

SIT-DOWN FOR DIGNITY

(Worker Determination and Community Mobilization during the Great Sit-Down Strike in Flint, Michigan (December 30, 1936 - February 11, 1937))

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PREFACE

During the 1930's the working class in this country was confronted with many struggles. I believe that most of these struggles were caused by corporate greed and oppression. Poor working conditions and assembly line speed-ups coupled with a rising class consciousness drove the industrial workers past their tolerance levels. Consequently, a rash of sit-down strikes swept the country during 1936-1938, industrial union membership soared, and corporations were forced to recognize employee rights.

I believe that the success of the great forty-four day sit-down strike in Flint, Michigan, which occurred from December 30, 1936 through February 11, 1937, was the key event that triggered the upsurge of the sit-down strikes and worker militancy throughout the country.

An unprecedented combination of worker determination, union organizing strategy, and community support united together in Flint, Michigan and forced the largest corporation in the world, General Motors, to recognize a labor union as the representative of their workers. As a result, wages, benefits, and working conditions improved for tens of thousands of workers throughout this country.

It is my opinion that the most important aspects of the Flint sit-down strike were the determination and organizing strategies used by the workers and the union, and dedicated community support especially from women. So I have put an emphasis on these aspects throughout this paper.

PART 1

THE CLIMATE WAS RIGHT TO STRIKE

The great sit-down strike in Flint, Michigan, was a direct consequence of the struggles of the working class during the 1930's. During the 1930's the American Federation of Labor (AFL) failed to give support for industrial workers, which led to declines in industrial union memberships. With the passing of the Wagner Act and the emergence of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) in 1935, industrial workers seemed to be gaining momentum, but corporate oppression and poor working conditions continued to prevail in industrial plants. It was the rising class consciousness that encouraged the workers to unite and fight for their rights, which inspired the incredible rash of sit-down strikes in the 1930's.

From its founding in 1886, the AFL was notorious for its support of skilled craftsmen and its opposition towards the organization of industrial workers. The influential leadership of the AFL even in the 1930's, including its president, William Green, considered the prospect of organized mass production workers as a threat to its prized skilled craftsmen. But by the 1930's large corporations, large plants, and complex machinery and technology had caused a division of labor and a dilution of worker skills. This made the AFL's ongoing system of protecting the autonomy of highly skilled craftsmen irrelevant to the very nature of modern industry. The AFL's narrow interests and structure could not meet the needs and demands of industrial workers in the 1930's. As a result, thousands of industrial workers quit the AFL in early 1936, and burned their union cards in protest¹.

Due to the working class struggles of the 1930's the federal government recognized a need for legislation that would assist the workers of this nation. The National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act) was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on July 5, 1935, and was regarded as the most radical labor legislation in the history of the United States. The federal government realized that the working-class needed federally protected rights to assist in their struggles, and to assure economic growth and stability to strengthen the nation. The Wagner Act provided much needed rights to workers including the right to freely elect a representative union, the right to protest unfair labor practices, the right to collective bargaining, and the right to free speech in support of a labor union². Unfortunately for the working class, the enforcement of the Wagner Act was stalled in the courts for over two years, and during this period little was done by the government for the workers' rights.

At the same time the government recognized the legality of unions with the passing of the Wagner Act, company unions, spies, anti-union groups, and detective agencies were discouraging legitimate union organizing drives. Company unions were designed to assume the identity of a legitimate union, but these company unions only protected corporate interests, while disregarding the rank and file interests and struggles. For instance, General Motors Corporation employed hundreds of spies inside their plants that infiltrated union organizing drives and also engaged in union-busting activities. Anti-union groups were determined to prevent workers from succeeding in organizing legitimate unions. One of the most sinister, evil, and murderous anti-union groups was the Black Legion (a Ku Klux Klan type of organization). This group consisted of white, Protestant, native-born people who actually wore black robes during raids of terror and group meetings. The Black Legion managed to convince great numbers of working men and women that the causes of their problems were Jews, Negroes, Catholics, and, of course, the Communists³. During a Senate investigation on corporate violations of civil rights the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee⁴ disclosed that General Motors had spent \$839,000 in 1934 alone for detective work, and more than half of this money went to the notorious union busting Pinkerton Agency⁵.

The workers in industrial plants during the 1930's faced even bigger problems than the company unions and spies; these other problems were the poor working conditions, the poor wages, and the assembly line speed-ups. Most of the industrial plants had very little ventilation, and often a thick fog of smoke or grinding dust would hover in the buildings. The toilets were usually kept in filthy condition and at a very low temperature to discourage workers from using them and overstaying their relief time. Often a worker who needed to use the bathroom had to wait for a relief man, and relief men were scarce and hard to locate, which made the situation even more uncomfortable. Accidents and injuries were frequent, while improper medical attention caused numerous infections and other complications⁶.

Annual automobile model changes caused severe unemployment periods for the auto workers. Sometimes experienced workers were rehired after a model change at the same starting hourly rate as new and unexperienced workers. Despite a relatively high hourly wage most auto workers complained of a low annual income. In 1935 the government released figures indicating that the minimum income for a family of four should be \$1600, but the average auto worker only earned \$900 in that year. In some cases group and piece rates were cut by over forty percent. The foremen refused to show the workers their time sheets, because they were changing figures to balance the productivity between the departments. In the Flint Fisher #1 plant, early in 1936, this practice caused

seven work stoppages in one week.

