

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

Context

December 30, 1936

Early one chilly December evening in 1936, United Automobile Workers (UAW) officials illuminated the red light in front of their Flint, Michigan, union hall. The flashing light summoned workers in General Motors's Fisher Body No. One, the largest auto body factory in the world, for an emergency union meeting. During their meal break, swing shift workers streamed into the hall, where the young, energetic UAW organizer Robert Travis confirmed rumors that GM had begun loading the dies used to stamp out body panels onto railroad cars. Fearful that the automotive giant was trying to squash the nascent labor organizing movement within the plant, Travis asked the assembled workers how they wanted to respond. "Shut her down! Shut the goddam plant!" came the reply from the cheering crowd (Kraus 88). The workers hurried back into Fisher One, took their positions on the shop floors, and refused to budge. Several minutes later, one of the men trumpeted, "She's ours!" from a third-story window (Kraus 89).

The Advent of Industrial Unionism in America

Three thousand auto workers occupied the plant that first night. Two miles away, sit-down strikers also took over the smaller Fisher Body No. Two factory, effectively shutting down GM's ability to produce several of its product lines. Thus began the six-week-long Flint sit-down strike, an episode that one historian has called "the most significant American labor conflict in the twentieth century" (Fine 341). Coming on the heels of the National Labor Relations Act, the Flint strike forced GM to accept the legitimacy of the UAW and signaled the arrival of industrial unionism in America. Following the successful GM sit-down strike, industries that had firmly resisted unionization were finally forced to the bargaining table. With their membership rates soaring, unions shifted the balance of power in the United States, representing a potent force in American politics for the next fifty years.

Unions and Unskilled Labor

Until the Flint sit-down strike, the labor movement had achieved only limited success in the United States. Union leaders had focused primarily on organizing

skilled workers, or employees most difficult to replace in the event of a strike, although only a fraction of the labor force had signed on. The American Federation of Labor (AFL), an umbrella coalition of trade unions created by Samuel Gompers in 1886 and presided over by him for nearly half a century, remained the nation's most powerful labor organization. Thanks in part to the AFL's organizing efforts, union membership in America skyrocketed from about 6.5 percent of the private non-agricultural labor force in 1900 to about 19.2 percent in 1920. It then dropped to below 15 percent, where it remained until the mid-1930s. Frustrated at the AFL's continued failure to court unskilled industrial workers, John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers joined with other unionists to create the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) in 1935. The UAW, established that same year, became a major CIO affiliate.

Organized Labor Until the Depression

Several factors account for organized labor's relative lack of success before the Great Depression. Until the late 1910s, high immigration rates meant that employees agitating for higher wages, shorter hours, safer working conditions, or the right to join unions often found themselves replaced by the economically desperate immigrants streaming to America's shores. With the deskilling of the workplace that accompanied industrialization, employers found it easier to secure replacement workers who required only minimal training. When labor conflicts erupted, government officials generally sided with owners rather than with workers, which also thwarted union-building efforts. During the first half of the nineteenth century, for example, laborers who attempted to organize protective associations frequently found themselves prosecuted for conspiracy. Later in the century, the intervention of state militia forces ended the Homestead Strike of 1892, while federal troops put down the Pullman Strike of 1894. Perhaps most importantly, industrialists fiercely resisted union membership drives in their plants. They routinely fired workers who went out on strike or joined non-company unions, and they hired security forces to bully strikers and to protect the strikebreakers recruited to replace them. Employers also engaged in extensive espionage to infiltrate labor organizations and established company-controlled unions to offer the illusion of meaningful worker participation in contract talks.

The Rise of General Motors

General Motors, leading an industry notorious for its strong anti-union stance, became not only the nation's largest automobile producer but also the world's largest industrial corporation. In 1936, during the Great Depression, the company

managed to sell 1.5 million automobiles, representing more than 43 percent of the domestic passenger-car market as well as a pretax profit of \$284 million. The man behind GM's remarkable achievement was its innovative president and CEO, Alfred P. Sloan, who pioneered sophisticated marketing plans and inventory control systems that transformed the unwieldy GM empire into a well-oiled production and distribution machine. Sloan's relentless drive for efficiency offered no place at the table for independent unions. Indeed, in the two years prior to the strike, the company hired more than fourteen different detective and security agencies, at a cost of close to \$1 million, to uncover and root out employees with union sympathies. A Senate investigating committee charged that this "most colossal super-system of spies yet devised in any American corporation" struck fear in the hearts of every GM worker (Fine 38). At the same time, a secretive group known as the Black Legion, a Detroit-based offshoot of the Ku Klux Klan, carried out a campaign of intimidation and violence not only against blacks, Jews, Catholics, and Communist sympathizers, but also against labor organizers who dared set foot in the state.

The Company Town of Flint, Michigan

Moreover, Flint, located just sixty miles northwest of Detroit, was a solid company town. GM's massive, sprawling factories dominated the town's landscape while providing a powerful reminder of the central place the corporation occupied in the local economy and political scene. Some 47,000 of the city's residents — two out of three breadwinners or a quarter of the entire population — worked for GM. As many as four out of five Flint residents depended directly or indirectly on the GM payroll to survive. By 1936, many of the town's leaders, including at least three of its city commissioners, the mayor, and the chief of police, were current or former GM employees. In short, in its attempt to unionize Flint automobile workers, the UAW was forced to contend with both the nation's most powerful corporation as well as with local officials who supported GM.

