

LIONS OF LABOR

By Fred Hobbs

Here in the 21st century, most Americans consider Labor Day as a chance for one last long weekend of summer before school starts in earnest, leaves begin to turn, and the days become visibly shorter.

Today, much less attention is paid to the original intent of the holiday, (to note the social and economic achievements of the American worker) than was the case in the early and mid-1900s. Those were the days of the flamboyant, hard-charging, charismatic and sometimes more than slightly dishonest nationally organized union leaders. Here's a brief treatise centering on four of the most dynamic and controversial of these Lions of Labor:

Walter Reuther was a car guy, an early Socialist who made the United Automobile Workers a major force in the auto industry and later played an important role in Democratic Party politics. In the 1930s and early 1940s, he led several strikes. As a leader in the United Auto Workers, Reuther helped win major strikes for union recognition against General Motors and Ford. After Pearl Harbor, he strongly supported the war effort and became a prominent figure in the anti-Communist left.

During his career he survived two assassination attempts and, in 1948, was badly beaten by strike-breakers in an attack which left his right hand permanently crippled. Toward the end of his life, Reuther strongly supported the Civil Rights movement, notably standing beside Martin Luther King during King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

Also present at that speech was A. Philip Randolph, an African-American civil rights leader, who organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first predominately black labor union. In the early quest for civil rights, Randolph led the March on Washington movement, which convinced President Franklin D. Roosevelt to issue an executive order banning discrimination in World War II defense industries. After the war, he persuaded President Truman to order an end to segregation in the armed forces.

John L. Lewis, with his booming voice, firmly set jaw and ever-present scowl, led the United Mine Workers of America for forty years. A major force in the history of coal mining, he was key also in the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO.) Lewis was considered a brutally effective and aggressive fighter and strike leader. In World War II, coal miners went on strike in the middle of a particularly cold and snowy winter. Coal to stoke furnaces was not available, and several businesses and public facilities had to shut down. A Denver newspaper displayed a photo of an empty schoolroom with the headline above reading: "John L. Lewis's Contribution to Education."

Jimmy Hoffa provides the most intriguing story regarding American labor leaders. As head of the Teamsters, Hoffa built the union into a force of a million and half members, the largest single labor organization in the U.S. He became involved with organized crime early on and in 1964 was convicted of jury tampering, attempted bribery and fraud. In mid-1971, he resigned the Teamsters presidency as part of a pardon agreement with President Nixon.

Hoffa was last seen in July 1975 outside a Detroit restaurant. There are many theories about his disappearance, presumed murder and where his body may be hidden. None of them has panned out.

Currently, Hoffa's son, James P. Hoffa is active in labor and political circles. But neither he, nor any other leading advocate of the labor movement today, can match the fervor and ferocity exhibited by those 20th century Lions of Labor!