968 was not limited to the national political arena. Closer to home, the fight over whether or not to hold a new Constitutional Convention (ConCon) was fully underway, and Soderstrom was soon in the thick of the fight. Although a rather arcane matter to modern observers, the ConCon consumed Reuben for most of 1968—most of his writings that year, including almost the entirety of his Labor Day address, were focused on persuading voters not to approve the convention when they stepped into the voting booth that November. Decrying it as a "tax dodge" and a "fraud," Reuben relentlessly warned the public:

Frustrated wealthy tax dodgers, who tried to place a lighter tax burden on themselves and a heavier tax burden on the poor want a new Constitution to enact basically the same revenue article which Illinois voters rejected in 1966. This article was designed to place a disproportionate share of the tax burden on the average blue, white, and gray-collar worker, the small farmer, and those on limited fixed incomes, while wealthy special interest groups are allowed to get by, virtually scot free!⁹¹⁹

In this he was virtually alone. Nearly every politician, paper, and professional organization was in favor of updating the 19th century constitution (Illinois's third). "Aside from certain segments of organized labor, notably Reuben Soderstrom, president of the Illinois Federation of Labor, little organizational opposition has developed," noted editorial writer Richard Icen.⁹²⁰ Even labor seemed to abandon him. That February Robert Johnston, the regional director of the United Automobile Workers union (UAW), came out loudly in favor of the ConCon, joining the governor's "blue ribbon" committee formed to support the effort. "I've talked to a number of people interested in this and they tell me they're interested in getting the state's finances straightened out and not in right-to-work bills," Johnston said.⁹²¹ Johnston was just the first. Soon after, reports surfaced that the State Federation of Teachers (FTU), the County and Municipal Employees union (AFSCME), and others intended to join the UAW in support of the ConCon.⁹²²

Upon closer examination, however, it becomes evident that these unions' ConCon support had little to do with the matter itself. All the unions that supported the ConCon were also opposed to Soderstrom's leadership. The Illinois AFSCME executives deeply resented Reuben's refusal to support legislation that would formally recognize public employee unions at the expense of their right to strike (a concession Reuben feared could later be used to hurt all unions) and had unsuccessfully tried to unseat him as president. The

teachers' union, meanwhile, was bitter over Soderstrom's refusal to give them more authority within the Illinois AFL-CIO (Reub, a civil rights advocate, was likely motivated by the organization's pro-segregationist sympathies, particularly among the Chicago leadership).

As for Johnston, his Illinois UAW broke off relations with Soderstrom's organization after their national president, Walter Reuther, resigned from the AFL-CIO executive council. By July of 1968, the national UAW had formally disaffiliated from the AFL-CIO. Although his actions were clearly driven by national events, Johnston—who had been a reluctant supporter of the Illinois AFL and CIO merger from the start—tried to cast his actions as his own personal rejection of Soderstrom's leadership. "I really don't think [Soderstrom] understands the needs of our time," he told the press, "and that's the big reason the UAW has left the federation and formed its own state-wide organization."⁹²³ Johnston was clever; he knew that the ConCon enjoyed broad support, particularly among the political and editorial elite. By publicly coming out in favor of the initiative, he gained both the goodwill of the governor and a potent weapon against Soderstrom, whose longstanding opposition to the ConCon was well-known.

Reuben's political enemies within the Illinois AFL-CIO were likewise able to paint Reuben as weak and out of touch. All throughout 1968 they used the issue like a cudgel, stirring up new calls for Reuben's resignation. In a year already pregnant with resentment and rebellion, they found a willing audience. Once again, they focused on his age. "The only objectors to a review of our state constitution," one critic sniped, "(is) an octogenarian and a determined group of persons fearful of metropolitan government."⁹²⁴ At the labor convention, the Municipal workers once again mounted an attack on Reuben's leadership, re-introducing a resolution for compulsory retirement from the Presidency at 65. Several of Soderstrom's allies pushed back ferociously; Delegate Henry Coco of the Allied Printing Trades Council spoke for many when he argued:

If this provision was put into effect at the time our president was 65 we would have lost 13 years of valuable service given to the federation. I have seen our officers functioning in the general assembly, and I tell you I have never seen a man more efficient, with more knowledge, more influence in the General Assembly. Many jobs are important because of the people you know, the influence you carry, and you do not gain that overnight. You gain that over a period of years and this is particularly true of the legislature.⁹²⁵

This time, however, the AFSCME insurgents had a coalition of support, not only from the Teachers' Union but from the more radical elements of labor who, inspired by the events at the Democratic Convention the month prior, were anxious to sow some chaos of their own. As the press described:

In the closing session of the AFL-CIO convention Thursday the delegates defeated, by a narrow margin, a resolution barring persons over 64 from election to the offices of the state federation. Had the resolution passed, the 80-year-old president of the state AFL-CIO, Reuben Soderstrom, would have had to step down in 1972 at the age of 84.⁹²⁶

The victory did little to quiet the calls for Reuben's resignation. Shortly after the ConCon initiative was approved by popular vote that November, Johnston pressed his advantage, writing publicly to Soderstrom:

If you (Soderstrom) and other IFL officials such as Vice President Stanley Johnson still insist on boycotting the convention, in continuing fear of the electorate, both of you should resign and make way for a more modern leadership that believes in participatory democracy.⁹²⁷

When asked by the press about Johnston's letter, Reuben responded that he hadn't received it (the main audience were the reporters, not Reuben, after all) and couldn't comment on it specifically. However, he continued, "These acrimonious charges after the thing (election) is over are crazy."⁹²⁸ Soderstrom and Johnson

would of course participate in the convention. Of course, that really wasn't Johnston's purpose or point. He smelled blood in the water, and he wasn't about to stop.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS HONORS SODERSTROM

It was tumultuous year for Reuben and the nation. Rocked by riot and death, chaos and confusion, the 80-year-old labor leader never appeared to consider giving up. If he did, he never admitted to it; when asked by a reporter at the convention that year if he had any plans to retire after his current term ends, Reub replied, "unfortunately not."⁹²⁹ He believed that labor needed him, and he was determined to give every last ounce of life he had left to the cause which had filled it with so much meaning.