Unionizing Flint

Union organizing at Flint thus proved a difficult and dangerous prospect. Wyndham Mortimer, the first UAW official stationed there, reported that he had received a threatening phone call within minutes of checking into his hotel room. The anonymous caller warned Mortimer to leave town immediately or face being "carried out in a wooden box" (Peterson 203). Given the hostile atmosphere, initial unionization efforts not surprisingly failed miserably; as of June 1936, the total UAW membership in five GM locals totaled 150, a trivial percentage of the total

workforce. Mortimer's replacement, Rob Travis, his colleague Roy Reuther, and other UAW organizers began meeting with autoworkers in their homes to foil GM efforts to disrupt the union drive. By December 1936, they managed to sign up 4,500 workers, or about 10 percent of GM's Flint workforce.

Work Stoppage in November 1936

Union organization had proceeded most rapidly at Fisher One and Two. At the former, increasingly frustrated workers had already begun engaging in short work stoppages in late October and early November 1936. When asked if his members were ready for a general strike, Bud Simons, Travis's main lieutenant in Fisher One, replied: "They're like a pregnant woman in her tenth month!" (Fine 116). On the evening of November 13, 1936, the UAW flexed its muscle to protest the firing of three disgruntled welders who had been sacked for refusing to work the evening before. In response to the firing, Simons ordered a shutdown of the main welding department in Fisher One, idling seven hundred men. Faced with an impressive show of collective action, the plant manager quickly caved to the workers' demands: he reinstated the fired welders and even asked the Flint police to locate and transport them to the plant to end the work stoppage as quickly as possible. Following the victory, Simons reminded the workers what they had accomplished by collective action: "Fellows you've seen what you can get by sticking together. All I want you to do is remember that" (Kraus 54). As news of the short but successful strike spread throughout the community, UAW membership rolls swelled.

Striking v. Picketing

The episode highlighted both the potential power of collective action and the potential benefits of the sit-down strike, which, from the point of view of dissatisfied workers, provided numerous advantages over the conventional strike. By remaining inside the factory rather than picketing outside of it, striking workers prevented owners from hiring strikebreakers to take their jobs and resume production. Picketers outside the plant often found themselves attacked by hired thugs, local police, state militia, and/or federal troops. In addition, employers were reluctant to dislodge striking workers by force inside a plant, since doing so not only made them appear the aggressor but also placed valuable machinery at risk. At the same time, if attacked, strikers were able to mount a stronger defense inside the factory than outside on an exposed picket line. Occupying the factory also provided a sense of satisfaction for the "depersonalized and alienated

automobile worker," while boosting morale and building a strong sense of community (Fine 122).

The Historical Emergence of the Sit-Down Strike

The tactic was not entirely new. Since the turn of the nineteenth century, workers in the United States, England, Italy, Yugoslavia, and France had mounted occasional sit-down strikes, although the number of workers involved and the period of occupation was generally limited. The approach first gain widespread public attention in early 1936, when employees at the Goodyear Rubber plant in Ohio and workers across France engaged in the first mass sit-down strikes in history. The success of those actions and the short sit-down in Fisher One in November convinced the UAW of its potential to force GM to the bargaining table.

The Wagner Act of 1935

The Roosevelt administration's growing support for labor and the passage of the National Labor Relations Act, known as the Wagner Act (1935), also gave the UAW the confidence to take on GM. The Wagner Act, as the most important piece of labor legislation passed in the twentieth century, granted workers the right to organize into unions of their choosing and to participate in collective bargaining. It prohibited employers from engaging in unfair labor practices, like establishing company-controlled unions or firing workers who organized or joined independent unions. Under the terms of the act, the National Labor Relations Board could order elections, during which workers could freely choose which union (if any) they wanted to represent them. Moreover, employers were prohibited from refusing to bargain in good faith with a union once the board had certified it as duly elected by workers. Employers initially ignored the sweeping legislation with the hope that the Supreme Court would declare the Wagner Act unconstitutional, just as it had done with other major New Deal initiatives.

GM and the Wagner Act

At GM, it was business as usual, despite the Wagner Act. A meeting held on December 22, 1936, between GM executive vice-president William S. Knudsen and UAW president Homer Martin had resulted in a stalemate when Knudsen firmly reiterated GM's position that it would refuse to bargain with the UAW or any other union. Job security, wages, seniority, union recognition, and the like were local issues, Knudsen insisted, to be handled by individual plant managers and not high-level corporate officials. With GM's continued refusal to negotiate, UAW

leaders began contemplating a possible strike sometime after the first of the New Year, after the inauguration of Frank Murphy as governor of Michigan. Murphy was widely considered a friend of labor, and union leaders hoped that, in case of a strike, he would not intervene on GM's behalf.

The Flint Sit-Down Strike

On December 30, 1936, when Bob Travis heard reports that GM was loading company dies on freight cars for shipment to Grand Rapids and Pontiac, he turned on the emergency meeting light outside the UAW meeting hall. Fearful that GM was shipping the dies (and thus their jobs) to plants where the union had failed to penetrate, workers in Fisher One and Two launched the Flint sit-down strike.