

Stuff you missed in history class: The Flint Sit-Down Strike, Part 2



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Working on the line at General Motors (GM) in Flint, MI in the early 1930s meant terrible working conditions, low pay and frequent layoffs, making the auto plants ripe for union organization. Earlier attempts to organize autoworkers were brutally stamped out by GM thugs and local police. Those who participated were fired and blacklisted from the industry. Passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933 gave

unions the right to organize and bargain collectively, but did not compel employers to recognize or bargain with them.

But in May 1935, Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act, which legalized strikes, mandated employers to bargain with unions and set up a board to enforce these laws. This invigorated those within the American Federation of Labor (AFL) who favored industry-wide organization, and resulted in the creation of the United Automobile Workers of America (UAW). However, the AFL severely restricted industrially organized unions in terms of governing themselves and taking collective action, so that November the president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), John L. Lewis, along with the leaders of nine other industrial unions, including the UAW, formed a caucus within the AFL, the Committee of Industrial Organizations, a name soon changed to the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), to support industry-wide organizing efforts.

Within weeks, the infant UAW dispatched organizers to Flint to attempt to organize workers there. It was a challenge few organizers wanted, since Flint was almost entirely controlled by GM. Yet the UAW recognized that if Flint could be won for the union, they would have established their most important beachhead within industrial America. To avoid the notice of company spies, organizers sent letters to workers they felt might be sympathetic and held secret meetings in the evenings in workers' homes. Gradually, the union grew, and with it, the workers' call for action.

The UAW's major challenge was to contain the growing strike fever until the time was right, which they thought would be just after the new year, after the workers had received their Christmas bonuses and the new governor, Frank Murphy, who was sympathetic to unions, was to be sworn into office. Things didn't quite work out as planned.

GM knew a storm was on the horizon, as small strikes had been rippling throughout their plants. Most were easily put down because of poor planning, weak local unions and the efforts of labor spies, but GM feared that the tide of strikes would spread to Flint, where the union was growing stronger.

On Dec. 30, at 8 a.m., the union learned that, in anticipation of a strike, GM was removing from Fisher Plant 2 the huge dies that were used for casting car bodies. If



UAW workers during the Flint Sit-Down Strike in 1935

these dies were removed, GM would be able to produce car bodies elsewhere and weaken the union's strategic position. UAW lead organizer Bob Travis immediately called a lunchtime meeting at the union hall across the street from the plant, explained the situation, then sent the members across the street to occupy the plant, giving the word that the dies were to be protected at all costs. With this directive, the strike was on, two days early. The next day, workers at Fisher Plant 1 sat down and the strike quickly spread to plants across the country. GM's production of auto bodies halted. By Jan. 1, just two days after the strike began, every Chevrolet and Buick assembly plant had closed.

Once inside the plants, the strikers moved scores of unfinished auto bodies in front of all the entrances to form a gigantic barricade. With acetylene torches, they welded a steel frame around every door. Bullet-proof metal sheets were put into position to cover every window, and wet clothes were kept in readiness to be placed on the face as protection against tear-gas attacks. Large supplies of metal parts were placed in strategic spots. Paint guns for spraying would-be invaders were located throughout the plant. Workers who had been separated and compartmentalized by the noise and restrictions of the assembly line were now working together not only to secure the plant from outside aggressors, but also to organize themselves into a community that could function and sustain itself within the plant.

GM officials knew they were in trouble; their normal strike-breaking tactics wouldn't work against the sit-down. The company couldn't easily stop the strike with violence. Instead of being outside of the factory on a picket line where they would be vulnerable to attack, the workers were protected by the company's own walls. Trying to forcefully remove the workers would put at risk millions of dollars' worth of company property, vast assembly lines and unfinished products. The 3,000 strikers were digging in deep and preparing to hold on tight.

Read about the conclusion in Part 3.