

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

Evidence 21: "The Sit-Down," Editorial in *The New Republic*, January 20, 1937

A

Introduction

As the sit-down strike dragged on, it received increasing attention in the national press. This editorial, which appeared in the left-leaning magazine *The New Republic*, assesses the situation some three weeks into the strike.

Questions to Consider

- According to the editorial, what issue had kept GM and the UAW from negotiating an end to the Flint strike?
- What happened when GM tried to obtain an injunction against the sit-down strikers?
- What were the advantages of the sit-down tactic?
- How did GM defend its refusal to negotiate with the UAW? Does the editorial seem to favor GM or the UAW?

Document

At the moment of writing, the one issue that has prevented a conference between the heads of General Motors Corporation and the leaders of the United Automobile Workers is the "sit-down," or the presence of the strikers in the plants. Feverish activity of mediators has ironed out every other objection of either side to talking over their differences. But the company executives will not discuss with the union the aims of the men in going on strike until this particular method of carrying it out is abandoned. And the union will not order the men to abandon it unless safeguards are granted. Whatever the near future may bring in the way of conciliation, the situation bears witness to the significance of this particular kind of tactics. Why should it be considered so important by both sides?

The traditional way of carrying on a strike is of course for employees to leave the plant and not to come back to work. Pickets are then sent to the plant gates to persuade others from taking the places of the strikers. In the

General Motors and other recent strikes, the procedure has been for the men to remain in the plants without working. In doing so they are not destructive; they take good care of the machinery; they amuse themselves with radios, games and impromptu performances; they ceremoniously punch the time clocks at the proper times to symbolize the fact that they still consider themselves employees. Food and other supplies are brought to them by their families or by other union members. This form of strike also involves picketing the gates, to see that people do not enter without legitimate business.

One of the first acts of General Motors in this strike was to obtain a court order which not only contained all the usual drastic prohibitions familiar to labor injunctions, but also commanded the men to leave the plant, on the ground that they were trespassers. The sheriff tried to read the injunction to the men and was greeted with uproarious laughter. He could have enforced the order only by a pitched battle. That he did not do. This particular effort of an employer to use the law against the sit-down is also somewhat blemished by the fact that President Homer Martin of the union has asked the state legislature to impeach Judge Edward D. Black, who issued the injunction, on the ground that he owns about 3,665 shares of General Motors stock. A Michigan law reads: "No judge of any court shall sit as such in any cause or proceeding in which he is a party or in which he is interested. . . ."

The advantages of the sit-down to the union are sufficiently obvious to anyone familiar with strike tactics. In order to operate the machinery with strikebreakers it is necessary for the employer to get the strikers out of the building. What may under certain circumstances be even more important in terms of morale, it is necessary to get them out even to create the impression that the machinery is being operated, or not improperly operated. In an ordinary strike the first necessity is merely to convoy strikebreakers in sufficient numbers past the plant gates. But it is more difficult to get unwilling men out of a building than it is to disperse pickets from a certain area in the street. The violence involved, even if the operation should be successful, would be more likely to endanger the company's property. Moreover, it is not so easy in such a case to maintain that the strikers are the aggressors, so far as the use of violence is concerned. The ordinary technique of the strikebreaking agency, which involves the use of gangsters, machine guns, and tear gas, is not adequate

to the new situation. In addition, the solidarity of the strikers is more easily maintained while they are continually together than if they were scattered except for periodic meetings or strike duty.

The clear advantage of the situation to the union is what lies behind the stipulation that the strikers will not leave unless the company will engage not to try to operate the plant or to move machinery elsewhere while the negotiations are going on. The fact that the company has not agreed to these conditions probably confirms in the union leaders' minds the suspicion that the company's real objection is to the very effectiveness of the tactic. If it were abandoned the company might try to break the strike by the usual methods, even during peaceful negotiations.

The company, of course, rests its objections on the grounds of high legal principle. The sit-down strikers are trespassers on property that does not belong to them; they are disobeying a court order to vacate; the company will not countenance unlawful conduct by negotiating with lawbreakers. People do not get excited about principles in combat situations, and it is unfair to accuse the employers of being consciously insincere in this plea. They are counting, too, on the possibility of arousing hostility to the strikers by stimulating the public to share their righteous indignation. Such hostility might make it less undiplomatic to use the violence necessary to eject the strikers. But it would be unfortunate if a deadlock over the manner of conducting a dispute should indefinitely prolong the dispute itself, while the major issues that gave rise to the controversy are lost to sight. General Motors and the union both profess to be willing to talk to each other about the grievances that the strike was called to remedy. Undue technicality in getting down to this business will be sure to suggest that the party who raises the most objections isn't anxious for settlement.

Source:

The New Republic 89, no. 1155 (20 Jan 1937), 342-43.