It was 40 years ago this month that Walter Reuther died in a plane crash. Forty years. Yet the autoworkers leader remains an important inspirational figure - a man whose life holds crucial lessons for those who are today seeking to revitalize the American labor movement.

I came upon him late in his career, and to me he seemed verbose, distant and a bit pompous: a do-gooder who didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't wench; who did only good things, and always in the artfully arranged glare of publicity.

He couldn't possibly be as good as those who had known the man for a long time claimed him to be. But they were right. Walter Reuther was an extraordinarily good man.

He was truly the conscience of organized labor - a crusader struggling very, very hard against the stagnation he found in a movement he had helped found, lead, and, finally, had tried to reform.

Reuther was the conscience as well of a lot of people who never paid union dues in their lives. I mean those who saw him as the embodiment of their hopes to change this imperfect society in ways that would better the lives of those at the bottom of its social, economic and political ladder.

It was Reuther, as much as any union leader, who brought dignity and economic security to the mass of Americans, expanding the country's major concerns beyond the elementary economic concerns that preoccupied most people in the years before World War II.

Reuther's specific contributions were many. There was the central role he played in establishing the United Auto Workers Union, over which he eventually presided. There was his role in forging together the country's industrial unions and in leading them, as president of the Congress of Industrial Organization – the CIO – in struggles for broad economic and social causes.

There was Reuther's exceptional success in negotiating better wages, hours and working conditions for the autoworkers that were pace-setting marks for workers in all industries and all occupations.

And there were Reuther's many efforts to shift the labor movement in new directions. His last attempt, and surely his boldest, came in 1969 when he led
the United Auto Workers out of the AFL-CIO and into an "Alliance for Labor Action" with the then-unaffiliated Teamsters Union.

Reuther hoped the alliance of the country's two largest unions could begin carrying out the programs he had suggested repeatedly to the AFL-CIO, only to be rebuffed by the former American Federation of Labor leaders who dominated the federation.

The alliance never really got going before Reuther's death and dissolved shortly afterward. Some of Reuther's fellow labor leaders had scoffed, in any case, that it was actually nothing more than an attempt by Reuther to satisfy the ambitions for broad union leadership he had been unable to realize within the AFL-CIO.

"Walter," they would tell you, "is just being Walter – all talk and no action."

Well, they were right about one thing at least. The man could talk. Others were accustomed to it, after three decades of Reuther-watching. But he was new to me, and I marveled to see him hold audiences of thousands for an hour and more while speaking without a single note – strictly off the top of his head – and doing so with great and forceful eloquence.

I especially remember a talk he gave in 1966, in a dilapidated little auditorium in Delano, California, where vineyard workers led by Cesar Chavez just a few months before had begun the strike that someday would capture the attention of the entire country.

I played the sophisticate and smiled knowingly over Reuther's wordy and dramatic promises to the farm workers. But then came the terrible news, four years later, of a plane down in Michigan, and I thought back to that cold December day in the grape country.

I remembered what those words had meant to the penniless, obscure and powerless band of farm workers who had gathered in the auditorium. There he was, one of the great leaders of America, promising to "stand with you until the end."

I may have been fooled, but the farm workers were not fooled. They knew that Walter Reuther meant exactly what he said. He always did.