Although wages were a big problem for the auto workers their main complaint usually focused on the assembly line speed-ups. The speed-ups in the auto industry were so furious that they physically exhausted the young and eliminated most workers over the age of forty. During a heat wave in July 1936, the temperatures soared to over one hundred degrees for over a week, but the speed of the assembly lines remained at a frantic pace. As a result, scores of workers died in the plants throughout Michigan, while hundreds more were hospitalized⁷. These speed-ups became intolerable and unacceptable to the workers, and as a result, they became the common ground for worker dissatisfaction and unity which led to the sit-down strikes during the 1930's.

The sit-down strike became labor's most effective weapon to demonstrate working-class unrest in the 1930's. The sit-down strike brought production to an immediate halt, while offering management no choice over whether to continue or close operations. The use of police or government troops to evict the strikers was limited, and in many cases was not even attempted. The owners of the plants did not want violence to break out and possibly damage their precious equipment or property. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 48 sit-downs involving 87,817 workers in 1936, 477 sit-downs involving 398,117 workers in 1937, and 52 sit-downs involving 28,749 workers in 1938⁸. Sidney Lens states in his book The Labor Wars that "the CIO leadership did not have to initiate these drives [sit-down strikes] because most of them got under way independently, usually under the aegis of virtually infinite varieties of left-wingers."⁹

A new federation of industrial unions was formed that gave hope to the industrial working-class, which was in dire need of a protective federation for industrial workers. When John L. Lewis, vice-president of the AFL, recognized that the Executive Council of the AFL would not support industrial workers or industrial union organization he decided to resign from his position and form the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO)¹⁰. Formed on November 9, 1935, it was dedicated to helping the industrial working-class fight their problems.

PART 2

THE UAW ARRIVES TO ORGANIZE FLINT

In May 1936 the auto workers had gained some hope for a legitimate union when the United Automobile Workers of America (UAW) was formed within the AFL. But due to the industrial nature of automobile mass production, the auto workers and the UAW soon became affiliated with the CIO. Wyndham Mortimer, a dedicated industrial unionist and a confirmed Communist was elected first vice-president of the UAW. In June 1936 Mortimer began one of the most incredible union organizing drives in United States labor movement history.

Mortimer went to Flint because this was where the heart of General Motors Corporation was located. He knew GM was "the citadel of power and the maker of policy for the auto industry."¹¹ So the GM workers in Flint had to be convinced to join the UAW in order to effectively organize the auto industry. Mortimer discovered that GM only had two sets of 1937 auto body dies, one in the Fisher #1 plant in Flint, Michigan, and the other in the Fisher Body plant in Cleveland, Ohio. These two plants were targeted for a strike that would possibly force GM to recognize the union and improve the working conditions and the wages of the workers.

Mortimer knew that the strike should be called around New Year's Day 1937, and he cited three logical reasons. The first reason was that GM was planning to pay each employee \$50 on December 18, 1936, and an early strike might deprive the workers of this bonus. The second reason was that a strike before the Christmas and New Year's holidays might have a negative impact on the workers, because it could ruin their holidays. And the third reason was that the new governor of Michigan, Frank Murphy, was thought to be more sympathetic to the struggles of labor, and he was going to take office on January 1, 1937.¹²

Before any strike could be carried out the workers had to be organized. When Mortimer came to Flint in June 1936 there were only 122 UAW members scattered throughout five different local unions. Their leadership was known to be spy-infested. And many of their members were considered to be GM stool pigeons.

Mortimer convinced the CIO to combine the unions into a single union called GM Local No. 156. With a new Local No. 156 union in place and affiliated with the CIO, Mortimer started his underground organizing campaign. He started by firing the secretary in the UAW Flint office, changing the lock on the safe, and sending the union dues directly to the UAW headquarters in Detroit, Michigan.

He took personal charge of the membership records and ignored the previous union leaders and officers. He gained respect and trust from the workers by meeting with them and their wives at night in their homes. Mortimer secretly met with groups of workers in basements by candlelight to avoid spies. He also managed to organize a secret union group within the Fisher #1 plant. This group consisted of Bud Simmons, Joe Devitt, and Walter Moore. Simmons and Devitt were politically left-wing and Moore was a Communist¹³. As a result of Mortimer's secret campaign, large numbers of union membership cards were signed, and it became obvious that Mortimer was succeeding in his Flint organizing campaign.

With the growing successes of his organizing campaign, Mortimer had to send for some experienced help from outside of Flint. He called in Bob Travis, an experienced organizer from Toledo, Ohio, Henry Kraus, a UAW writer and editor, and Roy Reuther, a devoted unionist and member of the Socialist Party. Together these men worked to solidify the UAW campaign in Flint¹⁴.

UAW president Homer Martin recognized the successes of Mortimer's organizing campaign and became fearful of Mortimer's growing popularity and power. A younger and less experienced union man, Martin, believed that Mortimer would challenge him for the UAW presidency. Martin demanded that Mortimer leave Flint, he hoped that Mortimer's momentum would cease. Other conservative elements within the UAW were upset with Mortimer's so-called "Red Empire" of brilliant strategists including a sizeable number of Trotskyists, Communists, and Socialists¹⁵. Accordingly, Mortimer left Flint in October 1936, leaving behind a growing union following, and was able to have his reliable assistant Bob Travis named as his replacement.