Many appreciated his sacrifice. That year Springfield Mayor Howard recognized Reuben with a key to the city, a work of art etched with the home of Lincoln, which he said "not only represents the intensions and desires of the people of Springfield, but in my own behalf, after having served about ten years as Mayor, (is one) of the most important keys to (one) of the most important recipients I have ever observed."⁹³⁰ While others paid their respects to Reuben's past lifetime of service, Soderstrom himself focused his message on the country's future, telling the delegates:

Our economy today demands an educated workforce, and our scientific advances demand that all youngsters be given a complete education. Why do they refuse to vote aid for education and training programs for the young when they know full well the future of the nation depends on the youth? Our cities need clean air and clean water, and adequate housing and proper care for our aged people. They need this sort of good government and progress now, not ten years from now, or even five years from now. That may be too late.⁹³¹

That summer, Soderstrom's hometown held a celebration of its history, called "A Salute to Streator," and the local newspaper chronicled various residents and events. Reub wrote a lengthy article which recounted the contributions of organized labor. As he concluded:

The writer believes that every good idea that has been enacted into beneficial legislation was first discussed in some union hall by courageous rank and file members. Organized labor can justifiably take credit for all social legislation, for Social Security Retirement benefits, Medicare, unemployment insurance, workmen's compensation for those injured or killed in industry, for public education and for many other programs which have made this the greatest nation on earth, and today's three thousand union members of Streator are among those responsible for this fine progress and good government. They are still doing their part in trying to build a better day and a better life for all the people in this blessed land.⁹³²

Perhaps Reuben's greatest honor came in December of that year, when he was recognized by the University of Illinois at a testimonial dinner given in his honor. The celebration, hosted at the Illini Union Building on December 6, was a grand affair, held in conjunction with the 20th annual Central Labor Union Conference with over 100 in attendance. University of Illinois President David Henry and Illinois Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations Director Melvin Rothbaum delivered the keynote addresses. President Henry payed tribute to Soderstrom "for his years of service to all of Illinois and to the University of Illinois," while Director Rothbaum gave praise "for his vision, dedication, and work in developing labor's role in our society...for his perseverance in initiating the Institute and the follow-up to make the Institute an integral part of the University of Illinois."⁹³³ They then presented him with an award in appreciation of the crucial role he played in establishing the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations. Reuben, seated at the speakers' table alongside his son Carl and granddaughter Jane, accepted the recognition with humility, and was quick to note in his remarks that while he was "personally better than well pleased with the comments and honors showered upon me, the credit should be shared by a large number of other people without whose cooperation and help there

would be no Labor and Industrial Relations Institute at the University of Illinois.”⁹³⁴

While it was a touching gesture, many of Reuben’s friends and family thought the honorific did not adequately reflect the scope of service the labor leader had rendered to the University. Soderstrom, they argued, should be awarded an honorary degree. In the words of Illinois AFL-CIO Executive Vice President Stanley Johnson:

As a citizen of Illinois for 69 years, spending 60 of his 81 years fighting injustice, projecting ideas and causes which have helped to make Illinois the progressive state it is, it would seem to me the great University of Illinois could complete the cycle and bestow upon this sturdy son of Illinois another honor he so richly deserves. No, he is not a university graduate. He is self-educated through his thirst for knowledge. An eloquent spokesman, gifted with voice and the drive for equity for the least of our fellow Illinoisans to share in God’s bounty, makes his life work for all the people of Illinois deserving of what the University of Illinois has in its power to bestow. I commend to the attention of the Trustees of the University of Illinois, its executive officers and the sacrosanct group which selects individuals for honors at commencement time to consider President Soderstrom’s total contribution to the good and welfare of our State and its people during sixty vigorous years of activities.⁹³⁵

Despite all the heartache of 1968, Reuben remained optimistic, certain at least that the next year would be better than the last. Little did he know what 1969 would have in store.

CHAPTER 58

1969

ACCOLADES AND UNREST FOR PRESIDENT SODERSTROM

“Capital might as well understand here and now that an intelligent public opinion will no longer permit the employing classes to monopolize all the benefits of invention, but will insist upon those benefits of invention being shared with the employees and the consuming public.”

-Reuben Soderstrom
Illinois AFL-CIO Convention, 1969

FIGHTING THROUGH ILLNESS

It had started off as a fine trip. Olga loved her summer getaways to Minnesota with her brother Reub. She liked pushing him outside his usual routine, taking him away from his traditional haunts and habits to visit new towns and old friends. Last year—after much prodding from Olga—they had visited the daughter of their dearly departed brother Lafe, a fine young woman whom Reub had helped in the years after her father’s death. Most of all she enjoyed listening to him practice his presidential address for the coming labor convention. She later remembered:

When we’d reach the hotel, he’d recite his speeches to me—and ask my opinion. Reub never read his speeches at the conventions or anywhere when he addressed the group or introduced his guests. He had memorized every word, he’d never miss a word, or forget any part of his speech. He always performed beautifully.⁹³⁶

This time, however, something went wrong. On their first day in their old hometown of Duluth, Minnesota, Reuben grew very ill, deteriorating in front of Olga’s eyes. She wanted to call Reub’s grandson Carl, now a resident physician at the Mayo Clinic, but Reuben refused. After much argument he finally relented, and together they made their way to Dr. Carl’s home in Rochester. Olga continued:

Reub went immediately to bed. Inside of an hour, Dr. Carl took his grandpa to the hospital—much against Reub’s will. The doctors there wanted to do surgery, diagnosing his trouble as a bad gall bladder, but Reub refused! He had the national convention coming up in Atlantic City and he insisted he had to attend. So attend he did. He kept writing that he was fine, but we knew he wasn’t; for while there he wrote to the clinic and made an appointment to return. He never would have done this had he been well, or he never would admit to being ill.⁹³⁷

While everyone who knew and loved him desperately wanted Reuben to take it easy, they knew better than to try to dissuade him. Soderstrom would never slow, never quit. Still, it was hard to ignore the toll these last few years had taken on the legendary leader. They had been fraught with war, dissention, assassination, riot, and chaos. An era which had begun in unbounded hope and peaceful protest was ending in disillusion and brutality, as the youth and communities of color that had once flocked to the message of Martin Luther King Jr. now turned to ideologies often defined by violence and a deep distrust of authority. Soderstrom, for

decades a fixture in the Illinois and national labor movement, had long managed to keep his organization whole despite its unwinding around him. Even as the Democratic Nation Convention in Chicago descended into nationally televised chaos, Reub kept his own Illinois AFL-CIO convention free from violence. Still, his gathering had not been without drama of its own; fights over civil rights, recognition of public employee unions, the right to strike, and national union politics had nearly unseated Reuben in the last convention. He faced unprecedented opposition from union leaders and membership whose own agendas—from the preservation of segregation to the desire for personal power and influence—led them to push the Illinois AFL-CIO to potential fracture.

Despite the pain in his belly, Reuben soldiered through the summer to the national convention in New Jersey and then back to Springfield.

LEGISLATION AND LITERATURE

Tax Fight

The Illinois AFL-CIO's Springfield office began its normal buzz as the general assembly convened. Once again, Reub put forth an aggressive agenda, including a state minimum wage and recognition of public unions. He sounded an upbeat tone, indicating to reporters that labor expected "their voices will ring out louder in the 1969 legislature than they have in past sessions."⁹³⁸

There was every reason to be skeptical, however. Labor was facing an unprecedentedly conservative legislature following an electoral drubbing in 1968. Republicans held a 13-seat majority in the Illinois House and a nearly two-to-one lead in the Illinois Senate.⁹³⁹ They were also plagued with internal disorder and struggle. The public union leadership, hungry for recognition at any cost, still seemed ready to bargain away the right to strike, a move that Soderstrom feared would have disastrous consequences not only for public employees but workers of all stripes. Meanwhile, other unions like the International Association of Machinists (IAM) had grown so frustrated with the legislature's failure to pass a state minimum wage that they threatened to take matters into their own hands. IAM District 123 President John Drennan hinted at the possibility of a march on the state capitol if the senate again excluded his membership from the wages that many other Illinois workers currently enjoyed through the expansion of the federal minimum wage.⁹⁴⁰ Ultimately, these divisions led to legislative stalemate; no new laws acknowledging public unions or prohibiting strikes were passed, while Drennan's threatened march failed to materialize.

