

Alfred "Al" Samter, 1922-2003

Alfred "Al" Samter, long-time activist in the Steelworkers Union, died January 12. He would have been 81 on Jan. 27.

Born in the Bronx, Samter came to Gary, Indiana in 1949. He landed a job in the coke plant of the sprawling Gary Works of U S Steel and, soon after, became a member of Local 1014 of the United Steelworkers of America. During a 37-year career as a union activist, Samter served as griever, assistant griever, editor of the Local 1014 newspaper and was a member of the National Steelworkers Rank and File Committee. When he died he was president of the local chapter of the Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees (SOAR).

In February of 1958 Al and five others were called before the House Un-American Activities Committee that had come to Gary looking for Communists in the steel industry and Steelworkers Union. True to his beliefs and his friends and co-workers he refused to testify.

George Edwards, presently editor of *Old Timer*, the official publication of SOAR, said, "Under Samter, the SOAR chapter in Northwest Indiana was the most active in the country. Many of their resolutions to our national convention were incorporated into the SOAR program on the issues of the day." Edwards said Samter was to have been presented with the Pioneer Award at the upcoming SOAR convention/ "Now we'll have to give it posthumously."

Curtis Strong, one of the First African Americans appointed to the USWA staff described Samter as a "damn good man." Strong said Samter was "a friend in need" When Strong and other Black steelworkers were demanding a "better shake" from the then leaders of the USWA. "I loved him dearly."

Ruth Needleman, professor of Labor History at Indiana University, invited Samter to speak to her classes on several occasions. "Few people understood the theoretical and practical demands of organizing like Al did and fewer still had either his experience or understanding when it came to dealing with interracial relationship on the job and in the union." Like others, Needleman remarked on his dedication and perseverance. "Nothing stopped him," she said.

Early on, Samter, who had been a table tennis hustler in his youth ("There weren't too many opportunities for a poor kid from the Bronx," he would explain.), developed an appreciation for jazz. "I couldn't afford tickets, so I got on good terms with the doorman at clubs and, when that didn't work, I'd find another solution," he often said.

Samter's granddaughter, Shannon McGuire, remembers him as a "very human, human being who loved his two grand children and four great grand children. "When we came to his house he would play his favorite records and dance around the room entertaining us."

Like most young men of his age, Samter served in the armed forces during World War II, seeing action in the Battle of the Bulge.

Samter was a great story-teller with, as often as not, himself being the goat. "I was driving the lead Jeep in the second half of a long convoy," he would say. "We were in the middle of nowhere in the middle and ran smack dab into a terrific dust storm. When the truck ahead of me turned, I went straight ahead and the rest of the trucks followed. We didn't get straightened out until daylight when they sent a search plane out to find us. From all the hell I caught you'd think I'd lost half the army!"

A memorial is planned for a later date.

Statement in Cal Project Award Booklet – November 22, 2002

Al Samter was born and grew up in New York City. He came to the Calumet Region in 1949 to work at the coke plant of US Steel's Gary Works. Having had previous experience in Union activity in the retail industry, he quickly became active in Local 1014 of the United Steelworkers as a shop steward.

Over the period of his thirty-seven years in the coke plant, he served the local union as an assistant grievance committeeman, grievance committeeman, secretary of the human relations committee, secretary of the civil rights committee, and editor of the Local 1014 Journal.

During the same time, he was and active participant in numerous intra-union election campaigns, most notably the campaigns by Ed Sadlowski for District 31 Director and for USWA International President.

In the 1970's, he co-chaired a rank and file group committed to giving basic steel members of the union the right to ratify contracts, and opposed to the no strike agreement being proposed by the International Union at that time.

Upon his retirement I 1987, he joined the Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees (SOAR). He has served as chairperson of the Political Action Committee, editor of the chapter newsletter, Vice-president, and serves currently as President.

For the past several years, he has served on the Board of Directors of the Calumet Project. He has participated in the Project's efforts to obtain language in tax abatement ordinances that protect the wages, benefits and working condition of employees, and the Project's Labor Education in the Schools project.

Statement in the District 7 News & Agitator Vol. 2 Issue 1 Winter 2003

Al Samter started at the U.S. Steel Coke plant in 1949. Over thirty-seven years he served as griever, secretary of the civil rights committee, and editor of the local paper.

In the 1970's, he co-chaired a rank and file group committed to giving basic steel members of the union the right to ratify contracts, and oppose the ENA no-strike agreement.

After retiring he joined the Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees (SOAR) chairing the PAC Committee, editing the chapter newsletter, and was president at the time of his death in January of 2003.

Al inspired large numbers of retirees to go to many solidarity rallies and bus trips to Washington D.C.

Al also served of the Board of Directors of the Calumet Project participating in the Project's efforts to obtain language in tax abatement ordinances that protect the wages, benefits and working condition of employees, and the Labor Education in the Schools project.

He will be greatly missed.