With the UAW growing strong in Flint and with worker militancy also on the upswing, an unplanned event happened in Cleveland, Ohio. The workers at the Fisher Body plant in Cleveland went on a sit-down strike on December 26, 1936. Louis Spisak, president of the Fisher Body local union in Cleveland, called Wyndham Mortimer for help and advice. Mortimer went to Cleveland, and along with other strike leaders issued a press statement saying that the strike should only be settled as a part of a national agreement with GM, and also stated that no talks would go on with local management or city officials. Mortimer then called Bob Travis in Flint and told him to close down the Fisher #1 plant as soon as possible¹⁶.

With the Cleveland Body plant now on strike General Motors secretly began an effort to remove critical auto body dies from the Fisher #1 plant in Flint. Bob Travis was notified by a worker on the night shift, and Travis told him to get some help and stop the dies from leaving the plant. During the night shift lunch break a 200 watt light bulb flickered from the union hall, and scores of workers

came over to the hall to find out what was happening. In a short meeting Travis told the workers that if the dies were taken out of the plant, many of them would probably lose their jobs. The workers decided to go back into the Fisher #1 plant and stage a sit-down strike to protect their jobs. Although it was December 30, 1936, very close to New Year's Day, the workers thought more of their livelihoods than of the holiday festivities, and soon shouted from the plant windows, "She is ours, Bob¹⁷." The workers had captured the Fisher #1 plant, and the historic forty-four day Flint sit-down strike was under way.

PART 3

THE STRIKERS DIG IN

The effects of the Fisher #1 sit-down strike spread like wildfire to the other auto workers in Flint, Michigan, and throughout the General Motors Empire. One of the most amazing aspects of the Flint sit-down strike was the rapid and effective worker organization.

On December 31, 1936, a sit-down strike in the Fisher Body #2 plant caused GM to close its Buick and Chevrolet units in Flint. The immediate effects of these strikes were enormous, because in auto production the processes are so closely related that a small group of workers can halt an entire factory or dependent factories by stopping the production in a few key departments of only one plant¹⁸. GM suddenly had four of its five units closed, and more than 25,200 employees were put out of work. GM notified suppliers of parts all over the country to stop or curtail orders immediately. John L. Lewis, president of the CIO, immediately gave the strikers the support of the CIO by stating, "The CIO is fully behind the Fight¹⁹."

Soon after the strike got under way in the Fisher #1 plant, the men called an emergency meeting and quickly decided to democratically elect a five-man strike strategy committee to govern the 1,200 workers inside the plant²⁰. Walter Moore, a Communist, was elected mayor of the strikers, and the remaining strike leaders were also politically left-wing. In order to make efficient use of the space inside of the plant, the men were put into family groups of fifteen each. Every worker had tasks to perform for six hours every day. They were on duty for three hours, and then were off duty for the next nine hours during each day. Sub-committees were then organized consisting of, "food, police, information, sanitation and health, safety, entertainment, education, and athletics²¹."

The food committee was in charge of setting up an eating schedule for the 1,200 men. Three hot meals were brought into the plant each day for every worker. The plant cafeteria was organized to accommodate this great amount of food and men.

The police committee was responsible for guarding the plants' entrances. A Special Patrol was formed that made complete 35 minute rounds of the plant each hour for the duration of the strike. A reporter for The New Republic, Bruce Bliven, wrote that when he went to Flint to interview the sit-down strikers he encountered an impressive security system. He was searched before entering the plant and he had to climb up a pile of packing boxes and crawl through a window just to get into the plant. The doors had been barricaded at the

beginning of the strike. When he got inside of the plant he was searched by another group of the police committee²².

The information committee responded to all questions from the outside and the press. All responses were written in advance and approved by the strike committee. This committee was also responsible for controlling all rumors. The corporation tried to spread rumors to discourage the strikers, but the information committee conducted two meetings everyday with the strikers to keep them informed of the truth.

The sanitation and health committee was in charge of the 3 p.m. general plant cleanup. During the cleanup the windows were washed and the entire assembly line area was cleaned. Every worker was required to take a shower every day. This committee performed inspections of the plant every day to ensure the building was kept clean. During the strike the toilets and showers were kept cleaner than anyone could ever remember.

The safety committee posted rules and regulations on plant bulletin boards. Smoking was restricted to certain areas, and all liquor was totally banned from the plant.

It was necessary to keep the strikers entertained, because boredom needed to be eliminated and morale needed to be kept high, so an entertainment committee was formed. Concerts were broadcasted every night over the plant's loud speaker system from a 12 piece orchestra consisting of a group of strikers. Each family group had a radio or a phonograph in their area. Charlie Chaplin even donated his 1936 movie Modern Times to be shown to the men²³.

The education committee conducted daily labor classes on the history of the labor movement, and on topics including union constitutions. Writing classes were taught by local university graduate students that were sympathetic toward the strikers. An athletic committee was in charge of a daily calisthenics program. Boxing, wrestling, ping-pong, and basketball were also provided. But no gambling with real money was allowed.