Soderstrom and his lieutenants were markedly more successful, however, in their fight for the soul of the state's tax policies. By 1969 Illinois was facing financial catastrophe, with revenue at dangerous lows and inflation at fearful highs. All the powerful interests of Illinois had packed the assembly halls with lobbyists clamoring for solutions that best advantaged their paymasters. Many conservative groups like the Illinois Retail Merchants Association (IRMA) demanded a "broadening of the sales tax base" before they would entertain any talk of an income tax. The Chamber of Commerce, fearing the inevitability of an income tax, called instead for a "flat tax" that would shift the burden from its wealthy donors to the working poor. Labor pushed hard against a host of new regressive tax proposals aimed squarely at working families. They took aim at the IRMA, insisting it the "completely inequitable" sales tax should not be raised but rather reduced for necessary goods.⁹⁴¹ They also testified against other proposed "working class taxes" like an increase in home mortgage interest rates, fearing that such a move would prevent working families from owning their own piece of the American Dream.⁹⁴²

Instead, labor leadership argued, new revenue should be found in the institution of a graduated income tax and especially higher corporate taxes, noting "there is no comparison between personal and corporate income

taxes. Corporate income taxes will not drive industry out of the state.”⁹⁴³ In this they met with broad success when the state introduced its first-ever income tax. True, it was a flat tax, collecting on 2 ½ percent of all personal wealth. However, it held a separate, higher rate of 4 ½ percent on corporate wealth—a major victory for Illinois labor.⁹⁴⁴

A Man on the Moon

Yet while the newspapers were filled with news of labor’s legislative success, they were largely devoid of something else: Reuben’s name. Many references to Illinois labor’s policies and positions were instead attributed to Executive Vice President Stanley Johnson. To some extent, this was the continuation of an existing trend; Reuben had for years been assigning increasing responsibility and visibility to the man who would, it was assumed, succeed him as Illinois AFL-CIO President. Johnson, not Reuben, was now referred to as “Chief Lobbyist for the AFL-CIO.”⁹⁴⁵ It is important to note that many of Stanley’s positions and opinions contradicted Reuben at least in tone if not in actual substance. For example, Johnson appeared to be quite engaged in the constitutional convention process after the passage of the 1968 ballot initiative. He put himself forward as a candidate to the convention, declaring himself in favor of a “flexible, easily understood Constitution modeled after the federal prototype” (a comment widely viewed as endorsing a change from the existing constitution’s format).⁹⁴⁶ This was in stark contrast to Reuben, who continued to assail the ConCon affair as “needless,” adding it to the list of labor’s failures in his speeches and correspondence.⁹⁴⁷

1969 also witnessed a flurry of some of Reuben’s most stirring, eloquent, and honest writings. His Labor Day message was a stark examination of the traumas and failures that had befallen labor and the nation over the past year:

It is with mixed emotions and an apprehensive attitude that I sit down to prepare my 1969 Labor Day Message.

Wage-earners have survived a year of unusual incidents ranging from the Onassis-Kennedy wedding, Two Men on the Moon, the Pueblo incident, the [Robert Kennedy assassin] Sirhan Sirhan trial, the sentencing of the killer of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the war in Vietnam, a disappointing Legislative Session, and a disastrous State and National Election.

With respect to the election, we in the State AFL-CIO believe the same now as we did during the campaign, that our State and Nation must move forward if we are to solve the problems of our cities and our people; that is to say, the problems of poverty, the problem of slums, inadequate education, inadequate housing, inadequate medical care, and all the rest. We will continue to fight for these goals... I desire to officially thank all of the voluntary workers who participated in the campaign because I believe that to the extent in which union people participated we have made this a better world in which to live and in which to work.

Labor lost the national election by about 10% of the vote.

Labor lost the State election by about 10% of the vote.

Labor failed to stop the needless Con Con by about 10% of the vote.

What can be done about that? Obviously the remedy lies in building up and strengthening the labor movement at least ten percent.

We ought to build up and strengthen our local unions at least ten percent.

We ought to build up and strengthen our City Central Bodies at least ten percent.

We ought to build up and strengthen our State Conferences and our great Illinois State AFL-CIO at least ten percent.

If we can do this during the next twelve months we will have turned disaster into success, and will have accomplished the basis for what is needed in the next State and National election to attain reasonable progress.

Labor's march onward and upward will continue until we have attained a land without an overlord, a land without oppression, a land radiant and resplendent, a perfect triumph of the brotherhood of all mankind!

On this 1969 Labor Day we are closer to that objective than ever before in our history as over a million union members in Illinois tip their hats and applaud the day by day accomplishments which have brought this goal within sight."⁴⁸

This message, filled with a wild mix of fire, self-examination, and flourish showed both Reuben's hope for the future and his condemnation of the present. The current age was one rife with "overlords" and "oppression" who had visited a host of ills upon the nation. Yet, despite this stinging rebuke, Reuben lived not only in hope but in impatient expectation that tomorrow would bring a "radiant" and "perfect triumph." To Soderstrom, the accomplishments of the modern age were both wondrous signs of what mankind could accomplish and damning evidence of society's failure to adequately care for one another. The marvel of that year's moon landing, which drew the eyes of the world, prompted Reuben to write:

For more than two hours Sunday night, July 20, an audience estimated at more than half a billion people watched one of the great events of history as it unfolded. What they saw was two human beings walking on the surface of the moon, performing assigned tasks with skill and efficiency.

The landing of these two members of the crew of Apollo 11 on the moon testifies, first of all, to the courage and abilities of the astronauts. But the cool confidence of the crew was also perhaps the greatest tribute ever paid to American industry. Some 20,000 companies participated in the development and manufacture of the enormous complex that is the Apollo system. And most of the parts, down to the humblest valve and smallest transistor, are critical; if they fail, the lives of all those aboard the spacecraft are imperiled.

The price paid for such perfection has been high. In dollars, Apollo has cost some \$21.4-billion since May 25, 1961, the day on which President John F. Kennedy laid down the challenge before Congress of a manned moon landing before the end of the 1960s.

This puts it in a class by itself. Apollo is the most expensive scientific project ever sponsored by the American people. It outranks the Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bomb, some 15 fold.

Even as the astronauts settled down for the trip home, debate began building up over the future of so expensive a program. The National Aeronautics & Space Administration wants to move up to the next plateau. It is asking funds to continue manned exploration of the moon at the rate of about three flights a year. It is working on plans for a manned earth orbiting space station and a shuttle vehicle to support it; and it is starting some of the advanced research that will be needed some day to support manned flight to the planets - first Mars and then beyond.

