

## Bargaining Table

# Soderstrom: Labor's One of a Kind

BY ROBERT M. LEWIN

There's never been anyone else in the labor movement,



ROBERT  
LEWIN

quite like Reuben George Soderstrom.

For 36 years, he has been president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor and its merged suc-

cessor — 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.

ONCE, at a White House luncheon attended by Soderstrom and several other labor leaders, the late President John F. Kennedy rose and said:

**"There will be no political speeches."**

The guests looked at the President in surprise and disappointment, and then at each other.

After the pause, the President put in:

"That's because I'm afraid Rube Soderstrom will ask for equal time."

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.

SODERSTROM followed several occupations before he was persuaded to take the one he's held the longest — labor leader.

He started as a farm boy on his father's fertile 160 acres of corn and wheat at Waverly, Minn., 18 miles west of Minneapolis.

He might have been born on a Kansas farm, instead, because his Swedish-born father, John, bought land there after making a moderate amount of money operating a shoe store at Chicago and La Salle.

But someone composed a song, "It Never Rains in Kan-

sas." The elder Soderstrom believed it. The price of Kansas land dropped. The elder Soderstrom sold his and moved to Minnesota.

**At 12, Reuben, second of a family of five children, became, a one-room-school dropout.**

He went to Chicago to live with an aunt for a while. Then he went to Streator to live with another aunt.

He carried materials for glassblowers at the American Bottle Co. there, earning 65 cents a day.

Soderstrom quit that to learn the printing trade in the composing room of the Streator Independent-Times.

WHEN HE wasn't setting type by hand or courting, Jeanne Miller Shaw, he was in the public library reading economics textbooks written by Richard T. Ely, University of Wisconsin professor.

For six years, he was president of Streator Local 327, International Typographical Union. For 10 years, he was president of the Streator Trades and Labor Assembly, a central body of union members.

IN 1918 he was elected state representative from the 39th senatorial district (La Salle County) on the Republican ticket, a post he held for 20 years. While in the Legislature he was elected a vice president of the state labor federation and later its president.

He helped to put through state financial aid for the blind and for children of widowed mothers.

He also helped to push through a bill to establish credit unions and get rid of loan sharks. In 1933, he successfully fought for enabling legislation so that Illinois could qualify for \$83,000,000

of federal money for low-rent housing projects.

He also successfully battled for a bill that curbed the issuance of injunctions against unions in state courts.

"LABOR has changed Illinois from a very backward state to a very progressive one — and it hasn't hurt the economy," said Soderstrom.

**"Not one employer would go back to the vile conditions that prevailed in the past."**

Though Soderstrom has offices in Marina City here, and in Springfield, he has maintained his home in Streator. His son, Carl W., 51, a lawyer and state representative, belongs to the Musicians' and Boilermakers' unions.

Soderstrom will have dinner Thursday night in the La Salle Hotel with other federation officials and his office staff.

The occasion: his 78th birthday.



REUBEN G. SODERSTROM

# THE UNIONIST

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## SODERSTROM

### The Man of the Hour!

Wins Chicago Endorsement, in the Home Union of President Howard  
Smashes the Progressive Machine in New York City

The Progs have met defeat—crushing defeat!

Their two mighty strongholds, New York and Chicago, have fallen!

And scores of other local unions have deserted the camp of the Progressives and are marching forward to victory with Soderstrom.

Big Six (New York Typographical Union No. 6) two years ago gave Howard an overwhelming endorsement.

At the recent endorsement meeting Big Six cut down Howard's support to around one-third of the votes cast!

Chicago Typographical Union No. 16—the birthplace of the Progressive Party, the center of its power, the home union of President Howard—two years ago backed him with a tremendous majority.

But at the recent endorsement meeting of No. 16 Howard received the support of less than a third of those present.

**AND SODERSTROM RECEIVED A MAJORITY OF ALL THE VOTES CAST — MORE THAN THE TOTAL OF HOWARD, BARKER, AND MILLIKEN!**

That is the answer of Big Six, with over 10,000 members, and No. 16, with over 1,000, to Howard's do-nothing record in the newspaper scales of those two unions, and to his part in forcing five-year contracts upon the jobbers of both unions.

The above results mean that the members of the New York and Chicago unions, after giving President Howard full opportunity to make good, have informed him:

—“You have been tried and found wanting!

“As a progressive union official you have been a complete failure.

“The net achievements of your administration have been zero.

“You have betrayed your friends and aided our enemies.

“Now we demand a change.

“We want SODERSTROM!

“And we intend to vote for every Unionist candidate on the ticket, in order that President Soderstrom may have full support in his efforts to build up the I. T. U.”

The Progs will probably point to the number of unions that endorsed Howard as proof that he is the choice of the I. T. U.