Protection of the property and the equipment belonging to GM was made a top priority from the beginning of the strike. The organizers of the union and the workers were aware of the importance of protecting GM's property. They knew that Governor Murphy of Michigan, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt could not have resisted corporate and media pressure to use force to evict the strikers if they were to damage any property²⁴.

During the strike class consciousness and the rank-and-file democracy were evident, which enabled the strikers to maintain morale and support and set up a successful strategy that baffled GM and other corporate executives²⁵. And to complicate matters even more for GM was the organized community support strategy that rapidly came together outside of the plants.

PART 4

GENERAL MOTORS ATTEMPTS TO OUST THE STRIKERS

General Motors Corporation wasted no time in attempting to break the Flint sit-down strike. On December 31, 1936, GM vice-president William S. Knudsen, set the tone for the corporation when he announced that the sit-down strikers were, "trespassers .and violators of the law of the land²⁶."

GM lawyers secured a court injunction that was issued on January 2, 1937, by Judge Edward D. Black. This injunction ordered the strikers out of the plants, and also ordered them to refrain from picketing once they were outside the plants. In an attempt to enforce the injunction, Genesee County Sheriff Tom Wolcott, deputized one hundred men, and together with sixty company police they went to the plants to evict the strikers. They failed to evict a single striker, and Sheriff Wolcott received no cooperation from any union leaders. Research by Lee Pressman, the CIO's national counsel, revealed that Judge Black owned 3,365 shares of GM stock worth \$219,900.²⁷ Section 13888 of Michigan's law reads, "No judge in any court shall sit as such in any case or proceeding in which he is a party or in which he is interested²⁸." The UAW turned this incident into a public embarrassment for GM, and this court injunction was deemed legally invalid.

Flint's city manager, John Barringer, organized the Flint Alliance, an organization which attempted to discredit the strikers and launch a back-to-work drive against the strikers. Barringer said the Flint Alliance was designed, "for the security of our jobs, our homes, and our community²⁹". The Flint Alliance adopted the strategy of the "Mohawk Valley Formula³⁰", a strategy to promote propaganda in an effort to defeat organized strikes.

A huge publicity program was then launched by the Flint Alliance, which attempted to convince the public that the Flint sit-down strike was the work of a Communistic and alien minority, and that the strike was destined to fail. The mayor of Flint, George Boysen, a former GM pay master, headed the Flint Alliance, Boysen signed up anyone who he could find including workers, foremen, businessmen, shopkeepers, housewives, and even school children³¹. GM foremen in non-struck plants were instructed to intimidate workers to sign up with the Flint Alliance, which was an effort to show the public that most of the GM workers were against the Flint sit-down strike. Despite the efforts and the propaganda used by the Flint Alliance, public support continued to increase, and the strikers remained inside the plants.

Now that the court injunction was stymied, and the Flint Alliance was proving to be ineffective, GM turned to a strategy of instigating violence in an attempt to

oust the strikers. Their plan targeted the Fisher Body #2 plant, which seemed to be much more vulnerable and conquerable than the Fisher #1 plant, because only one hundred strikers were inside. GM'S strategy was to turn off the heat in the plant, when the temperature was only sixteen degrees outside, and to prevent food from entering the plant for the strikers. GM believed that this strategy would instigate a physical confrontation between the strikers and the police. GM planned to prove to Governor Murphy that the strikers were violent. The ultimate goal of GM's plan was to convince Governor Murphy to evict the strikers from the plants and put an end to the strike³².

On January 11, 1937, as previously planned, company guards turned off the heat in the Fisher Body #2 plant, and then they stopped food from getting into the plant for the strikers. Hundreds of strikers and their supporters rushed to the Fisher Body #2 plant to assist the strikers that were inside, and to strengthen the picket line. The picketers surrounded the company guards, took their keys, and then guarded the plant's main gate. The company guards ran into the plant and called the Flint police to report that they had been kidnapped by the strikers. The Flint police rushed to the plant armed with guns, grenades, tear gas, and nauseating gas³³.

"The Battle of Bulls Run" got under way when the police began to hurl tear gas into the plant and at the picketers. The strikers inside the plant dragged a fire hose to the main door and another to an upstairs window, and began to spray water on the policemen. Other strikers began to throw two pound automobile door hinges at the policemen. This police attack' ended in a few minutes, because the policemen's uniforms began to freeze in the cold weather³⁴.

The strikers and their supporters prepared themselves for another police attack. They gathered empty bottles, nuts, bolts, and an assortment of other materials to throw at the police. About fifty policemen soon arrived at the plant to continue the battle. Victor Reuther shouted from a sound truck, "We want peace, General Motors chose war - give it to them³⁵." The strikers began to throw their assorted missiles at the policemen, and the water hoses sprayed them again. The policemen could not gain access to the plant and they retreated out of the reach of the water hoses and the missiles. Frustrated by their defeat, the police began to shoot at the strikers and picketers. During this second police attack fourteen union men were wounded by bullets³⁶.

Genora Johnson, a woman whose husband was inside the plant, grabbed the microphone inside the sound truck and shouted at the police, "Cowards! Cowards! Shooting unarmed and defenseless men³⁷." She then yelled, "Women of Flint! This is your fight! Join the picket line and defend your jobs, your husband's jobs, and your children's home!³⁸" About thirty women broke through the police barricades and joined the picket line. The women stood in front of the

men and shouted to the police to shoot them before the men³⁹.