NASA officials say that a manned Mars flight may well be possible within the next 17 years. A plan, including estimated costs that run only slightly over \$3 billion a year, is now being prepared for submission to President

Nixon. In the near future, the people of the U. S. will have to decide whether to commit the nation to that plan and that expense.

The question is by no means open and shut. There are urgent and costly problems to be dealt with at home - especially in the cities. If the manned space program is diverting resources and talent from such problems, then it is hard to justify giving it new and still more difficult goals.

But there is good reason to think that our great domestic problems go unsolved not for lack of resources but for lack of motivation and inefficient use of the resources we have. This nation has resources - scientific, material, and human - never assembled anywhere on earth before. As one Frenchman said as he watched the landing, "America has shown in one glorious moment that it literally can do anything it wants to do."⁹⁴⁹

Soderstrom's most eloquent writing that year, however, dealt with a far more somber affair: the death of John L. Lewis. Although often fierce and sometimes bitter rivals, John L. Lewis and Reuben Soderstrom had come to hold a deep and abiding respect for each other, coming in the final years of their life to a form a bond of mutual fondness and friendship. Reub was deeply moved at his former rival's passing, and in tribute wrote a eulogy in the *Illinois AFL-CIO Weekly Newsletter*:

To a great extent former U.M.W.A. President Emeritus John Lewis was a son of Illinois...To attain reasonable goals he brought his defiant personality into action, defying anti-union employers, state and federal administrations, Presidents, Governors, court injunctions, and even his fellow union leaders when they withheld their co-operation. He looked like a labor leader should look and was acclaimed by all as possessing the qualities of a superb bit of a man. Not the kind of person that one can easily forget...

He was my personal friend. The name of John L. Lewis is emblazoned in our hearts and minds in huge letters of gold and seemingly on the skyline of eternity in recognition of his contribution in making almost a half million poorly paid and poorly protected coal miners the best paid and best protected coal miners in all the world.⁹⁵⁰

Reuben's words were a tribute both to Lewis the man and to the sometimes caustic and confrontational tactics he employed. Yet, however aggressive his rhetoric, Reuben respected that Lewis had always stopped short of advocating violence. It was a sad fact, he believed, that the same could not be said of what he termed a "youth in revolt." In an essay prepared for the executive board that year, Soderstrom savaged what he viewed as desire by some within the current generation for violent confrontation, as well as a media he believed was too eager to reward such immature action with lavish attention:

Young people today are very much the same as they have been since the beginning of time, impatient with conditions as they are, in some instances not quite sure just what they want, but a majority do have definite ideas for the future.

Those with constructive ideas go about the business of making changes with quiet, courage, and intelligence which is seldom ever noticed in newspapers, television and radio, because it is not sensational enough for their readers, viewers and listeners.

I am sure no intelligent person will object to reasonable demonstrations which are intended to dramatize a need for the constructive progress of humanity.

We do, however, deplore and condemn the actions of a small percentage of attention seekers who are interested only in the destruction of anyone or anything with which they may disagree, without giving thought to

constructive programs.

During the 1930s this nation came through one of the greatest social revolutions in recent world history. We rose from a practically bankrupt nation to one of the most affluent and richest in the world. This was accomplished by the efforts of men with vision and courage of their convictions.

Any idiot can start a fire or incite mob rule for the destruction of anything with which they may disagree. The public news media should devote less time to glorifying irresponsible actions of the few and give more support to the constructive ideas of the majority if we are to continue making progress in the interest of integrity and freedom for humanity.⁹⁵¹

He was about to come face to face with some of these youths.

1969 ILLINOIS LABOR CONVENTION

Turn Toward Militancy

In the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., disillusioned black youth increasingly turned militant. In 1966, Stokely Carmichael, who replaced the nonviolent civil rights leader John Lewis as head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), gave a name to this more confrontational philosophy: Black Power. According to historian Jeffrey Ogbar:

SNCC's promotion of Black Power was an affirmation of militancy, as well as a challenge to the psychological effects of white supremacy...For many in the SNCC, chants of 'Freedom Now!' were ineffective. "That don't scare white folks," Carmichael asserted. "The only thing that's gonna get us freedom is power."⁹⁵²

Even some among MLK's inner circle, sensing the changing winds, shifted their rhetoric and tactics. The most dynamic of these was Jesse Jackson, a young protégé of King's who had risen to prominence in Chicago as a both a charismatic Reverend and leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Operation Breadbasket. In an interview in the summer of that year, reporter Debby Ranking described the man and his organization:

His church in the heart of the ghetto is packed by a faithful congregation of 4,000 to 5,000 that returns every Saturday for the minister's oratory – a heady mixture of Baptist theology and black power. With his dashing dress, grasp of urban problems and disdain for Establishment procedures, the 27-year-old preacher is a natural magnet for the alienated in search of a leader. But critics contend he is an opportunist with ambitions beyond a church pulpit. They claim he's been able to mobilize only a fraction of Chicago's one million Negroes, mainly the young and middle class...

The mistake of his race in the past, he says, is that "we saw ourselves as moral agents. We're not moral agents in the eyes of white people, we're economic entities to be seen as profits and losses, assets and liabilities." The minister's aim is to create "a sophisticated state of black nationalism, realizing our conditions are the same from Maine to Miami, so we can move simultaneously and collectively upon a given issue."⁹⁵³

Of course, Jackson's rising popularity put him on a collision course with the SCLC's then-leader, Ralph Abernathy. According to one account:

Jesse Jackson was a maverick in the SCLC...After Martin Luther King's assassination in April 1968, Jackson's rebellion became more pronounced, more open. Since he was running the only going concern within the

organization, he felt the mantle of power and responsibility should be heading in his direction. The board of the SCLC thought otherwise, and appointed Ralph Abernathy as King's successor....

The split between Jesse Jackson and Ralph Abernathy grew wider, and the dislike on both sides was genuine. Jackson was annoyed because he had not inherited King's authority. Abernathy would not hear of an upstart like Jackson taking over the American Civil Rights movement.⁹⁵⁴

By 1969 the American civil rights movement was thus characterized by two challenges—an increasing propensity for militancy and an internal power struggle pitting charismatic upstarts against a comparatively uninspiring, old-guard leadership.

Unionism and Race Relations

Unions were not exempt from the movement's ire. There had always been tension between the organized labor and civil rights movements. The fact that the earliest leaders in the fight for racial parity emerged from organized labor—most notably Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters President A. Philip Randolph—virtually assured that the first battleground for equal rights would be within the union halls. For years, Randolph had submitted resolutions at the national AFL convention calling for an end to union segregation, only to have AFL presidents demure that they had no power to compel such change. As Philip Taft writes:

Although the A.F. of L. was officially opposed to discrimination for the reasons of race, creed, or color, discrimination against Negroes and other minority groups was tolerated in practice throughout the years. Only this much can be said for the federation's policy; the A. F. of L. had no power to compel international unions to obey its pronouncements against racial discrimination. Even directly chartered central bodies could not be forced to accept Negro delegates if they lived in sections of the country where strong prejudices existed. The Federation leadership had long since learned the limits of its power; it had become accustomed to avoiding the use of force against its affiliates whenever another—however unsatisfactory—solution presented itself.⁹⁵⁵

Labor unions in 1969 bore the scars of racial prejudice. As it had in the civil rights movement, the frustratingly slow process of racial integration created widening divisions within labor leadership. AFL-CIO President George Meany and former CIO chief Walter Reuther had for years fought over how to handle the question of race, with Reuther pushing for more active union involvement in the arena of civil rights. Meany, for example, had chosen not to give the AFL-CIO's endorsement of King's March on Washington in 1963—a decision Reuther voted against and publicly opposed.⁹⁵⁶ By 1968 their disagreement on this and other issues led to a formal split between the AFL-CIO and Reuther's United Auto Workers (UAW). The divide between the two leaders reflected a growing chasm between many unionists—especially those within the older trade-based unions—who wanted to maintain segregation, and a younger generation unwilling to sacrifice progress on the altar of solidarity.

