

Steelworkers' 70th birthday: The Past Inspires the Future

Posted on June 3, 2012 by Rosemary Feurer

Kenneth Germanson, president emeritus of the Wisconsin Labor History Society, shares with LAWCHA [his article](#) on the [USW's recent 70-year anniversary \(photo gallery\)](#).

In the early days of World War II – May of 1942 – some 1700 delegates from local unions of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) and the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers gathered in the Music Hall of the Cleveland Public Auditorium to form the United Steelworkers of America.

Seventy years later, on a bright, warm spring day, another 1700 met in the same Music Hall to celebrate the anniversary of the founding of the Union and its long history of struggle. On Thursday, May 24, the crowd in the Music Hall was a mixture of local union representatives, International Union staff and retirees. Among the active Steelworkers were some 500 members of the Next Generation, the USW's young members' organization, composed of workers under the age of 35.

This mixture of old, not-so-old and young helped to reinforce the theme that the members of Steelworkers Union – in the words of President Leo Gerard – would “inherit the past and make the future.”

In an enthusiastic speech following a nearly two-hour multimedia presentation of the union's history, Gerard reminded the audience that they “inherited the history of those who died” in the earlier struggles. He said it was the obligation of the union's current members to follow up and continue the struggle for a better future for all.

“We're standing on the future they gave us,” he said.

The multimedia show was an inspiring portrait of the union's history, with a collection of actors reading scripts while images of historic photos appeared on a back drop. Often they were accompanied by Labor History Professor Tom Juravich (University of Massachusetts) on the guitar.

The spirit of the show infected the audience which often interrupted the performers with cheers that added to the enthusiasm of the day.

The script, written by Lisa Jordan, director of the USW Education and Membership Development Dept., created a truly lively, meaningful summary of the Union's efforts through the years, concentrating on areas where the Steelworkers were significant leaders, such as in safety and health, racial justice, and the expansion into global unionism while dealing with the issues of unfair foreign trade.

This was more than a 'rah-rah' session; the presentation was balanced and truthful, showing successes as well as those times when the challenges could not be immediately overcome. If anything, it reinforced the belief that the fight must continue, a sentiment that President Gerard stated over and over again.

Turning to the present-day challenges, Gerard expressed a fear of what could happen, particularly in the coming elections, if the anti-worker forces win, possibilities that exist both in Canada and the United States.

"Now I wake up every morning and I'm angry as hell," he roared. "I'm afraid they might win and take away our heritage."

The morning program was followed by afternoon workshops, concentrating largely on how to mobilize the Union's many tools - along with its history - to continue the fight.

There was one living connection with the original founding convention. One of the delegates to that convention - 94-year-old George Edwards - was in the audience and was greeted with a standing ovation when he was introduced.

Judging from the reaction and interest shown during the program, it was obvious the participants were stirred by the heritage they had inherited, and thus were ready to arm themselves to continue the fight that the Steelworkers began 70 years earlier.

Author



Rosemary Feurer

Rosemary Feurer is Professor of History at Northern Illinois University. She is the author of *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950*, among other books and essays. She is working on *The Illinois Mine Wars, 1860-1940* and a new biography of Mary Harris "Mother" Jones.