Five hours after the battle started the police made another attempt to rush the plant. The strikers ran them off again with water hoses and missiles. Women played a key role in this attempt, because they remained on the picket line and the police were afraid to shoot the strikers with the women in their line of fire. As a result of the strikers' determination and the women's support, "The Battle of Bulls Run" was over, and the Bulls had run.⁴⁰ But during the battle a total of thirty-six policemen were sent to the hospital for treatment of various injuries sustained during their defeat.

A victory celebration took place the next day, January 12, 1937, as eight thousand workers gathered in front of the Fisher Body #2 plant. Thousands of auto workers were now signing up with the UAW every day. Community support and union strength was growing.

Governor Murphy arrived in Flint on January 12, 1937, and decided to bring 1,500 National Guard troops to Flint as a precautionary measure. But to GM's dismay, Murphy refused to use the troops to oust the strikers.

PART 5

THE ROAD TO VICTORY

As the strike continued the sit-downers became more determined to win their dignity. Community support continued to grow, and from an unlikely source, the Women's Emergency Brigade. As GM attempted to use the courts to end the strike, the UAW planned a strategy to extend the sit-down strike to the largest GM plant. Finally, after forty four days, the strike ended through a negotiated agreement. Victory belonged to the Flint sit-downers.

When the Flint sit-down strike began all of the women workers were sent home. The women formed the Women's Auxiliary, which was designed to help their men and neighbors through the strike. The women were expected to only do the cooking for the strikers. But the Women's Auxiliary soon joined the picket lines, and became a major factor towards the success of the striking workers⁴¹.

During the "Battle of Bulls Run" the women realized how effective they were in preventing the police from ousting the strikers from the Fisher Body #2 plant. As a result of the women's success, Genora Johnson, began organizing a detachment from the Women's Auxiliary for use in emergencies called the Women's Emergency Brigade. The Brigade organized into military style squad groups with a squad leader. The squad leaders had cars and they quickly rounded up their squads when there were any emergencies in Flint that involved the strike. The women wore bright red berets and red and white arm bands with the letters "EB" as their trade mark.⁴² The Women's Emergency Brigade soon numbered more than 400, and were seen marching through Flint with banners and American flags.

As the women were organizing the Women's Emergency Brigade, GM was in court on January 25, 1937, asking Judge Paul V. Gadola to issue a court injunction that would immediately force the evacuation of the sit-down strikers from all of the plants. A hearing date was set for February 1, 1937. Bob Travis knew that Judge Gadola would surely issue the injunction on February 1, 1937, and the strike could be lost on this action. The UAW's counter-action would be to show their strength by staging another strike, and their target was the largest GM plant, the Chevy 4 plant.⁴³

The Chevy 4 plant was the largest plant in the GM Empire. All of the one million Chevy engines were manufactured in this single plant each year. It appeared nearly impossible to capture for a sit-down strike, because it was heavily guarded with a large force of company guards and an armory of tear gas and clubs. The plant's superintendent, Arnold Lenz, was the most anti-union of

all of the GM managers. He was consistently firing men on the spot for union activity. And during the Flint strike he continued to fire men for any association with the union.

Bob Travis knew that capturing the Chevy 4 plant would be a very difficult task. Travis developed a decoy strategy that was designed to trick Lenz into believing that the UAW was going to strike at another plant, the Chevy 9 plant. Travis picked thirty union men, and met with them on January 31, 1937, at the Fisher #1 plant to discuss the strategy. He knew that a few of these men were suspected GM stool pigeons. Travis told the men that the UAW was planning a sit-down strike at the Chevy 9 plant, which was really a decoy. Just as Travis had planned, the word got to Lenz and he moved virtually the entire company guard force to the Chevy 9 plant in preparation to stop the strike. The Chevy 4 plant was left virtually unprotected, and Travis' plan was beginning to come together.⁴⁴

On February 1, 1937, a large group of union supporters, including the Women's Emergency Brigade, gathered outside of the Chevy 9 plant. Union workers inside of the plant shouted "Strike!" during the shift change, and mayhem broke loose in the plant. Suddenly, company guards attacked the men with clubs and tear gas. The men inside the plant were overwhelmed by Lenz' force, but help was on the outside. The Women's Emergency Brigade began breaking the windows of the Chevy 9 plant. They explained their action, "We had to break the windows, I tell you, to get air to the boys who were being gassed inside. We don't want violence. We just want to protect our husbands and we are going to."⁴⁵

As the battle at Chevy 9 continued, union workers from another plant, the Chevy 6 plant, joined forces with the workers from the Chevy 4 plant and began shutting down the equipment in the unprotected plant. Travis' decoy had worked, and the union men were in control of the largest GM plant. After the Women's Emergency Brigade washed the tear gas out of their eyes, they marched to the Chevy 4 plant and blocked the entrance.