These problems were particularly acute in Chicago; while some unions actively pursued equal rights, others were still segregated, and some, such as the building trades, tried to bar black workers altogether. According to labor historian Milton Derber:

Traditionally, blacks in Chicago had been denied entry into most crafts. Discrimination by unions included exclusion from union membership by constitutional provision or by ritual; segregation of minority group members in separate "auxiliaries"; the use of work permits for minorities instead of union membership; and denying minorities full participation in union activities and equal employment opportunity. The Washbourne Trade School, the major Chicago school training plumbers, electricians, carpenters, and other building trade workers for many years, had a policy of admitting only apprentices named by the unions, which rarely accepted

blacks as apprentices.⁹⁵⁷

Tensions finally erupted in 1969 when a group of 61 black community organizations united to form the Coalition for United Community Action (CUCA), a group dedicated to directly confronting the issue of racial discrimination in construction hiring. On July 22, 17 black youths wearing red berets—identifying them as members of the local street gang the Black Stone Rangers—stormed the Building Trade’s offices, shouting “We’re taking over. Get out!” They held the facilities for several hours before relinquishing control.⁹⁵⁸ As the summer progressed, the CUCA, backed by Rangers, closed down more than 20 construction sites at a cost of over \$100 million.⁹⁵⁹ Organized labor, which had pioneered the tactics of strikes and work stoppages, now found itself in the middle of a whole new dynamic.

The trades initially responded with denial, claiming that it was a lack of qualified workers, not racism, that was responsible for the dearth of black members. As the protests continued, they offered to create new training programs for African Americans seeking an entrance to the trades.

Negotiations between the CUCA and building trades, however, seemed impossible. The CUCA demanded elimination of the union referral system (by which union workers were referred to construction jobs) as a precondition for talks, which the building trades viewed as a non-starter. When the Illinois AFL-CIO got involved, neither side seemed ready to budge.⁹⁶⁰

This, then, was the situation as Reuben and his colleagues began their planning for the 1969 Illinois Labor Convention in Chicago. A union body bitterly split between advocates for change and a preservation of the “old order,” on a collision course with a disillusioned black community angry at being shut out of the labor force and led by increasingly militant members who now saw the path to victory in direct confrontation. Chicago labor was loaded with tension.

“Tear the Whole Place Up”

Soderstrom understood these stakes. As the convention approached, his driving concern became how to repair the breach between the labor and civil rights movements in Chicago. He was determined to use the event to demonstrate organized labor’s commitment to equality, and made it a priority to secure a civil rights leader as keynote speaker. He first sought Martin Luther King Sr., the “father of a martyred son who was loved by organized labor,” to address the delegates, but the elder King was unable to attend.⁹⁶¹ In his place, Reub turned to an old friend: Ralph Abernathy, MLK’s right-hand man and successor. He offered the SCLC leader carte blanche, telling him, “You are free, of course, to select any subject you may choose and devote whatever time you may need for the delivery of your address. I know your presence will be an inspiration to our delegates and visitors, and I can assure you an attentive and appreciative audience.”⁹⁶² Abernathy agreed to once again address the labor delegates, bringing a message of cooperation even as he called on labor to do more for the black community:

It is always good to come here for the purpose of fellowship with our brothers and sisters who are engaged in a struggle that is common to all of us. Today, right here in the City of Chicago, young black workers are calling upon organized labor in the construction industry to help them open the doors of opportunity. These young black workers have put aside the slogan, “Burn, baby, burn” and replaced it with a constructive slogan for social change, ‘Build, baby, build...

We have learned many lessons from labor. The lessons are too valuable to be thrown away. We are going to profit by what we learned, and what you taught us so well. We believe we shall overcome, black and white together... The Southern Christian Leadership Conference has marched with organized labor in many areas of the country including teachers’ strikes, hospital workers’ strikes, and sanitation workers in Memphis, in fact,

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. died fighting for organized labor...

Let us forget the things that separate us, and know the things that bind us together as a nation and a people. We must go on from here, however, to fulfill the objectives of feeding the hungry, housing the ill-housed, and finding useful employment for the jobless. The greatest monument we can build to Martin Luther King is the continuation of his feeble efforts to redeem the soul of America, and cause this wealthy nation to stop spending its billions and billions of dollars for the destruction of life, and start spending it for the building up of life.⁹⁶³

However, not everyone was happy with Abernathy's presence. Chicago was, after all, the home of Abernathy's chief rival, Jesse Jackson, who had not been invited to address the convention. And the SCLC's presence at the Illinois AFL-CIO convention during the height of tensions between the building trades and the CUCA injected a new, unpredictable factor into the equation. The night of Abernathy's speech, Jackson unexpectedly reached out to Reuben to request a meeting with the Illinois AFL-CIO executive board. They agreed to meet the following afternoon over lunch.⁹⁶⁴

Soderstrom was excited by the offer; this, he thought, was finally an opportunity to directly discuss the standoff between the building trades and CUCA. The following day, Jackson arrived at the Conrad Hilton hotel along with CUCA Coordinator CT Vivian, spokeswoman Meredith Gilbert, and a contingent of the Black Stone Rangers, clad in their signature red berets. According to then-Secretary Treasurer Bob Gibson, the presence of the members alarmed some of the board members, but Police Superintendent Orland Wilson (who was also present at the meeting) received assurances from Jackson that "just a few boys" would be attending the lunch as his bodyguard. The comment struck Gibson as almost comical. "They weren't boys," he later recounted. "Hell, these guys were in their 30s and 40s, a lot of them."⁹⁶⁵

The meeting continued well past noon, delaying the resumption of the convention's afternoon session. When it finally ended, Reuben emerged with a statement that he believed would be a first step towards healing, a resolution which validated the concerns of the CUCA, denounced violence, and stressed the all-important need for unity. He planned to have a vote on the language that very afternoon.⁹⁶⁶

But the old tensions returned almost immediately. As the convention reconvened, Jackson's entourage moved to the front of the hall, positioning themselves at the tables closest to the stage.⁹⁶⁷ Stanley, visibly ill at ease, called on "our guests in the red berets to please sit over on the other side."⁹⁶⁸

