



1937

The Battle of the Overpass

On May 26, 1937, union organizers clashed with Ford Motor Company's Service Department; an internal security force under the direction of Harry Bennett. The UAW planned a leaflet campaign entitled, "Unionism, Not Fordism," at the overpass on Miller Road at the main gate of the River Rouge Plant. At approximately 2 p.m. several of the leading UAW organizers, including Walter Reuther and Richard Frankensteen, were asked to pose for a picture by a Detroit News photographer. While they were posing, men from Ford's Service Department came from behind and beat them. Both men suffered severe injuries along with many other workers, reporters and photographers, who were documenting the incident. Having close ties to Henry Ford, the Dearborn police ignored the violence. Ford Motor Company accused the union officials of provoking the incident and took no responsibility for what transpired. The incident played an integral role in the UAW's campaign to organize autoworkers, increased support for the union, and hurt Ford's reputation.

¹ A Battle on the Overpass

Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, ID 8748

² The Battle Begins

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³ Battle Scars

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Credits:

Chandler, Alfred Dupont. *Giant Enterprise: Ford, General Motors, and the Automobile Industry*. Harcourt Brace & World, 1964. Print.

Keywords/Topics:

Politics and Legal Issues, Work/Jobs

Questions:

1. Why didn't Ford want the UAW to distribute leaflets?
2. Why did this hurt Henry Ford's reputation?
3. Why was Ford so against unionization?

Links to Internet Websites:

<http://apps.detnews.com/apps/history/index.php?id=172>

<http://www.hfmvgv.org/exhibits/fmc/battle.asp>

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,758013,00.html>

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Many UAW members were assaulted by Ford's Service Department. In this photograph, one member was attacked by four service men. This man was distributing leaflets about Ford's unfair labor practices and the UAW's plans to counter them.

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Members of the UAW Women's Auxiliary were also hostilely attacked and beaten by the Service Department. Once again, the Dearborn Police sided with Henry Ford and did not protect UAW members from violence. The Service Department attacked photographers but were unsuccessful in destroying incriminating photographs. The Battle of the Overpass hurt Ford's reputation and increased support of the UAW around the country.

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Walter Reuther and Richard Frankensteen just after being assaulted by Ford's service men during the "Battle of the Overpass". Being prominent UAW leaders, Reuther and Frankensteen were specifically targeted by the Service Department. In later years, Walter Reuther would survive two assassination attempts.