

# Sylvester Petro Battled Compulsory Unionism

## *Writings Showed How Coercion Makes 'Clean' Unionism Impossible*

Sylvester Petro, a onetime steelworker and unpaid union organizer who went on to become one of the world's leading advocates of the individual employee's Right to Work regardless of union affiliation or nonaffiliation, died of a heart attack in Woodstock, Ga., on November 10.

Born on Chicago's South Side in 1917, he worked in Windy City steel mills after leaving high school and also as a rank-and-file recruiter for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), one of the two union conglomerates that teamed up in the fifties to become the AFL-CIO.

He largely paid his way through the University of Chicago's undergraduate and law schools with money he earned at the mills and on construction crews.

### 'Education and Reflection' Made Sylvester Petro A Right to Work Champion

His personal experiences during the labor riots of the thirties and forties, as well as "education and reflection," ultimately led Mr. Petro to conclude that, in his own words, "unions, whatever their capacity for good, had to be watched and subjected to the same rules of conduct that apply to others."

Over the years, Mr. Petro deployed his considerable skills as an attorney, public

speaker, scholar and journalist to assist the victims, both employees and small businesspeople, of government-authorized compulsory unionism.

For more than a decade after he received his law degree in 1945, he labored quietly as the editor of a legal journal, a law professor, and a consultant.

Mr. Petro's life changed in January 1957, when the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor or Management Field, chaired by pro-Right to Work Sen. John McClellan (D-Ark.), was established and went into operation.

### Compulsory Unions Are 'Happy Hunting Grounds Of . . . Lustful Despots'

As the McClellan Committee exposed in televised hearings example after example of Big Labor corruption, theft, extortion, brutality, and human exploitation, Mr. Petro sought to bring to a wider public his message that laws and other policies promoting compulsory unionism were the critical source of the abuses.

In a December 1957 address to business leaders regarding the revelations at the still-ongoing McClellan hearings, Mr. Petro ringingly affirmed that, with regard to the tarnished House of Labor, the "house cleaners will have to be the

workingmen of the country."

"The cleansing materials," he continued, "will have to be their own free choice and their right to refuse to join unions or to participate in strikes, picketing, and boycotts."

However, if the workers "are to have any chance of success in the exercise of these rights, they are going to need the protection which governments have so far denied them.

"For the sad condition of the House of Labor is the consequence, basically, of the fact that governments in this country have been failing to protect the basic rights of free men in the labor field."

Mr. Petro made the same point even more colorfully in his 1959 book analyzing the McClellan Record, *Power Unlimited*.

When trade unions become "voluntary associations," he wrote, they will "no longer be the happy hunting ground of the lustful despots which they now are."

### Mr. Petro Took Battle Against Public-Sector Forced Dues to U.S. Supreme Court

Mr. Petro was an especially fierce foe of government union monopolies, and in 1974 he penned a landmark law review article contending that such monopolies are not only harmful to the public interest, but also unconstitutional.

In 1976, with the assistance of National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation attorneys, he took his battle against public-sector forced union dues to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Unfortunately, the High Court opted to let stand state laws that force teachers and other public employees to pay union dues or fees, or be fired, although the justices did see a constitutional need for limitations on forced fee collections.

"The struggle against what Syl Petro caustically referred to as 'antisocial labor policy' continues to this day," said National Right to Work Committee Executive Committee Chairman Reed Larson, who knew Mr. Petro personally.

"Sadly, he did not live to see the abolition of compulsory unionism. However, the eloquent speeches, brilliant reporting, and masterly scholarship he left behind will continue to serve as invaluable resources for the generation of Right to Work proponents who will carry this fight through to the finish." 



More than 40 years ago, labor-relations scholar Sylvester Petro summed up the problem: "It is . . .

absurd to expect good clean unionism in conditions of extensive compulsory unionism . . ."