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Ed Sadlowski, Fiery Steelworkers Insurgent, Dies at 79

By **Sam Roberts**

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Ed Sadlowski, a fireball labor leader whose militant insurgency in the 1970s shook but failed to dislodge the steelworkers union's top brass, died on Sunday in Estero, Fla. He was 79.

His death was confirmed by his daughter Susan Sadlowski Garza, a Chicago alderwoman. He had Lewy body dementia, she said.

Mr. Sadlowski, a third-generation steelworker who dropped out of high school in the 11th grade to become an apprentice machinist, rose meteorically through the ranks of the United Steelworkers union by echoing the confrontational rhetoric of his labor heroes, like John L. Lewis, who had led the miners union, and Victor Reuther, one of three Reuther brothers who had transformed the autoworkers union into a labor power.

Mr. Sadlowski rejected the more collegial approach of contemporaries who had gone so far as to give up the right to strike in favor of arbitration.

Nicknamed "Oil Can" because he had customarily carried one in his first job in a steel mill, Mr. Sadlowski was lionized by liberals and the national media as a populist who would democratize union elections and oust entrenched officers who had cozied up to management and lost touch with the rank and file.

In the mid-1960s, at 26, he became the youngest president of a steelworkers union local after a federal court overturned a rigged vote. He later led the union's largest district, covering mills from Chicago to Gary, Ind.

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Mr. Sadlowski went on to challenge established labor leaders in 1977 in a bitter campaign for the presidency of the national union, which comprised 1.4 million members. But in generating liberal political support and financial contributions from outside sources — including the consumer

advocate Ralph Nader, the folk singer Pete Seeger and former members of the Kennedy administration — his campaign provoked a backlash by some steelworkers.

Mr. Sadlowski was defeated, and the national union proceeded to bar outside financial contributions to union candidates. He challenged the decision, but it was upheld in 1982 by the United States Supreme Court.



Mr. Sadlowski successfully challenged his loss in a 1973 election to become director of the steel union's largest district, covering mills from Chicago to Gary, Ind. In a court-ordered rerun, he won by 20,000 votes. United Press International

Edward Eugene Sadlowski Jr. was born in Chicago on Sept. 10, 1938, to Mildred (Sanders) Sadlowski and Edward Sr., who worked for Inland Steel and was a founding member of a steelworkers union local.

Ed was born about a mile from the site of what was remembered as the “Memorial Day Massacre” of 1937, when 10 unarmed supporters of striking steelworkers were killed by the police. (He later became the proud owner of a check that John L. Lewis wrote to pay for the funerals.)

In 1956, after a stint in the Army, Mr. Sadlowski was hired at 18 to be an oiler at the United States Steel South Works in South Chicago. Three years later, he married Marlene McDillon, who survives him. In addition to her and his daughter Susan, he is survived by two other daughters, Patricia Hoyt and Diane Agelson; a son, Edward; 11 grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

After he was elected president of United Steelworkers Local 65 at 26, Mr. Sadlowski sought higher union office in 1973, campaigning to be director of sprawling District 31. He lost by 2,000 votes. But a dissident group he led, called Steelworkers Fightback, enlisted Joseph L. Rauh Jr., a prominent Washington lawyer, to challenge the outcome in federal court, and in a rerun in 1974 supervised by Labor Department monitors, Mr. Sadlowski won by 20,000 votes.

While he once likened the labor movement to a “holy crusade,” Mr. Sadlowski dismissed the notion that the Fightback dissidents were idealists and that the campaign showed him to be a romantic.

“A romantic!” he said to Rolling Stone magazine. “A romantic could’ve never won that election.”

The 1977 national election to succeed I.W. Abel as president was among the most vituperative internal labor disputes ever. In one instance, a Sadlowski volunteer was shot and wounded handing out leaflets in Houston.

Backers of Lloyd McBride, a union leader from St. Louis and Mr. Abel’s preferred successor, painted Mr. Sadlowski as a radical whose platform was a 1930s anachronism espoused by an erudite idealist who had told Penthouse magazine: “We’ve run the workers into the ground. Ultimately, society has nothing to show for it but waste.”

Mr. Sadlowski, whose liberal bona fides included his opposition to the Vietnam War and to the political boss Mayor Richard J. Daley of Chicago, argued that the leadership had lost touch with the workers, bargained away the right to strike and empowered the presidents of union locals, rather than the rank and file, to ratify contracts.

“You can make it sound like any kind of revolutionary rhetoric you want,” he told The New York Times in 1976, “but the fact is it’s the working class versus the coupon clipper.”

McBride won, about 328,000 to 249,000, and Mr. Sadlowski’s national celebrity rapidly evaporated. He became a union subdistrict director and retired in 1993.

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