

Module 06: "Which Side Are You On?" The Flint Sit-Down Strike, 1936-37

Evidence 1: William Knudsen to Homer Martin, January 1, 1937

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Introduction

In a widely circulated letter issued just one day after the Flint sit-down strike began, William S. Knudsen, GM's executive vice president and Alfred P. Sloan's right-hand man, answered UAW President Homer Martin's request for a meeting. A tall, heavy-set Dane who emigrated to the United States at the age of 20, Knudsen was a self-made, down-to-earth industrialist who reportedly refused to hire female secretaries so he wouldn't have to curb his tendency to curse up a storm. Soon after the strike ended, Knudsen became GM's president. He would later go on to direct the federal government's massive weapon's production program during World War II. Although this letter was addressed to Martin, Knudsen was clearly trying to win the battle over public opinion about the sit-down strike.

Questions to Consider

- According to Knudsen, what was GM's position on collective bargaining? At what level did such bargaining have to occur? What reasons did he provide for his position?
- How did his public position on collective bargaining square with GM's repeated attempts to suppress union organization at its plants?
- How did Knudsen portray the sit-down strikers and the union? In his view, how had the union violated the principles of collective bargaining? What was his opinion on the legality of the sit-down strike?
- What did he demand before GM would negotiate with the union? What metaphor did he use to describe GM's position in the face of the sit-down strike?

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This is in reply to your request for a meeting addressed jointly to the

president and to the executive vice president of General Motors corporation.

On Dec. 22, 1936, upon receipt of your letter of Dec. 21, I invited you to come by my office for a personal interview and at the time informed you and your secretary-treasurer that in accordance with the operating policy of General Motors corporation the matters you wished to discuss should be taken up with the individual plant managers, and if necessary with the general managers having jurisdiction in the location involved.

You say in your letter "Bona fide collective bargaining is the only workable instrument for the establishment of satisfactory relationships between employers and employe[e]s." General Motors corporation accepts the principle of collective bargaining and desires to maintain satisfactory relations with all of its employe[e]s, regardless of union or non-union affiliation.

To this end it has established a procedure under which employe[e]s may bargain collectively with management. This procedure, dated Aug. 15, 1934, is well known to employe[e]s and when you were in my office I showed a copy of it to you.

Obviously with plants located in 35 separate communities in 14 states with more than 200,000 employe[e]s, necessarily operating under a variety of conditions peculiar to the manufacturing of the products in which they are engaged, grievances of individuals or groups of individuals can only be handled locally where the employe[e]s and the plant management are familiar with local conditions as well as with the basic general policies of the corporation concerning employe[e] relations.

Certainly there is nothing in this common-sense arrangement which is inconsistent with bona fide collective bargaining, in fact it promotes bona fide collective bargaining.

On the contrary, what has occurred? Seven plants of General Motors are now idle as a result of strikes or shut downs caused by the United Automobile Workers.

The jobs of more than 135,000 men are imperiled, most of them through no fault of their own. They and their families stand to lose more than

\$1,000,000 in wages from General Motors.

How many other thousands are now or will be thrown out of work and deprived of wages as a result of these strikes in our plants is impossible to forecast.

The union leaders say they want collective bargaining. General Motors corporation recognizes collective bargaining. It has provided appropriate machinery for it, but each of these plants was shut down by the union against the wishes of a great majority of its employe[e]s, without any attempt on the part of the union to bargain collectively before the sit-downs occurred.

Obviously the managers of these plants cannot bargain collectively with the representatives of a fraction of their employe[e]s if these representatives themselves refuse to bargain collectively before a shut-down is called.

Yet that is exactly what has happened in each instance. The union itself has refused to bargain collectively and has made real collective bargaining impossible by exercising coercion before the bargaining begins.

[Knudsen then briefly discusses two GM sit-down strikes that had recently taken place in Kansas City, Missouri, Cleveland, Ohio. In both instances he claimed that a minority of workers shut down the plants without attempting to collectively bargain.]

Take Fisher plant No. 1 at Flint. Here again a meeting between the management and the union was scheduled for Monday, January 4, but Wednesday night, before that meeting could take place, the second shift sat down and caused Fisher plant No. 1 to close, throwing out of work 7,000 men. Over 1,000 are still in the plant.

Take Fisher plant No. 2 at Flint. Two men were transferred from one job to another. Without warning, or any attempt to negotiate their cases, and without regard for collective bargaining, less than 50 men sat down and forced this plant to close, 200 idle men remaining inside and 1,000 men idle in total.

. . .The record cited above shows how little regard union representatives have for real collective bargaining. Sit-downs are strikes. Such strikers are

clearly trespassing and violators of the law of the land.

We cannot have bonafide collective bargaining with sit-down strikers in illegal possession of plants. Collective bargaining cannot be justified if one party having seized the plant, holds a gun at the other party's head.

. . .In so far as your organization represents such strikers, I would suggest as a preliminary first step toward bargaining with the plant managers, that you order your members to vacate the plants as a condition precedent to a discussion of any alleged grievances. . . .

Source:

Flint Journal (1 Jan 1937), 4.