

Stuff you missed in history class: The Flint Sit-Down Strike, Conclusion



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In the last wintry days of 1936, workers at the General Motors (GM) plants in Flint, MI, halted their assembly lines, put down their tools, and began one of the most important events in U.S. labor history: the Great Flint Sit-Down Strike. Their action, or better, their lack of action, had an impact that resounded through not only the auto industry, but through manufacturing industries across America.

Rather than walking out and creating a picket line, the workers simply sat down and refused to leave the plant. The sit-down strike spread from plant to plant and within a few days, production at nearly every GM plant had come to a halt. As the strike spread, the fledgling United Autoworkers union (UAW), founded just the previous year, found another way to hurt GM: They aided the company's competitors by ending a strike at Bohn Aluminum, ensuring an uninterrupted flow of pistons to the Ford Motor Co. They also helped negotiate settlements of strikes at Pittsburgh Plate Glass and Libby-Owens-Ford so Chrysler could continue producing.

While the union gained support and membership at the beginning of the strike, GM was plotting to retake and reopen its plants. GM brass and many Flint residents were horrified at the sit-down tactic employed by the strikers. They saw it as an offense to the American tradition of property rights and assigned the blame for its introduction in Flint to "outside agitators," "radicals" and "reds."

One way GM fought the strike was by planting spies among the sit-down strikers in Flint, who spread rumors to hurt morale and fed damaging information to anti-union reporters. The *Flint Journal*, whose editorial board was firmly on GM's side, carried headlines every day that either exaggerated the nature of the strike or spouted the company's biased interpretations of events. Anonymous letters were sent to strikers saying their wives were cheating on them, and wives received letters saying their husbands were deathly ill. Other agents preyed on workers' children, questioning them at school to gain information about the strikers and weaken their morale. While many of these attempts to scare workers and their families away from the union were effective, GM was planning a large-scale attack to starve and freeze the sit-down strikers out of the factories.

With financial losses mounting, GM tried to provoke the strikers to commit violence. The company wanted to destroy the peaceful image of the sit-down strikers and portray them as a destructive mob so that the governor would have no choice but to declare martial law and use the National Guard to break up the strike. On Jan. 11, guards outside of Fisher No. 2 refused to allow food in. When outside pickets tried to bring food in by ladder to the second floor, the guards confiscated the ladder. As the police began to surround the plant, the picketers swarmed to the gate and demanded the guards open it.



On Feb. 11, 1937, 44 days after the strike began, General Motors signed an agreement recognizing the United Autoworkers union. The following year, UAW membership rose from 50,000 to 300,000 and autoworker wages grew by as much as 300 percent.

When the guards refused, the picketers forced the gate open. The police fired tear gas and vomit-inducing gas as they rushed the building. The union called on picketers to hold their posts and those inside to grab the fire hoses. The police were driven away by the force of the hoses and a rain of two-pound hinges. Before they left, the police shot and wounded 14 strikers, but after the injured were carried away and the tear gas cleared, the strikers still controlled Fisher No. 2. The next day, thousands of men and women from Michigan and the surrounding states converged on Flint and massed in front of Fisher No. 2 to celebrate the victory.

Union organizers in Flint knew they had to strike another blow against GM; their target was the largest single unit of the GM empire, Flint's Chevy No. 4 plant. But the plant was heavily guarded and few of its 14,000 workers were union members. So the union leaders let it "leak out" that they were going to try to take over Chevy No. 9, a smaller plant, on Feb. 1. All of the company's resources were diverted to No. 9. While a contingent of strikers and sympathizers faked a takeover of Chevy 9, workers from Chevy 6 came over to help shut down the massive No. 4 plant, encountering only token resistance. The Chevy 4 sit-downers constituted the largest group of strikers in Flint and GM was done. On Feb. 11, 44 days after the strike began, GM caved and signed an agreement recognizing the UAW.

The following year, nearly 100 sit-down strikes took place in auto plants across the country; UAW membership rose from 50,000 to 300,000; and autoworker wages rose by as much as 300 percent. This historic sit-down strike began a period of powerful union growth across U.S. industry and the expansion of a thriving American middle class.