

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

Evidence 4: Homer Martin's Reply to Sloan's Memo, January 6, 1937

A

Introduction

In many ways, Homer Martin seemed like an unlikely figure to head the UAW. Born in Marion, Illinois, on August 16, 1902, Martin was a star track athlete in college before doing post-graduate work at a seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, experiences that had dubbed him "The Leaping Parson." After uttering pro-labor sentiments from the pulpit, he lost his pastoral position in a Kansas City suburb and began working for GM's Chevrolet plant. Martin was laid off from his GM job in 1934, became active in the UAW, and quickly rose to the presidency of the organization. Martin was a gifted orator who "made men feel that in organizing a union they were going to battle for righteousness and the word of God" (Fine 78).

Notice that, near the end of the document below, Martin once again decries the debilitating effects of the "speed-up" on workers. The language he uses in some ways recalls a passage from John Dos Passos's novel, *The Big Money*, which was published the previous year: "At Ford's production was improving all the time; less waste, more spotters, strawbosses, stoolpigeons (fifteen minutes for lunch, three minutes to go to the toilet, the Taylorized speedup everywhere, reach under, adjust washer, screw down bolt, reachunderadjustscrewdownreachunderadjust until every ounce of life was sucked off into production and at night the workmen went home grey shaking husks)."

Questions to Consider

- According to Martin, why did the UAW want to engage in collective bargaining with GM?
- How did Martin respond to GM's charge that the UAW was trying to establish a closed shop at GM (i.e., a business at which only union members could find work)?
- How did he respond to GM's claim that it was paying fair wages?
- What other objectives did he identify for the strike?

- What was his view of "labor-saving machinery?"

Document

The recent full-page advertisement of the General Motors claiming intimidation and coercion as the United Automobile Workers' medium of organization is to be expected. Nevertheless, the employe[e]s of the corporation will realize the methods of Mr. Sloan's managers, operating without any organized labor interference, made the slogan "through at forty" such a near-reality as to invoke a Federal investigation of the industry.

Employe[e]s realize that on the production and conveyor lines only youth can serve. Any attempt to right this condition is not labor dictatorship. It is the hope for release from dictatorship that has given the United Automobile Workers of America its membership, realizing as they do that true collective bargaining means, as defined in Webster's International Dictionary "the bargaining that takes place between employers and employe[e]s acting in groups, as under the conditions imposed by labor unions and the employers' associations of the present day."

The United Automobile Workers of America is not attempting to run the plants of General Motors Corporation, nor are we asking for a closed shop as Mr. Sloan would imply. A closed union shop is one where only members of the union are permitted to work and requires all the workers to share in the cost of maintaining the union. This is not one of our demands.

Taking Mr. Knudsen's statement in The Detroit News of Jan. 2 that "* * * the average rate for all General Motors workers is 78.6 cents per hour," and Mr. Sloan's statement that "forty hours is the standard work week," we can readily understand the impossibility of the General Motors employe[e], with an average family, purchasing even the lowest priced car produced by the corporation.

This is a reflection on the industry which depends largely on the average workman for the sale of its product. To be "justly proud" of such a wage record, failing as it does to justify the purchase of even the lowest priced car produced by the corporation, reflects on the social vision of Mr. Sloan.

While a higher wage is important, it is far from being the only objective in

this controversy. As the American workman in 1776 fought for political freedom, so we today are fighting for social and economic freedom. This is a struggle against the inhuman speed-up which has made man the slave of the machine; it is a fight against the vicious espionage system which deprives the automobile worker of those legal rights to join any organization he desires (keeping in mind that the General Motors Corporation paid \$167,000 to the Pinkerton strikebreaking agency in 1935); it is an endeavor to shorten the hours to a working day which will enable the automobile worker to enjoy his wife, his children, and his leisure [sic] time.

It, in short, is an effort to obtain those things of which every true American can be justly proud.

There has been more technical progress since the time of our own Civil War than during all the centuries that have gone before. The American workman has not justly shared in that progress. Labor-saving machinery has succeeded chiefly in binding the human body to the untiring machine and gearing it to such speed that the workman faces a reddening sun before life should have reached high noon.

Organization can be labors only reply to conditions which are subject to the whims of management. Only through the effective medium of a national agreement can dictatorship by management be avoided.

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with knowledge in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in.'"-- Abraham Lincoln."

Source:

Detroit News (7 Jan 1937), 4.