



## Battle of the Overpass

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On May 26, 1937, nearly sixty UAW members from Local 174 arrived at Ford Motor Company's River Rouge Plant to pass out leaflets, with city permit in hand, as part of a campaign to secure union representation for Rouge workers. Several neutral observers were also present, including clergy, reporters, and photographers. In order to access the greatest number of workers, participants met at the pedestrian overpass on Miller Road at Gate 4 of the complex during a shift change. As UAW leaders Walter Reuther, Robert Kantor, Richard Frankensteen, and J.J. Kennedy posed for photographers, they were approached by members of the Ford Service Department and severely beaten. Women from UAW Local 174's Ladies Auxiliary, reporters, and photographers standing below the overpass were also attacked.



UAW Organizing, Reuther,  
Frankenstein, Battle of the Overpass,  
1937

Detroit News photographer James Kilpatrick captured the beatings in vivid detail. When men from the Service Department threatened Kilpatrick and demanded that he turn over his film, the photographer concealed the actual negatives and gave them blank plates instead. Over the next few days, widespread publication of photos from the “Battle of the Overpass” made headlines across the country. The photos, in conjunction with testimony during the subsequent hearings from medical personnel who treated the injured, brought national attention to the brutal methods utilized by Ford and other companies to fight union organizers. This victory in public opinion was crucial for further advances by organized labor.

As one of the most famous events in the history of the American labor movement, the “Battle of the Overpass” set in motion a series of efforts that resulted in a crippling strike at the Rouge Plant and final recognition of the UAW by Ford Motor Company in 1941. It also cemented [Walter Reuther’s](#) importance within the UAW and paved the way for his pivotal years as president.

In addition to the collections highlighted above, information about the “Battle of the Overpass” can be found in the following collections at the Reuther Library:

- [Robert Dunn Papers](#)
- [Maurice Sugar Papers](#)
- [UAW Local 212 Records](#)
- [UAW Public Relations Department: Ford Motor Company Series Records](#)

- [Battle of the Overpass Image Gallery](#)



Walter Reuther comforts Richard Frankensteen following their assault by Ford Service Department employees during the “Battle of the Overpass”. The men were beaten and tossed down a flight of stairs for distributing United Auto Workers leaflets outside of the Ford Rouge Plant, Dearborn, Michigan. Credit: [Walter P. Reuther Library](#)

## Author



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