Some of the other delegates went even further. "Mr. Chairman!" shouted a white delegate, Joseph Botica, of the Chicago Iron Workers, "I see in our group here seated in this house of labor, in the house of God, in the soul we are all governed by, people here with red berets. Are they delegates to this convention? If not, I move we adjourn this meeting as of now!"⁹⁶⁹

The call instantly split the delegation. Half the hall thunderously applauded while the other burst into a loud chorus of boos. When Reuben insisted that the guests be allowed to stay, Botica grew even angrier, his voice rising to a fever pitch. "Let us have them remove their hats then!" he shouted. Denouncing the Rangers as "extortionists," he demanded Soderstrom "check their credentials...There is a motion on the floor. Check their credentials!"⁹⁷⁰

Reuben had had enough. He pounded his gavel, silencing Botica and his compatriots. "These people are not delegates," he stated. "They are uninvited guests, but they have come here to sit through the proceedings. Our proceedings are public anyhow. I think the smart thing and the courteous thing to do is to let them sit here."⁹⁷¹

At this, the hall began to cheer, the mood turning. One after another the delegates rose in support of Reuben and the Rangers. "If the Chair intends to let them have a voice, I think we make a mistake to take an ironclad or closed mind," said one. "Mr. Chairman, now we may not agree on the young brothers in here, but no delegate has a right to get up in any convention and call anyone extortionists," said another.⁹⁷² When some of the delegates left in protest, even more rose to condemn those who would choose to leave rather than listen. Mr. Jack Siegel of the Shoe Workers Joint Council No. 25 rose to make an especially passionate appeal, telling all who remained:

Mr. Chairman, I know that the problem that we are facing here, and the discussion that we are facing is something that is going to occur from now on because the black people of this country are beginning to make the kind of demands that we in the labor unions started making 100 years ago...I say, brothers, we are glad that you are here. We ought to congratulate ourselves that we attract young, black militants who come to hear what the labor movement, which has also had a tradition of militancy, has to say.⁹⁷³

Reuben nodded in approval as some in the crowd cheered. "I quite agree," Soderstrom said. "I hope that someday all our black brothers will be unionized and seated in this convention as delegates."⁹⁷⁴ Slowly, the convention returned to order. They continued to debate resolutions and listen to guest speakers. Finally, after a scheduled speech by Congressman Abner Mikva, they reached the moment Soderstrom had been waiting for. Bearing down on the podium, he presented the statement he created with Jesse Jackson over the lunch hour; "Now the statement that was developed out of the conference that we held during the noon hour is now ready to present to the delegates to this convention. I hope it meets with the approval of every delegate seated here. We have done the best we could." He then turned to Vice President Joe Germano, who stood and read the following "Statement On Equal Employment Opportunity":

We want to express our strongest moral position in favor of equal employment opportunity and in support of the aspirations of our Black Brothers. We want them on our side in our joint efforts to obtain the best possible conditions for all workers and all citizens of the United States.

We urge all of our affiliates to give strong heed to the times and to the protests of Blacks and of youth, and to give their best efforts in support of training programs which will open up job opportunities to all persons regardless of race, color, creed or sex.

We will not yield to threats of violence—we will at all times continue to do the right thing and urge all of our affiliated labor unions to do all that they can to dedicate themselves to the goal of making Labor Day 1969 a day of unity and cooperation between all workers, as we go forward to make our country a better land in which to live in freedom and liberty.⁹⁷⁵

In the official convention minutes, the motion was accepted by an overwhelming margin, with Reuben declaring that "The moral support of this great organization is on the side of the blacks."⁹⁷⁶ Newspaper and eyewitness accounts, however, tell a different story. The resolution sparked a loud, heated debate between the delegates and the Rangers, who demanded that the statement include language specifically condemning the building trades. Amidst the clamor, the Rangers leapt from their seats and sprang to the stage, pushing Reuben away from the podium. According to the *Chicago Tribune*:

Members of the Coalition for United Community Action, led by the Rev. C.T. Vivian and Meredith Gilbert, charged onto the stage amid threats to "tear the whole place up." They seized the microphone, denounced the resolution as inadequate, and ordered the delegates to "go home, get out of here!"⁹⁷⁷

Reuben was in near-shock at the pushing and shoving. Again from Gibson:

They went up and took over the platform and they grabbed the gavel from Reub. They took the microphone off of the podium and were walking up and down the platform yelling, “We’re going to shut this place down, burn this and tear it up” and all this. Tom Burk was there, he was a VP and member of the board, he stands up and he’s got his gun up in the air and he said, “You wise guys want to stay here and see what this will do?” It was out of control. I think that shook up Reub more than anything I’d ever seen...

So they were saying they were going to burn the city down, tear this building down and burn up everything, and Jesse was sitting there listening to them. So I talked to Stanley: “I don’t want to listen to this bullshit, do you?”

“No,” he said. “What do you think we ought to do?”

“Well,” I said, “I think we ought to call Jack Conlisk.” Jack was the superintendent of the police.

“Call Jack,” Stanley said. So I called him up...At that time they had a group of Chicago policemen just for labor disputes, but they were intended more along the lines of strikes. But hell, it didn’t take 30 minutes, here they come. They had like a semi loaded with guys—they must have had 50 cops in there!⁹⁷⁸

The police stood outside the convention hall, but did not enter. Reuben reclaimed the microphone and hastily gaveled the chaotic convention to an early close. The police gathered outside on the sidewalk as rattled and discordant groups of delegates filed out of the hall. Reuben left with Gibson and Johnson. The newspapers the following day were filled with stories of “convention chaos” and tales of strife between black and white workers. The fiasco undermined the goodwill built during Abernathy’s visit and torpedoed negotiations between the Illinois AFL-CIO and the CUCA.⁹⁷⁹

The events in Chicago took a heavy toll on Reuben’s spirit as well as his body. “You know he became sick after that,” Gibson said. “Not long after that he went to Mayo.”⁹⁸⁰ Shortly after the convention, Reuben returned to Rochester, Minnesota where he underwent major abdominal surgery to remove his badly damaged gall bladder. The medical tests also detected indications of heart failure. He recovered for many weeks in Rochester and then in Streator. As Olga recounted:

When he returned to the Clinic he was admitted immediately. They knew he was in serious trouble. When they operated they found the gall bladder had ruptured and had deteriorated to such a degree that it had to be taken out in pieces—in fact, they said it laid like a mud pie. He was called “the miracle of the Mayo Clinic.” He was eighty-one years old and to recover from such surgery was indeed a miracle. He recuperated in Streator for about six weeks (not nearly long enough) and then returned to his work in Springfield, Illinois...(it was) a heavy schedule to leap into after serious surgery, but Reub was determined and back to work he went.⁹⁸¹

Reuben returned to ruminating on the upcoming issues for labor, including the own power dynamic within his own organization. Stanley Johnson, Reub’s long-serving Executive VP, was eager to grab the reins as leader of Illinois labor. But Reuben had long been skeptical of Stanley’s governing ability, particularly in these trying times. He would prefer to hand the reins to Bob Gibson, but bypassing Johnson in favor of the Secretary-Treasurer—Stanley’s junior and a former CIO man—could rip the young Illinois AFL-CIO alliance apart. Like his great peers in labor—Gompers, Green, Reuther and Meany—Reuben would not retire. Illinois labor needed him; if he could, he would become 50 years old again and work another 30 years. But those powers were not available to him.