But, like Howard's record, the more the endorsement returns are understood, the less credit they are to him.

A few months ago, there were only two international parties in the I. T. U.—the Progressives and the Conservatives.

Then the Unionists entered the field, under the leadership of the powerful Soderstrom, who, after a campaign of only a few weeks' time, secured considerably more than the required fifty endorsements of local unions, and delivered knockout blows to the Progs in the largest unions of the I. T. U.

That was something unheard of, undreamed of—the impossible!

Soderstrom's campaign had not started until well along in January, only a few weeks before the endorsement meetings.

Previous to that time, the Unionist platform had not been printed, and not a page of literature distributed.

No attempt was made to cover the I. T. U. with campaign literature, the immediate end being merely to secure the necessary endorsements.

The members of the great majority of the unions throughout the I. T. U. knew nothing about Soderstrom or the Unionist Party, consequently many of them accepted without question the stereotyped Prog argument that unless the Progs were endorsed the Wahs would be returned to power (as if that could be worse than the present conditions!).

But where Soderstrom became known, he was either endorsed or received a strong vote.

Where Howard was known, he lost.

Howard's political career would be ended if every member of the I. T. U. were fully informed as to his activities—and his INACTIVITIES.

But the membership are not fully informed, since their main source of information, the Typographical Journal, conceals the shortcomings of the Prog administration.

However, they will soon be acquainted with the true situation.

Then—

Goodbye, Mr. Howard!

WELCOME, PRESIDENT SODERSTROM!

The following article appeared February 8, 1930, in the *Federation News*, official organ of the Chicago Federation of Labor.

# On Labor's Honor Roll of Faithful Service

A Member of the Typographical Union, to Whom the Trade Unionists and the Citizens of the State of Illinois Are Indebted

Organized labor has only one representative in the Illinois State Legislature—Reuben G. Soderstrom of Streator. Yet Illinois occupies first place among all the states of the nation in the manner of legislation favoring union labor and in the absence of legislation aiding the open-shop movement. And R. G. Soderstrom is very largely responsible for that condition.

That he possesses exceptional qualities of leadership—personal magnetism, knowledge, courage—goes without saying. But those qualities do not account for the legislative power that he wields. Other public men by the score, possessing these same qualities in marked degree, after a meteoric flash have sunk into obscurity.

The secret of his phenomenal success is his deep and genuine sympathy for the toiling masses, which manifests itself in his personal contacts, his public utterances and his legislative efforts.

His rule of life is service. In his unselfish and sacrificing efforts to live up to that ideal he has not only drawn his constituents to him with bonds of steel but has the infinitely strengthened his own power when battling in their behalf.

## Champion Who Commands Respect

Add to the above a clean, wholesome life and sterling honesty, and you have the picture of a champion of labor who commands the respect and admiration not only of union men and women, but their enemies, throughout Illinois and far beyond its boundaries.

John H. Walker, president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor, in a lengthy article for the press covering some of the more important achievements of Mr. Soderstrom, made this comment: "I know of no man of his age in our country who has had a greater or more varied experience in the struggle of labor as a trade unionist for the betterment of humanity. Through it all he has stood undimmed for labor—capable, well informed, intelligent, thoroughly honest."

We hardly mention a few phases of his work in *seven years* as illustrating its importance to the labor movement.

As chairman of the Committee on Public Utilities in the 14th and 15th General Assemblies in 1925 and 1927; as Speaker pro tem at a special session of the Illinois Legislature; as chairman of the Committee on Education in the 16th General Assembly in 1929, he fulfilled the duties of the various positions with credit to himself and his constituents.



REUBEN G. SODERSTROM  
Labor's Champion in the  
Illinois Legislature

## UNIONIST TICKET

President  
E. G. SODERSTROM  
First Vice-President  
MAURICE A. ADLER  
Second Vice-President  
THOMAS J. CONNELLY  
Delegates to  
American Federation of Labor  
A. BERGH  
J. H. CAMPBELL  
JOHN E. MURRAY  
W. S. HATCHETT  
Delegate Canadian Trades and  
Labor Congress  
CHARLES RYAN  
Trades Union Printers Home  
AUSTIN HEWSON  
E. R. WORKMAN  
JAMES P. OLWELL, JR.  
Agar Union Printers Home  
HERBERT E. JAMES  
Auditor  
CHARLES C. TBSTERMAN

He has introduced and successfully piloted through the House amendments to the Workmen's Compensation Law, giving greater protection to injured workmen and more benefits to their families.

He introduced and guided through the House the Injunction Limitation bill which is now on the state statutes of Illinois—the only bill of its kind enacted by a large industrial state in the United States. It has materially reduced the number of injunctions issued against labor, and is a monument to Mr. Soderstrom's statesmanship.

He has succeeded in securing the passage of the Old Age Pension bill through the House in every session in which it has been introduced while he was a member.

