

Reuben G. Soderstrom Foundation



FORTY GAVELS

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

By Robert W. Soderstrom

Foreword

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!"



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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.

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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 axle 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

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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

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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.

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