1. “500 Planes a Day”

Victor G. Reuther

Months before Hitler’s armies marched east into Poland, Walter and I had a conversation with Ben Blackwood, a trusted aide in the General Motors Department [of the UAW] and himself a skilled toolmaker, about Roosevelt’s call for aid to Britain and the kind of help America was best equipped to give. Because of the unrelenting Luftwaffe offensive, it was obvious that England needed planes, not only guns and tanks, for her defense. As toolmakers we knew it would be many years before American industries turning out civilian goods could be tooled to produce weapons in any quantity. But, as Walter said, we should not romanticize about the nature of the airplane, though the aircraft industry had for so long made a fetish of the highly specialized expertise involved. A plane was made of steel and aluminum, like other vehicles, and its component parts could be manufactured by essentially the same kind of machines and machine tools that stamp and turn out the parts of an automobile. We had seen the conversion of peacetime tools—and helped make it—in the Gorky plant, when Russia was arming itself against the inevitable German invasion.¹

Of course, the automobile manufacturers, asked to take on enormous defense contracts, assumed that they would gradually close down their automobile plants, keeping them on a standby basis, while the government proceeded to build and put at their disposal spanning new factories, equipped with millions of dollars worth of machine tools, most of which would be duplications of the tools sitting idle, or about to sit idle, in the automobile plants as we moved into an all-out war effort.

A careful survey taken by Ben Blackwood and me in GM plants all over the country corroborated Walter’s hypothesis and became the basis of his proposal for a “500-planes-a-day” program, to be undertaken by the automotive industry. He had informal meetings with R. J. Thomas and Philip Murray about his plan.² They were both enthusiastic, and Murray submitted it to President Roosevelt on December 20, 1940. . . .

Roosevelt responded with interest, and sent a memo to Knudsen, co-director with Sidney Hillman of the Office of Production Management. . . .

William Knudsen, though deeply devoted to FDR and to the defense effort, must nevertheless have felt put out that Walter Reuther, the “red-headed upstart” who had so often clashed with him across the General Motors bargaining table, should presume to tell the nation what the automobile industry could do about mass tooling for aircraft production. Yet an editorial in Knudsen’s home town newspaper, the Detroit News, stated on January 6, 1941, that “no industrial leader has paralleled Reuther’s initiative and ingenuity in presenting such a plan for consideration.”

There was a meeting of top officials of the OPM [Office of Production Management], the Air Force and the Navy, Knudsen, Hillman, R. J. Thomas and Walter. A courtesy call was paid on the President after the discussion. . . .

Walter had made a public appeal on the radio the week before. It was a long speech and an emotional one. Some of it is well worth remembering:

In London they are huddled in the subways praying for aid from America. In America we are huddled over blueprints praying that Hitler will be obliging enough to postpone an all-out attack on England for another two years until new plants begin to turn out engines and aircraft.

Packard has just finished pouring the concrete for its new engine factory and Ford may soon be ready to begin digging ditches in which to sink the foundations for his. Not until the fall of nineteen forty-two, almost two years hence, will these bright, shiny new factories actually begin to turn out the engines. This is snail’s pace production in the age of lightning war...

We believe that without disturbing present aircraft plant production schedules we can supplement them by turning out five hundred planes a day of a single standard fighting model by the use of idle automotive capacity. We believe that this can be done after six months of preparation as compared to the eighteen months or two years required to get new plane and engine factories into production...

Fortunately, despite the headlines which tell us of unfillable orders and labor shortages, we have a huge reservoir of unused machinery, unused plants, unused skill, and unused labor to fall back upon. The tool and die workers... are also partially idle...

The plane, from certain points of view, is only an automobile with wings. Our greatest need is for plane engines... The plane engine is the more delicate and compact combustion engine but it is still a combustion engine, containing the same parts... There stand idle in the Cleveland Fisher Body plant toggle presses huge enough to hold and operate a draw or flange die weighing seventy to eighty tons. Such a machine can stamp out airplane parts as well as automobile parts...

It would take years to install in new aircraft plants the same type of presses which now stand idle fifty percent of the time...

Equipment at the Chevrolet Drop Forge plant in Detroit operates at sixty percent of capacity even at this time, which is a peak period for the automobile industry. The machines and hammers in this plant could produce all the drop forgings required for five hundred planes a day and still supply the Chevrolet Company with sufficient forgings for one million cars during the coming year. Labor asks: Why not use this equipment instead of duplicating it?

Labor’s plan springs from the pooled experience and knowledge of skilled workers in all the automotive plants, the same skilled workers who are called upon year by year in the industry to produce new machine marvels. Each manufacturer has the benefit of his skilled workers. We of the United Automobile workers, CIO, have the benefit of the skilled manpower in all the automotive plants, not just in one of them.

Labor asks only in return that its hard-won rights be preserved... only that it be allowed to contribute its own creative experience and knowledge and that it be given a voice in the execution of its program...

No question of policy needs to be settled. The President has laid down the policy. We must have more planes...

Quantity production was achieved in the Reich and is being achieved in England by methods labor now proposes to apply to the automotive industry.