Meanwhile, on the same day, Judge Gadola issued an injunction, which simply stated that the strikers had twenty-four hours to vacate the plants or face ejection. Governor Murphy ordered the National Guard troops to surround the Chevy 9, Fisher #1, and Fisher Body #2 plants. The Women's Emergency Brigade was ordered to leave the picket line at the Chevy 4 plant. There were now 4,000 National Guard troops in Flint armed with machine guns and tear gas. As the tension mounted plans were being made to negotiate a peaceful settlement.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, convinced GM president Alfred P. Sloan, and his staff to continue negotiating

talks with John L. Lewis, and the UAW in Detroit, Michigan. Governor Murphy acted as the mediator between the parties. Finally, on February 11, 1937, an agreement was made between the General Motors Corporation and the United Automobile Workers of America⁴⁶. After forty-four days the Flint sit-down strike was over. The determination of the workers combined with brilliant union strategies, and a dedicated network of community support prevailed. The largest corporation in the world, General Motors, had done something that they said they would never do - they recognized a union as the sole bargaining agent of their members.

PART 6

THE SETTLEMENT AND THE CONTRACT

Governor Murphy said, "reason has prevailed. . .and the union has agreed to end the strike."⁴⁷ GM president, Alfred P. Sloan, that a \$25,000,000 wage increase would be given to the GM workers⁴⁸. On February 11, 1937, "about 400 men left Fisher #1, 125 quit Fisher Body #2, and 200 to 300 walked out of Chevrolet 4 engine plant...heads high singing 'Solidarity' and greeting families and friends."⁴⁹ Thousands of people were in the streets of Flint to greet the victorious workers. As the men marched down the streets in Flint, the feel of victory was in the air.

The strike settlement and the terms of the agreement were announced on February 12, 1937. The following is a summary of the agreement as it appeared in the New York Times⁵⁰.

General Motors Agrees:

- To recognize the United Automobile Workers as bargaining agent for its members.
- Not to bargain on matters of general corporate policy with any other group from twenty struck plants without Governor Murphy's sanction.
- Not to discriminate against members of the union or the union in favor of any other group.
- To drop court proceedings in the sit-down strike.
- To return all employees to their usual work without prejudice.
- To resume full operation as soon as possible.

The Union Agrees:

- To call off the strike and evacuate occupied plants forthwith.
- To refrain from intimidation and coercion of employees, on or off the premises, in efforts to gain members.
- To refrain from recruiting on company property.
- To exhaust every possibility of negotiating grievances before calling any other strike.
- To refrain from calling strikes or interfering with production pending negotiations.

The Corporation And The Union Agree:

- To begin collective bargaining negotiations Tuesday [February 16, 1937] on wages, hours, production speed-up and other working conditions.

The immediate results of the settlement included the return to full time work of 225,000 employees, the resumption of manufacturing of 225,000 cars per month, and raising the average wage rate five cents an hour.

GM reported that the average employee earned 78.64 per hour in 1936.⁵¹ A five cents an hour raise is approximately a 6.4% pay increase, which was a sizeable amount in 1936.

In addition to the pay increase, the union workers won the right to wear union buttons in the plants, which made the company spies and other forms of espionage within the plants unnecessary. The union also had the guarantee of GM, to Governor Murphy, that for six months the corporation would not negotiate with any other group without consulting with the governor first. This six-month clause was very important, because the union now had the time to organize the remaining GM employees without outside interference⁵².

Collective bargaining negotiations between GM and the international union began on February 16, 1937, which marked a milestone in United States labor movement history. For the first time in history a legitimate contract between a large auto corporation and a union was under way. "Representing the corporation were William F. Knudsen, President; Charles E. Wilson, Vice-President; Mr. Dubruel, Research Department; and Harry Anderson, Personnel Department. Mr. Knudsen...participated at times. Representing the UAW-CIO were John Brophy, CIO; Ed Hall, UAW Vice-President; and Wyndham Mortimer, UAW Vice-President."⁵³

Everything during the collective bargaining negotiations had to be fought for by the union. All of the union's demands were resented by GM, because they regarded any demand as a challenge to their authority, and to their property rights.

A final contract was reached on March 12, 1937. This contract included three clauses relating to seniority, because seniority was a major issue to the workers and the union. The auto manufacturers had adopted a seniority system based on merit, skill, and dependability. This system did not take into consideration the length of service that an employee gave to the corporation. The union demanded, and won, a fair seniority system based on length of service. The results were in the following clauses; lay-offs and rehires by seniority, seniority retained in transfers, and posting of seniority lists.

The contract also had clauses that gave the workers and the union recognition of shop committees and stewards, and a grievance procedure. Legitimate representatives of the union were now recognized within the work force. Shop committees could discuss problems and changes with management without the fear of getting fired. The grievance procedure gave employees the right to discuss a problem with their shop steward, who would then discuss the matter with the employee's foreman in an effort to resolve the dispute.

A six-month probationary period and a wage adjustment were also included in the contract.

PART 7

GOVERNOR MURPHY'S ROLE

As Governor Frank Murphy took office on January 1, 1937, he immediately inherited an enormous problem. The problem, of course, was the great Flint sit-down strike. Murphy found himself right in the middle of the heated labor dispute. In addition, he was also being pressured by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, to reach a quick settlement.

Just two months before Murphy took office as the governor of Michigan, he was elected with the support of the workers' vote. And the strikers and their supporters constantly reminded him of their support during his campaign. Murphy declared that raising the troops to 3,000 in early February 1937, was an action to protect against the vigilante Flint Alliance, as well as the threat of violence and destruction by the strikers⁵⁴. By taking this action he put himself deeper in the middle of the dispute, because the corporation backed the Flint Alliance, and the strikers resented the troops being placed in Flint.