He was 81 and moving forward into another year.

CHAPTER 59

1970

FAREWELL

“Dad often told me no human power can stop the onward progress of organized labor and that no divine power will, and that the Carpenter of Nazareth looks down with approval upon the march of organized labor. Through President Soderstrom’s efforts we enjoy better homes, better schools, better jobs, better working conditions and a better world. The workingman has arrived and has attained a high standard of human dignity for himself and his family because President Soderstrom has lived. It can truly be said of him that he loved and served his fellow man.”

-Carl Soderstrom
Illinois AFL-CIO Convention, 1970

FIGHTING TOWARD RECOVERY

Reuben never quit. This wasn’t just a matter of historical record but a rule, a principle that had driven him throughout his life and leadership. It was the singular quality on which all those who knew him—friend and foe alike—could agree. Once Reuben Soderstrom set his mind to a thing, he would never stop until it was complete; no matter how long it took, how much it cost, or how many hits he took. It was what compelled him to transform Illinois from a predatory manufacturers’ haven into a state that cared for its workers, children, and aged. It sustained him when his revolutionary reforms, many of which preceded their national counterparts, seemed Sisyphean tasks impossible to others. It compelled him to refuse defeat, even when his opponents considered the fight long over. He never quit, never stopped, never surrendered, even amidst personal loss and political misfortunes. He was here to keep on, to fight, to win.

Despite his drastic surgery and uncomfortable convalescence in late 1969, Reuben began to give attention to new issues, particularly industrial pollution. He threw his vocal support behind the creation of a \$750 million bond for the protection of the environment through the control of water pollution, and began to raise concerns over growing farm subsidies and agribusiness. “I’m a little bothered about the fact that our government is paying farmers 4 billion dollars annually to take millions of acres of Midwest land out of production with current reports indicating that 30 million people, most of them wage earners, are not getting enough to eat,” he wrote to his executive vice-president that spring. “That startling number, 30 million American citizens, are reported to be hungry. Ten percent of them will be found in Illinois. That’s shocking.”⁹⁸²

He also gave renewed attention to electoral politics. Eager to undo the damaging defeats of the 1970 election, Reuben chaired a meeting of the statewide Committee On Political Action (COPE) in Chicago. He encouraged those present to help rehabilitate the popular image of unions as a way to expand labor’s influence in politics. Too many Americans, he warned, viewed unionists as narrowly self-interested, concerned only with the wages and hours of their own. Nothing could be farther from the truth, he said, arguing:

Unions represent a broad cross section in Illinois. They come from all walks of life in all parts of the state. They want what any American wants, peace, prosperity and security, dignity of the individual. They want these for

each and every Illinois citizen, every American.

A labor unionist is a most unusual and important person, a pioneer of the American spirit who believes in the fulfillment of democracy's promise and its extension into the economic field. This belief arises out of his own deep conviction of his own dignity and the dignity of all other men and an understanding of the kind of world in which he lives.

The labor unionist knows full well that he cannot entrust his affairs to others. He knows that wage earners must unite in order to secure their humane and economic rights. Otherwise they would be totally dependent on the employer.

The gains which have been made by local unions are beneficial to every element in the country, including the employer and the government itself...To those who are not in touch with the situation, it may look as if the labor union is merely a movement to secure higher wages and shorter hours, and to accomplish these objectives it is merely a striking machine. Those who have this conception of the labor movement have much to learn from it. They should realize that the labor movement deals with the things that uplift humanity, and that every improvement, every step that has been taken to bring improvements and better standards for wage earners generally is a part of the labor movement. Thus the labor unionist has been a social force, I might say a financial force, through working out his own destiny through the labor union.⁹⁸³

He also continued to advocate for pro-labor candidates, especially his son Carl. Far from fading, the pugnacious Reub had to consciously tone down his rhetoric; as he wrote to Carl in a note attached to a draft of his support mailer:

Whatever changes you desire I'll make them. The letter would be a lot stronger if I blasted both the Governor and his Putnam County candidate. That I know you don't want—and maybe blasts are not desirable in a campaign where you look like an easy winner.⁹⁸⁴

In spite of everything that had befallen him, Soderstrom threw himself into the fight as the new decade dawned. He continued to push, to pull, to refuse to quit. By the opening months of 1970 the Illinois AFL-CIO president was chugging along.

REUBEN REFUSES TO QUIT

Soderstrom Rejects Retirement

Appearances proved deceiving, however. Reuben's refusal to retire from his work put his body under incredible strain, and it was only a matter of time before his now-frail frame relented. Five days after celebrating his 82nd birthday, President Soderstrom suffered a heart attack soon complicated by a stroke. Although still able to speak, the stroke left Reuben paralyzed on his left side and confined to a rest home in his hometown of Streator.

Still, the incapacitated warrior refused to relinquish the reins. His executive vice president, Stanley Johnson, was technically next in line for the presidency, but even after 20 years together Reuben still held reservations about his second in command. He may have had a friendly relationship with Johnson, but many within the AFL-CIO did not. Stanley had engendered no small amount of ill-will during the Illinois AFL and CIO merger negotiations, angering the CIO negotiators so much that they outright refused to accept him as secretary-treasurer. Even after the merger, many in labor resented Johnson. According to Bob Gibson, then secretary-treasurer:

Stanley was an odd guy. He didn't have two different personalities, but he acted different (it seemed to me) around different people, and sometimes it was just almost like bullying some people. Stanley never had a lot of what you would call close friends. People worked with him, and got along with him, but to me I just never seen that side of Stanley where he had a lot of friends.⁹⁸⁵

Even some of Reub's closest and most powerful allies—men like Bill Lee, president of the Chicago AFL-CIO—went out of their way to avoid his executive vice president. “Bill and Stanley never got along very well at all,” Gibson recalled. “Bill always would come in and look at Stanley's office, then later on he'd look in my office (mine was next door) and say, ‘Is he still here?’”⁹⁸⁶

For years, Reuben had denied the presidency to Johnson, bluntly telling him on at least one recent occasion that he “wasn't ready yet.” The fact that Soderstrom was telling Johnson, at age 64, that he was still not prepared indicates that he likely believed Johnson unfit for the presidency. According to his grandson, Carl Soderstrom Jr., Reuben had stated on more than one occasion that he preferred Gibson, the energetic community organizer from the CIO who had become Reub's protégé, as his successor. But to endorse anyone other than the executive vice president—especially a former CIO member—would invite chaos at an intensely vulnerable moment. Convinced that he was still the only man who could do the job, Soderstrom resolved to remain in command, even if it was from a hospital bed.