The difference and our opportunity is that we have in the automotive industry the greatest mass-production machine the world has ever seen. Treated as one great production unit, it can in half a year’s time turn out planes in unheard-of numbers and swamp the Luftwaffe. This is labor’s answer to Hitler aggression, American labor’s reply to the cries of its enslaved brothers under the Nazi yoke in Europe.

England’s battles, it used to be said, were won on the playing fields of Eton. America’s battles can be won on the assembly lines of Detroit.

The swollen wartime bureaucracy, with its myriads of dollar-a-year men jammed into Washington, consigned many proposals to limbo, Walter’s among them. It was not, of course, attractive to the automobile manufacturers, but it was both imaginative and timely, and was finally given serious consideration by the War Department. It stirred up debate in the press and even inspired Charles E. Wilson, Knudsen’s successor as president of General Motors, to challenge Walter to a face-to-face verbal duel in Detroit...

No one was more outspoken against Walter’s plan than the chairman of General Motors, Alfred P. Sloan, who declared categorically on November 20, 1940, that automobile plants were not adaptable to the manufacture of any other products. “Only about
ten or fifteen percent of the machinery and equipment in an automobile factory can be utilized for the production of special defense material." He was in effect saying: Leave our plants alone on a standby basis, and build new plants for aircraft and tanks and gun carriages; tool them completely for that sort of specialized work though it may take two years to get them into real production.

The tragedy of this two-year delay was compounded by the insanity of saddling American taxpayers with the enormous cost of building new plants, which the corporations would later argue were "special purpose defense plants unsuited for civilian production" and ask that they be turned over to them, for a token fee, to be converted to their own purposes. The auto industry seemed ready to sacrifice the very life of the nation to its profit interests.

Many American workers paid dearly for this intransigence, which, of course, enriched the owners of industry. Corporate profits and the incomes of auto, steel, and other executives went up considerably during 1941. Eugene Grace of Bethlehem Steel, for instance, enjoyed a salary increase that year, boosting his remuneration from $478,000 in 1940 to $537,000 in 1941. Even the small Willys Overland Corporation provided for its president a 71 percent salary increase. Tom Girdler of Republic Steel had his salary raised by 56 percent, bringing it up to $275,000. When these men advocated business as usual, they knew what they were defending—and it wasn't the nation's survival.

Our UAW survey had indicated that at least 50 percent of auto-producing machinery was suitable for defense production. The refusal of General Motors to put at the disposal of the defense effort even its idle machine tools meant that in the urgent first six months of 1941, a crucial period, GM, out of a total production of $1,350,000,000 worth of goods, delivered only $131,000,000 worth of defense products.

Most American industrialists were trying at that point to make money from civilian and military sales. Their continued production of civilian cars and other consumer goods brought them huge profits to which they intended to add the lucrative cost-plus defense contracts. With all their patriotic protestations and "victory councils," they had, in fact, to be shoved, against their will, into a maximum defense effort.

The final assessment of the merits of the Reuther plan came much later. It could be found in the reports of the auto executives themselves when, at the war's end, they boasted, as did K. T. Keller, Chrysler's head, that 89 percent of their machine tools had been converted to war production and could now be easily reconverted into making civilian cars. . .

Finally, in December, 1941, there was a decree to cut back by 51.5 percent the passenger car production of the "big three" auto producers and the quotas of the smaller firms like Studebaker, Hudson and Nash, by 15.3 percent. A month before, I had challenged automobile executives to concentrate on fewer models in order to eliminate waste of materials and machinery. When the cutback was made an official order, serious pockets of unemployment appeared, as we had anticipated, lasting for six to eight months, and this at a time when the nation was calling for the labor of every person in a combined defense effort.

Within hours after the Japanese air attack on Pearl Harbor and before declaration of war by Germany against the U.S., I reported to the press: "The President's appeal for increase of production seven days a week in defense industries has received the unanimous support of the UAW-CIO. . . This will not only speed defense production, but will also provide immediate defense employment for additional thousands of workers displaced by auto curtailment and whose skilled labor would otherwise be unused."

Needless to say, the automobile industry went on dragging its feet and it was urged that the cut-off date for passenger cars should be extended to the middle of February.

The CIO and the UAW began to carry their case to the public by writing an open letter to the OPM:

Half of the nation's auto plants are today closed down. Virtually all of them will be down by the end of January. Blacked out not by Hitler and Japan. Approximately 25,000 automobile workers, men trained in precision, mass production methods, and highly skilled tool and die workers are now idle. Fully 400,000 will be idle by the end of January. The nation has lost two million man days every week in war production. . . . Only a few plants are turning out the vital materials of war. . . .

The program drafted by Walter P. Reuther and other members of the UAW-CIO was referred to you for study and recommendation.
You did nothing about it. Similar plans for increasing production of steel, aluminum, copper and other materials vital to the war program were proposed. You did nothing about them. Labor is ready and determined to do its part... willing to accept the bitter necessities of a righteous war. Labor had the right to expect industry to do its part.

Editor's Notes

1. Victor and Walter Reuther spent a year and a half working in the Soviet Union, commencing in November, 1933. Their very understandable wish to see Soviet life at first hand was misunderstood by conservatives, even though the Reuthers were disillusioned with the Soviet government.

2. R. J. Thomas was then president of the UAW, having succeeded Homer Martin; Philip Murray was national president of the CIO.