

Activist's death reminds of key UAW-Ford battle

O'Connell was bodyguard for Walter Reuther

By JOE ROSSITER
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The death of longtime UAW member and Ford retiree Mike O'Connell Sept. 20 rekindled memories of a moment in the local labor movement with lasting repercussions in the American labor struggle.

O'Connell, a tough-as-nails activist who had served as a bodyguard to former UAW President Walter Reuther, was one of only a handful of survivors from the infamous Battle of the Overpass. He died of natural causes at Heartland Health Care in Dearborn Heights. He was 90.

Born in Detroit, the oldest of seven children of parents who were Irish immigrants, he grew up in southwest Detroit and was a Golden Gloves boxer. He was hired at Ford in 1936 and became instantly enamored with the union as an organizer and steward.

The Battle of the Overpass occurred May 26, 1937, when union organizers clashed with Ford Motor Co. security guards at a pedestrian overpass near Gate 4 of the Rouge complex in Dearborn.

Union members including Reuther and Richard Frankenstein had gathered outside the plant that day for a planned leaflet campaign to promote the fledgling union. While posing for a newspaper photographer, they were attacked by members of Ford's internal security force under the direction of Harry Bennett and savagely beaten.

As Dearborn police pas-



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UAW leader Richard Frankenstein, with coat pulled over his head, is pummeled at the gate of the Ford Rouge plant in Dearborn on May 26, 1937, at the start of the Battle of the Overpass.

sively watched, the violence escalated and the unruly mob attempted to destroy photographs taken by the photographer at the scene. Instead, he hid the photographic plates under the back seat of his car.

As news and photos of the brutal attack made headlines in newspapers across the nation, the pictures inspired the Pulitzer committee to institute a prize for photography.

The incident increased support for the UAW, and it hurt Ford's reputation. Three years later, the Dearborn auto giant inked a contract with the UAW.

"Those were some very rough times," said Mike Smith, director of the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University. "Back then, companies were willing to use whatever force necessary, including guns and hiring goons to beat up people and discourage the union."

Described as humble, modest and low-key by his oldest daughter, Patricia O'Connell, she said her father, an Army veteran of World War II, never much talked about his experiences with the union or the war. "Though he didn't get beat up at the Battle of the

Overpass, he often remarked that Harry Bennett and his private-run secret service team put fear into every worker. He said he wasn't worried, but you had to be careful," she said.

Besides his daughter Patricia, Mike O'Connell is survived by another daughter, Rita O'Connell; a son, Michael; three grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Funeral services were held Thursday.

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