## Defeats Open-Shoppers Scheme

To Mr. Soderstrom very largely belongs the credit for defeating the efforts of the open-shoppers to destroy the union movement in St. Louis.

He has served with distinction on the State Board of Education for nine years.

He is 41 years of age, is married, and has two children.

He is not a politician—he makes no appeal to partisan prejudice. While a candidate at each election on an old party ticket, the politicians and their machine ignore him—but the workers do not. Term after term he has been repeatedly returned to office by the united efforts of those who have full confidence that he will represent their interests to the best of his ability—union men and women and their sympathizers.

"Rube" Soderstrom became a printer's devil at the age of 15, and at the age of 21 he joined the St. Louis Typographical Union as a journeyman. Since then he has worked at his trade in Minneapolis, Madison, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Chicago, and is now working as a linotype operator in Streator.

He has served as president of Streator Typographical Union No. 314 and is now its vice-president.

He was elected president of the Streator Trades and Labor Council before he was 35 years old. He is now reading clerk of that organization.

The Unionist Party (composed of members of the International Typographical Union, with 71,000 members, and have nominated him for that responsible office.

## BLACK SUNDAY

(Continued from Page Three)

wrong a member, or see him or her wronged, if in my power to prevent."

Have you lived up to that oath?

No. 16 says you have not!

The Chicago Union had fought for—and won—a scale that would have been an inspiration to every local within the jurisdiction of the I. T. U.; a scale that would have been a powerful aid to all scale committees in securing the consecutive five-day week within a short period of time.

Then you stepped in and commanded the triumphant union forces to cease fighting, and gave the employers opportunity to outwash themselves against farther advances by the membership of the I. T. U.

Therefore you are charged with a shameful and unjustified violation of your oath that you have wronged every member of the International Union.

The highest judicial tribunal of our organization, the Supreme Court of the International Typographical Union—the membership—is now receiving and weighing testimony against you.

On the 28th day of May judgment will be rendered in accordance with the preponderance of the evidence.

And you will pay the penalty!

# Reuben G. Soderstrom, 82, State Labor Leader, Is Dead

BY JAMES STRONG

Reuben G. Soderstrom, former president of the Illinois AFL-CIO died yesterday in Streator, La Salle County. He was 82.

Mr. Soderstrom, who headed the 1.1-million-member organization for more than 40 years, retired as president, effective last Oct. 1. He suffered a stroke last March which left him partially paralyzed and confined him to St. Mary's Hospital in downstate Streator, where he died.

He was reelected in 1968 for his 10th four-year term as leader of the state's largest labor organization, but announced his intention to resign at the annual convention last July in Peoria. He was named president emeritus. He never was opposed in his 10 campaigns for the union presidency.

#### Policies Are Continued

Stanley L. Johnson, executive vice president, succeeded Mr. Soderstrom to the organiza-



Reuben Soderstrom

tion's leadership and continued many of the policies and programs of Mr. Soderstrom.

Mr. Soderstrom celebrated his 82d birthday on March 10. He was born in Wright County, Minn., and moved to Streator when he was 12. He had made his home there since, altho much of his time was spent in Springfield where he was involved in labor interests.

He headed the state AFL-CIO since 1930 and was co-editor of its weekly news letter.

Mr. Soderstrom began his career in a newspaper office as a printer, linotype operator, reporter, and editorial writer for labor papers.

#### Served in Legislature

He was former president of the Streator Typographical Union, the Streator Trades and Labor Council and the Streator Board of Education. In 1918, he was elected to the Illinois General Assembly from the

39th district, reelected in 1922 and served five consecutive terms.

During World War II, he was a member of War Production Board's Labor Advisory Committee, the National Management-Labor Policy Committee of the War Manpower Commission and other advisory groups. He also served on many state commissions and councils.

During his career in the state's labor movement, he fought Communist infiltration into organized labor and in 1934 endorsed a three-day work week to provide wider employment.

#### Worked Out Mergers

Mr. Soderstrom and Joseph Germano, district director of the United Steelworkers of America, worked out state and local mergers of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1958.

Mr. Soderstrom's wife, the former Jeanne Shaw, died in 1951.

Surviving are a son, State Rep. Carl W. Soderstrom [R., Streator], and five grandchildren.

Services will be held at 1 p. m. Friday in the Park Presbyterian Church, Vermilion and Hickory Streets, Streator.

## Infant Boy Killed by Scalding Water

Fourteen-month-old Brian Cooney of 801 Glendale Rd., Northfield Township, died yesterday in Lutheran General Hospital of burns to more than 50 per cent of his skin in a home accident early in the day. Detective George Meier of the sheriff's police said the child's mother, Pamela, was pouring boiling water into a glass container when the container broke, spilling the water over the child.

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