Apparently, not everyone received Reub's memo. On Monday, July 13, the *Chicago Sun-Times* announced Soderstrom's impending retirement, writing:

Reuben Soderstrom, president of the Illinois AFL-CIO, plans to retire from the post in September after 40 years as a leader of the labor movement, his associates disclosed Sunday...Although his four-year term does not expire until April, 1972, his associates say Soderstrom will inform the 22-member executive board of the Illinois AFL-CIO of his decision to retire.⁹⁸⁷

The *Chicago Tribune* and *Streator Times-Press* quickly followed suit, noting that “the last two years of Soderstrom's term is expected to be filled by Stanley Johnson.”⁹⁸⁸

Reuben was furious. He immediately wrote to both papers to refute any and all rumors of his retirement. As the *Chicago Tribune's* Robert Wiedrich wrote in his column the “Tower Ticker:”

82-year-old Reuben G. Soderstrom took one look at reports he had retired as Illinois Federation of Labor Chief and decided they were grossly exaggerated. He hasn't quit and reportedly won't announce anything on the subject until the Executive Board meetings just before the state labor convention September 21 in Peoria. Reports of Soderstrom's “retirement” were evidently leaked by overzealous associates waiting in the wings for a chance to pluck the federation presidency. Soderstrom is recovering from a heart attack in a Streator convalescent home, but remains top dog for now.⁹⁸⁹

Whether or not Johnson was the “overzealous associate waiting in the wings” is not known, but the writing was now on the wall. Although unable to admit it, Soderstrom was physically no longer able to lead the Illinois AFL-CIO.

A Convention in Tribute

On Monday, September 21, the Illinois AFL-CIO Convention was gaveled in for the first time in nearly two generations without the illustrious leader. Executive Vice President Johnson, speaking in front of a large

mural of Soderstrom, did his best to calm the nerves of those present. He began his address by acknowledging the hole left by his illustrious predecessor, unable to attend the convention for the first time in decades:

This is the first time in 40 years of these great conventions you do not have your distinguished president to deliver one of his eloquent addresses, but I hope you will note he is here in spirit, and the best we can do this morning is to point to a typical pose immediately behind me, of Reub Soderstrom with his gavel. I would like to dedicate this thirteenth annual convention of the Illinois State Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations to the president of ours who for forty years served so well, Reuben G. Soderstrom...

As I indicated to you, our president is with us in spirit. I discussed this matter with our colleagues Bob Gibson and the Executive Board, and it seemed to me the most apropos thing we could do in connection with the presentation of the fortieth gavel would be, as long as Reub himself was not here to receive it, would be someone who was very close to his heart. And it so happens he has the same name, Reuben Soderstrom, the grandson of Reuben Soderstrom, our president.⁹⁹⁰

As the crowd rose to cheer the great leader's youngest grandchild, William Reuben Soderstrom, who took to the stage to accept his grandfather's final, fortieth gavel. He thanked all those present for the love and loyalty they had given to his namesake:

It is with a deep sense of pride and humbleness I accept these gavels for my grandfather, Reuben Soderstrom. I am going to take them back and give them to him, and I know what he is going to do. He has a large cabinet in his house, and in this cabinet there are mementoes from his more than sixty years' service for the people of Illinois, and the great labor movement. For my grandfather I would like to thank you very much for presenting these gavels. They mean so much. He loved you all, and you are all God's people.⁹⁹¹

Vice President Johnson then introduced State Representative Carl Soderstrom. Reuben's son barely managed to choke back the emotions that threatened to overtake him as he spoke to the delegates of the man they honored, the father he knew:

President Soderstrom is a man, believe me, who lived for organized labor. From the tip of his toes to the top of his head he always was for the union man and his cause...Because he understood economics and because he understood politics he was able to promote labor's interest and cause very successfully through all the various legislative and legal channels. He has lived to be the dean of all labor leaders in the country at the age of eighty-two. He has dedicated his whole life of service to organized labor and would have died for labor and its causes.⁹⁹²

Hoisting the gavel high, he announced:

To many persons this gavel may appear as just a piece of wood fashioned into a gavel, but to my dad, your president, it will be one of his most cherished possessions. To him this gavel represents forty years of progress by the Illinois labor movement. To him it means presiding over 40 separate Illinois state conventions. To him it is a symbol of loyalty, affection, cooperation and respect that you have accorded to him and to his leadership the past forty years. To him it will bring back memories of countless men and women who have dedicated their lives along with him to advance labor's great cause. To him it will recall conventions where such men of labor as Jack Walker, Victor Olander ... and countless others were present.

To dad a gavel was not a symbol of authority. To him it was a symbol of trust and faith and confidence placed in him by the delegates so that he could preside, maintain order, conduct the meetings and see that all issues and every delegate was accorded a fair and impartial chance to be heard.⁹⁹³

After Reuben's resignation was officially tendered, the delegates voted to honor him with the title of President Emeritus, an unprecedented sign of respect for the esteemed leader.⁹⁹⁴ After forty years, the man who had seen the organization through the Great Depression, World War II, and the greatest economic expansion the world had ever seen was about step down, and labor in Illinois would never be the same.

A Life in Reflection

Reuben followed the events unfolding in Peoria from his hometown of Streator with a mix of ruefulness and awe. It undoubtedly pained him to not be there, to not be leading the organization to which he'd dedicated and sacrificed so much. Still, even the stoic Soderstrom could not have remained unmoved; anyone watching the convention would have been hard-pressed to remain dry-eyed as the unyielding parade of men and women whose lives Reuben had touched, great and humble alike, stood to give their own personal tribute. It was a celebration, not just of Reuben the man but of the movement he had shepherded from the darkest days of persecution and depression through to the modern days of unprecedented strength and universal legitimacy. This was the end of an era, not just for Soderstrom, or even Illinois, but for organized labor itself.

The day after Reuben was named President Emeritus, his hometown paper, the *Streator-Press Times*, presented a stirring tribute to its favorite son, writing:

Described by persons of all ages and in all walks of life as "one of the greatest of the greats," Streatorite Reuben G. Soderstrom ended 40 memorable years as president of the AFL-CIO in Illinois when his letter of resignation was read at a state labor federation convention in Peoria.

Memories of a vital and ambitious labor leader, who waged his own personal war against unsafe or unfair practices in industry, must have lingered in the minds of the labor delegates as they were read the letter of resignation Soderstrom penned regrettably...Remembered as a stirring orator with a fantastic memory of the many legislative measures he successfully fought for, Soderstrom's well-earned respect by laborers is evident in the fact that during his 40 years as president of the state labor federation he was never opposed.⁹⁹⁵

Reuben refused to linger on what was behind him, however, choosing instead to focus on what lay ahead. When asked about his plans for retirement, Reuben gave no indication that he intended to withdraw from public life. As the *Streator-Times Press* observed:

Now recuperating in a rest home, Reuben Soderstrom does not yet find himself, at the age of 82 years, ready to accept the complete rest he's earned. He corresponds heavily with friends and labor associates.

Also on his immediate agenda is the possibility of writing a book and papers covering his lifelong work in labor...In the typical manner in which Reuben Soderstrom accomplished all he set out to do, his mind still "jumps ahead." His title of the book at this moment would be "Forty Gavels."⁹⁹⁶

The great man died on December 15, 1970. This is his book.

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