As to why Murphy did not order the troops to retake the plants, I believe that he did not want to be responsible for any bloodshed. He realized that the strikers were determined to hold their positions inside the plants. If Murphy had ordered the troops to oust the strikers, there would have been many casualties and much destruction of corporation property. As a result, Governor Murphy would have been blamed by both parties for taking aggressive action, and this would have jeopardized his chances of winning another political election.

Above all else, I personally believe that Governor Murphy was trying to make a national name for himself. Wyndham Mortimer said, "to settle this strike without violence or bloodshed, a strike that has captured the imagination of the whole world, would be an outstanding accomplishment [for Murphy]."⁵⁵

Murphy's name was also mentioned for the Democratic nomination for president of the United States. With a rising class consciousness, and a rising working-class militancy throughout the country during the 1930s, Murphy realized that using force against the workers would not have been in his best interests. To evict brave men that were fighting for dignity would have seriously tarnished Murphy's image, and probably ruined his chances of any future political career.

PART 8

THE IMPACT OF THE FLINT SIT-DOWN STRIKE

The success of the Flint sit-down strike immediately encouraged workers throughout the United States to use the sit-down tactic against their employers. On February 24, 1937, only two weeks after the Flint settlement, United Press estimated that a minimum of 30,000 workers were staging sit-down strikes throughout the United States⁵⁶.

Large corporations including Goodyear, Goodrich, General Electric, and United States Steel announced wage increases in an attempt to avoid a Flint-style sit-down strike. Chrysler also offered wage increases, and agreed to negotiate a contract with the UAW for its 75,000 employees.

As the successes of the sit-down strikes spread throughout the country the media, elected officials, and corporate executives took an offensive position against them.

Time stated, "As a disturber of United States peace the sit-down strike had just begun to fight."⁵⁷ And, a writer for the New Republic expressed his observations, ". . . newspapers are vying with one another in applying bad names to the strikers, and we are told over and over that the sit-down strike is illegal, autocratic, and brutal...and that if it goes on; it will certainly bring about fascism in this country."⁵⁸

New Jersey's Governor Harold G. Hoffman said, "A labor union has no more right to take possession of a factory than a band of gangsters has to take possession of a bank. . . .to the citizens of New Jersey, I promise, and to the lawless organizations...the entire resources of the State will be called into action to preserve the rights, liberties, and property of its citizens."⁵⁹

With the UAW's announcement that they were planning to organize the Ford Motor Company "the nation's No. 1 anti-unionist Henry Ford spoke out: "A man loses his independence when he joins a labor group of any kind, and he suffers as a result. Competition in industry will guarantee workers a fair wage, but labor unions destroy this competition. It is organizations of this type that lead to war"⁶⁰.

There is no doubt in my mind that the Flint sit-down strike played a key role in the unionization of the industrial workers throughout the United States. Flint was the building block for the CIO and the UAW. By the end of February 1937, the UAW membership reached 200,000, and it was steadily increasing each day⁶¹.

The sit-down strike was the most effective weapon that the working-class ever utilized in their efforts to fight for their rights and dignity. But in 1939, with the case of NLRB vs. Fansteel Metallurgical Corporation, the Supreme Court of the

United States outlawed sit-down strikes. Chief Justice Hughes wrote the opinion for the court, "The employees had the right to strike, but had no license to commit acts of violence or to seize their employer's plant..."⁶²

With this decision by the Supreme Court an end came to the successful sit-down strike wave of 1936-1938, but the achievements of the sit-downs live on.

NOTES

¹ Sit-Down: The Great Flint Sit-Down Strike Against General Motors 1936-1937, Pamphlet No. 6, (Brooklyn: Progressive Labor Party, 1967), pp. 5-7.

² James R. Green, The World Of The Worker: Labor In Twentieth Century America, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), pp. 150-152.

³ Wyndham Mortimer, Organize! My Life As A Union Man, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), pp. 111-113. Mortimer believed that the Black Legion was responsible for the deaths of a number of union organizers prior to 1936. He explained that bullets had been found on the chest of several murdered union organizers, and applications for union membership were thrown near their bodies. Mortimer also linked the Black Legion to Henry Ford and the Ford Motor Company, who he said were infamously anti-union, and were overtly anti-Semitic. (Semites are members of a group of races including Jews, Hebrews, and Arabs.)

⁴ Jerold S. Auerbach, American Labor: The Twentieth Century, (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc. 1969), pp. 253, 272-273. The La Follette Civil Liberties Committee was a subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Education and Labor. The La Follette Committee conducted a lengthy investigation, from 1936 to 1940, relating to corporate interference with labor's right to organize and bargain collectively. This investigation was helpful to the working class' struggles, and in fact aided the workers during the strikes of the 1930's, because the committee publicized corporate misdeeds. The following are excerpts taken from the reports issued by the La Follette Committee concerning corporate usage of private agencies to prevent strikes, and to engage in anti-union activities. "The use of private deputies in an anti-union campaign is inimical to the maintenance of orderly representative government. It leads to (a) private usurpation of public authority; (b) corruption of public officials; (c) oppression of large groups of citizens under the authority of the State; and (d) perversion of representative government."

