

REUTHER VS. MEANY

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CPYRGHT

At the fork of a river, where two branches veer off, the distance between them is still small; further along it can become enormously large. The open break between the goliaths of AFL-CIO, Walter Reuther and George Meany, seems at first glance to be minor, even personal. But as the song says, it can be the start of something big, perhaps something of historical portent.

Reuther is irked at many things, at many levels of importance, none of which in itself appears to be significant enough to cause permanent rupture. Yet added up they indicate that the two men are travelling in different directions. Both of them are aware of it, Reuther to such an extent that at one point he weighed the pros and cons of withdrawing the auto union from the Federation.

The idea was given up in favor of what might be called "living together, separately." But this may be a distinction without a difference.

Reuther is miffed, to begin with, because Meany has stopped consulting him and no longer seeks a consensus on major issues. When the AFL and CIO were merged in December 1955, Meany as the president of the larger body was given the top post in the wedded group. But it was always understood that he would seek the advice of the former president of the CIO and try to act in unison. For a long time now that has not been happening. As a matter of fact the small body of eight men—president, secretary-treasurer, and six vice-presidents—who were to act as a policy-making executive committee where conflicting views might be harmonized, has been buried without the benefit of a formal funeral.

The failure to establish this working relationship after 11 years reflects, alas, a deeper failure—the failure to blend antipathetical social attitudes. Both men are devotees of what is euphemistically called the "free enterprise" system. But Reuther is the personification of *social* unionism, which demands large scale face-lifting of the system, Meany of *business* unionism, which is highly uncomfortable with crusades. Typically, Reuther, though he is no longer the irrepressible socialist of the 1930's, walks with Martin Luther King in Selma or pickets with the grape strikers in California. The "honest plumber," by contrast, not only eschews such symbolic

solidarity, but *boasts* that he has never walked a picket line or been on strike in his life.

For Meany the addition of a million members to the AFL-CIO in the last couple of years—mainly due to enlargement of the blue-collar force with the Vietnam war and the growth in government organizing with an assist by John Kennedy—falls under the nomenclature "success." Reuther is painfully conscious that the AFL-CIO today represents a smaller portion of the labor force than it did at birth. The grandiose organizing plans that were envisioned in 1955, in the South, amongst white-collar workers, in agriculture and the service industries, have been stillborn or minuscule at best. And though the AFL-CIO has pipe-lines to the White House and "friends" on Capitol Hill, it is not part of the "in" group as it was in Roosevelt's day.

Labor's Role

Reuther is distressed with the *image* of labor under Meany. It no longer blazes trails in the civil rights field, as it did in the 1930's. Its lobbying activities for social change have the dull luster of a rockbound institution, rather than the flaming zeal of a crusader. When it speaks for rebuilding the cities, more public housing, better education, medicare, it speaks as an echo. It is no longer the center of the liberal movement but a loosely-tied tail to it.

In the realms of international affairs the situation, insofar as Reuther is concerned, is even worse. On many issues, Meany and the former general secretary of the Communist Party, Jay Lovestone, who heads his international affairs department, is to the right of the Chamber of Commerce—e.g., on the question of trade with the Communist nations.

Reuther, like Meany, is an anti-Communist, a supporter of the Vietnam war, an advocate of "strength" through military power. But he cannot stomach the "narrow and negative" anti-Communism of the Meany-Lovestone clan. He has been chafing at the bit for years over Lovestone's kinship with the Central Intelligence Agency and his cloak-and-dagger operation.

The Lovestone issue, in fact, was one of the immediate causes of the schism. Reuther has wanted him tossed out of the movement since 1955, but he has kept publicly silent until the middle of last year when his brother,

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