

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

### Evidence 23: "Is the Sit-Down Unfair?" Editorial in *The New Republic*, February 17, 1937

# A

#### Introduction

The following editorial in *The New Republic*, apparently written before the strike ended but not published until nearly a week later, attempted to address the concerns of those arguing that the sit-down strike represented an illegal form of trespass, and as such, unfairly held the majority of workers hostage to the whims of a committed minority.

#### Questions to Consider

- What does the editorial assert about GM's attitude toward unions? What specific anti-union activities does it claim GM had engaged in?
- According to the writer(s), was the sit-down strike legal? Why or why not?
- Why did the writer(s) think the sit-down was "here to stay?"
- What specific recommendation did the editorial make to managers at GM and other industries?

#### Document

Many persons who are as a rule friendly to the cause of organized labor are gravely troubled about the sit-down strike. Their feeling, as reflected in numerous letters received by *The New Republic*, is that it is clearly illegal and that it constitutes some sort of blackmail by which a small minority of employe[e]s of an industrial corporation seek to dictate both to management and to their fellow workers, who may be entirely out of sympathy with the aims of those who are "sitting down." This attitude is probably well expressed by one correspondent of ours who remarked in effect: I am a farmer and I own an apple orchard. If I hired a man to pick apples and he sat down under the tree, I would be well within my rights, morally and legally, to throw him out.

The point missed by this correspondent, and by many other persons, is that

simple analogies about an apple picker sitting under a tree have no meaning in relation to an affair like the General Motors strike. This corporation has some 235,000 employees, scattered through the United States. It is not owned by Messrs. Sloan and Knudsen but by some 329,000 stockholders, who are also scattered through the United States. Probably 99 percent of them have no first-hand knowledge of the labor policies of their company, and even if they had, and if they objected to the actions that are being taken, they have no real means of indicating their disapproval or altering the policy. As [American economists] Berle and Means have pointed out, ownership and control are now distinct from one another; all that the average stockholder demands is that dividends should be regular and large. When you hire one man to pick apples in your orchard, you know how he and his family are getting along and you would probably be distressed if they were in a state of semi-starvation. But there is no contract at all between any of the 329,000 owners and any of the 235,000 workers except through the tiny group of Sloans and Knudsens, who probably own little if any stock and over whom the only real social control is the approval of their fellow big-business men in Wall Street or near to it.

Let it be remembered that this group as a whole has always been and is now 100-percent anti-union. Sloan and Knudsen, for example, are obviously not in fact concerned about the collective-bargaining rights of those employees who are not members of the UAW. What they really want is no collective bargaining at all. If they can't have that, then they want fake company unions, or numerous employee groups that will be weak and ineffective just because none of them speaks for the whole mass of the workers. It is the standard history of strikes that the management always complains that the strike leaders are arrogant or radical or ambitious and that it weeps crocodile tears over the non-union workers who are deprived of the right to earn a living. Change the union leadership, change the personnel of the groups on strike, and the complaints from the bosses still go on.

The sit-down strike is not illegal. It is so new that no existing law has any relevance in regard to it. Statutes against trespass are clearly intended to prohibit the entry of thieves and other criminals who break in for the purpose of damaging property. But the sit-down strikers enter upon the property with the knowledge and consent of management. They have no

desire to steal or damage any property, and whenever damage has occurred it has been incidental to the brutal tactics of the police. The sit-down strikers are just as anxious to get back to work as anyone else is to have them do so. All they ask is decent treatment enforced through collective bargaining.

Vast quantities of nonsense have been printed lately about the immortality of a strike conducted by less than a majority of employees. If the UAW, according to this argument, had 117,501 members, the strike would be perfectly proper. If it has only 117,499, then we must have nothing to do with it. To argue this way is to misunderstand the whole history of the labor movement. Unions do not win strikes by having an overwhelming majority of the workers in their ranks before trouble arises. They get such majorities by winning strikes. The fact remains that all previous attempts to unionize the automobile industry have failed; that the effort to operate with groups of small unions was tried in 1934 and proved a disastrous failure. If the automobile industry really wanted collective bargaining on the only basis on which it has any reality, it would accept the UAW and work with it. A ten-word announcement by Mr. Sloan that this was being done would bring 95 percent of the GM employees into the union in forty-eight hours. A majority of any group of employees will almost always favor a union strong enough to enforce their right to be heard. But instead, the General Motors Corporation has fought this union and any other effective one. It has spent vast sums of money on a spy system. It has violated the terms of the Wagner Labor Relations Act in the hope that the law would be declared unconstitutional. It has exerted every sort of bribery and coercion to keep men out of the union.

The sit-down strike is here to stay, and industry would be well advised to come to terms with it. Even if the present strikers are forced out by the bayonet, on the day that operations are resumed, the possibility of another sit-down will appear. Dismiss every union man, and it will still exist; the conditions which force one group of employees to organize and fight in self-protection will eventually cause any other group to do the same thing. Modern industry, through technological advance, has itself created conditions under which its workers can no longer be treated as abject serfs. If the managers were really intelligent — which they are not — and if they were not controlled by patterns of thinking carried over from a dead past — which they are — they would make the decision their fellow industrialists in

Great Britain made a quarter of a century ago. They would accept collective bargaining, would help the process instead of hindering it, and would agree to American standards of life for American workers.

Source:

*The New Republic* 90, no. 1159 (17 Feb 1937), 32-33.