

Stuff you missed in history class: The Flint Sit-Down Strike, Part 1



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With thousands of NALC members traveling to Detroit this summer for the national convention, I thought it a good time to write about what many consider the most significant labor conflict of the 20th century.

Although Detroit is known as Motor City because several headquarters of large automakers are located there, this story focuses on what happened about an hour's drive to the northwest, in Flint, MI. You may have heard about Flint only because of its recent water crisis, but in

its heyday it was home to many auto manufacturing plants and known as "Vehicle City." And in the 1930s, Flint was the center of a revolution in the U.S. labor movement. Here's that story.

Flint was founded around 1815 as a small trading post on the banks of the Flint River. An ideal stopping point on the Detroit-Saginaw trail, the settlement grew into a prosperous village and was incorporated as a city in 1855. Flint became the center of Michigan's lumber industry and by 1860, the population exceeded 7,000.

In 1886, a lumber worker, William Durant, and a hardware salesman, Josiah Dort, each just 25 years old, partnered by investing \$1,000 apiece to found a horse-drawn carriage manufacturing business in Flint. They sold 4,000 carts their first year and by 1900, Durant-Dort had become one of the world's largest carriage manufacturers, producing more than 50,000 carriages a year. As they expanded, they acquired other enterprises that produced the components for the carriages including timber land, lumber mills, wheel manufacturers, axle works and varnish facilities, thus controlling the means and materials of production from top to bottom—and making Durant and Dort millionaires in the process.

Although he personally saw automobiles as "stinky, loud and dangerous," Durant recognized that the horseless carriage was the wave of the future, and he and Dort assumed a controlling interest in the fledgling Buick Motor Co. in 1904. With Buick as its base, Durant envisioned a large auto manufacturing conglomerate that, like his carriage company, would also control its subsidiary component-making companies—and in 1908 founded the General Motors Holding Co. (GM). Over the next 10 years, GM acquired the Chevrolet, Cadillac, Oldsmobile and Pontiac auto companies, the Fisher Body company, as well as parts manufacturers and paint, varnish, axle and wheel companies. By 1920, GM was producing more cars than all other U.S. auto companies combined.

With the success of GM, Flint's population grew from about 13,000 in 1900 to more than 150,000 just 30 years later. By 1930, Flint was well-established as a company town, with 80 percent of its population directly dependent on GM for its livelihood.

While GM's success made its owners and investors wealthy, it did little for the workers who actually built the vehicles. Wages were low, barely half of what was deemed

necessary by the government for a family of four. Workloads were regularly increased, assembly lines sped up and piece rates reduced. The plants were freezing cold in the winter and blazing hot in summer. Workers often were laid off for three to five months at a time between model years. Those who tried to organize unions were reported by GM spies, fired and blacklisted from the auto industry.

Things got more desperate for working people throughout the United States as we entered the Great Depression in the early 1930s. Millions of rural families in the South packed up and moved to northern towns and cities, lured by the promise of higher-paying auto factory jobs. The number of working women rose by almost 30 percent over the decade, and black farming families' arrival in northern cities increased racial tensions as workers competed for what few jobs were available. These rapid changes in the U.S. workforce disrupted what little momentum the labor movement had built up.

Employers played organized workers against the unorganized, skilled workers against the unskilled, employed against the unemployed and the traditional working class against newcomers. Bosses used race and ethnicity to divide and conquer and pushed for non-union "open shops" across the country. This polarized atmosphere pushed workers toward more militant action, but they lacked support.

One of the first acts taken by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt following his inauguration was the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), his first New Deal initiative to counteract the economic and social impacts of the Great Depression. Passed in June 1933, the legislation proclaimed the right of workers to form unions and collectively bargain with employers. Unfortunately, the text of the NIRA was poorly written and ultimately, poorly enforced, yet its passage inspired an outburst of labor activism across the country.

Consistent with its conservative craft unionism approach, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), an alliance of trade unions in the United States, tried to organize autoworkers along craft lines, parceling them out to its many trade unions (machinists, metal workers, painters, etc.) rather than organizing them on an industry-wide basis, i.e., a single union representing all autoworkers. It is estimated that in 1933, more than 210,000 autoworkers joined various AFL locals, including 20,000 in Flint alone. Yet the AFL did little to change the workers' plight. Strikes by local AFL affiliates attempted in Flint in 1930 and 1934 were not supported by AFL leadership and were viciously broken up by company-hired strikebreakers and by the Flint police force. More than once, workers clamored for union representation, signed cards, and later ripped them up when the AFL declined to support their union drives and strikes. By 1935, AFL membership among autoworkers had fallen to a new low. In the Flint GM plants, union membership had declined to fewer than 500. But this was all about to change dramatically in the next year.

I'll cover that next month in Part 2.