⁵ Progressive Labor Party Pamphlet, p. 8.

⁶ Henry Kraus, The Many And The Few: A Chronicle Of The Dynamic Auto Workers, (Urbana and Chicago: University Of Illinois Press, 1947), p. 57.

⁷ Sidney Lens, The Labor Wars: From The Molly Maguires To The Sitdowns, (New York: Double & Company, Inc., Garden City, 1973), p. 294.

⁸ Irving Bernstein, Turbulent Years: A History Of The American Worker 1933-1941, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1969), p. 500.

⁹ Lens, p. 288.

¹⁰ Mortimer, pp. 94-98.

¹¹ Berstein, pp. 519-521.

¹² Ibid., p. 520.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 522-524.

¹⁴ Lens, pp. 299-300.

¹⁵ Progressive Labor Party Pamphlet, pp. 9-10. The president of the UAW, Homer Martin, was worried about getting into a power struggle with the UAW's first vice-president, Wyndham Mortimer, who was an older and more experienced union man. Martin believed that Mortimer would be humiliated in Flint, Michigan, due to the incredible odds against a union organizing drive succeeding in a company town. But with the help of left-wingers, Mortimer was able to create a successful union organizing campaign. The leftist movement was on the rise in the United States during the 1930's. For example, the Communist Party had grown from 7,500 members in 1930 to 41,000 members in 1936.

- ¹⁶ Mortimer, p. 126.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 127-128.
- ¹⁸ Sidney, Fine, Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike Of 1936-1937, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), p.122. Fine explains how effective and successful the sit-down strikes were in the auto industry. He describes how sit-down strikes were used against the corporations as a organizing device for unions like the UAW.
- ¹⁹ "Sit Downs Close Four Big Plants of General Motors." New York Times, 31 Dec. 1936, p. 1.
- ²⁰ Progressive Labor Party Pamphlet, pp. 11-13.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 13.
- ²² Bruce, Bliven, "Sitting Down In Flint." The New Republic, 27 Jan. 1937, pp. 377-378.
- ²³ Progressive Labor Party Pamphlet, p. 15.
- ²⁴ Lens, P. 205.
- ²⁵ Berstein, p. 526.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 528.
- ²⁷ Lens, pp. 306-307.
- ²⁸ Bernstein, p. 528.
- ²⁹ Ibid., pp. 528-529.
- ³⁰ Green, pp. 164,197. The "Mohawk Valley Formula" was developed by Remington Rand, the typewriter manufacturer. The "Mohawk Valley Formula" used a campaign of propaganda to defeat organized strikes. Threats to move plants and intimidating publicity were targeted at employees and local citizens to discourage union drives and strikes.
- ³¹ Berstein, p. 528.
- ³² Lens, p. 309.
- ³³ Progressive Labor Party Pamphlet, p. 16.
- ³⁴ Lens, p. 310.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 310.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 311.
- ³⁷ Progressive Labor Party Pamphlet, p. 17.
- ³⁸ Ibid., p. 17.
- ³⁹ With Babies and Banners, Directed By Lorraine Gray, (The University Of Michigan, Labor Research Center, 1977) [A Documentary Film Covering the Story Of The Women's Emergency Brigade]. The wives and relatives of the Flint sit-down strikers protected their men during the "Battle of Bulls Run". The women stood in front of the picketers, and warned the police that they would not move if the police began to shoot at the strikers or the picketers. Many people believe that this was the reason that the strikers were not ousted from the Fisher #2 plant by the police.
- ⁴⁰ Lens, p. 311.
- ⁴¹ With Babies and Banners.
- ⁴² "Women's Brigade Uses Heavy Clubs." New York Times, 2 Jan. 1937, pp. 1, 3.
- ⁴³ Mortimer, p. 36.
- ⁴⁴ Berstein, p. 538.
- ⁴⁵ Mary Heaton Vorse, "The Emergency Brigade at Flint." The New Republic, 17 Feb. 1937, pp. 38-39.
- ⁴⁶ Mortimer, pp. 132-139.
- ⁴⁷ Louis Stark, "Strikers Quit Auto Plants; Operations Resume Monday; \$25,000,000 Rise in Wages." New York Times, 12 Feb. 1937, P. 1.

- ⁴⁸ Ibid.,p. 1.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 1.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 1.
- ⁵¹ "Automobile Armageddon." Time, 18 Jan. 1937, p. 19.
- ⁵² "The Automobile Victory." The Nation, 20 Feb. 1937, p. 199.
- ⁵³ Mortimer, p. 142.
- ⁵⁴ Progressive Labor Party Pamphlet, p. 18.
- ⁵⁵ Mortimer, p. 153.
- ⁵⁶ Progressive Labor Party Pamphlet, p. 29.
- ⁵⁷ "Sit-Down Spread." Time, 1 March 1937, pp. 13-14.
- ⁵⁸ "The Sit-Down And Fascism." The New Republic, 31 March 1937, p. 225.
- ⁵⁹ "Sit-Down Spread." Time, 1 March 1937, p. 14.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 13.
- ⁶¹ Progressive Labor Party Pamphlet, p. 30.
- ⁶² Bernstein, p. 679.

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