THE SITDOWN STRIKES
OF THE 1930's:
From Baseball
to the Bureaucracy

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One day in 1935, a reporter named Louis Adamic visited the rubber capital of America, Akron, Ohio. A new kind of strike called the sit-down had just started hitting the headlines, and Adamic tried to find out how they had begun. The first Akron sit-down, he was told, was not in a rubber factory but at a baseball game, where players from two factories refused to play a scheduled game because the umpire, whom they disliked, was not a union man. They simply sat down on the diamond, while the crowd cheered and yelled for a new umpire, until finally the old one was replaced. Not long after, a dispute developed between a dozen workers and a supervisor in a rubber factory. The workers were on the verge of giving in when the supervisor insulted them and one of them said, "Aw, to hell with 'im, let's sit down." The dozen workers turned off their machines and sat down. Within a few minutes the carefully organized flow of production through the plant began to jam up as department after department ground to a halt. Thousands of workers sat down, some because they wanted to, more because everything stopped anyway. What had happened, workers wanted to know? "There was a sit-down at such-and-such a department." "A sit-down?"... "Yeah, a sit-down: don't you know what a sit-down is, you dope? Like what happened at the ball game the other Sunday." (1)

Adamic describes the response:

sitting by their machines, caldron boilers, and work benches, they talked.

Some realized for the first time how important they were in the process of rubber production. Twelve men had practically stopped the works! Almost any dozen or score of them could do it! In some departments six could do it! The active rank-and-file, scattered through the various sections of the plant, took the initiative in saying, "We've got to stick with 'em!" And they stuck with them, union and non-union men alike. Most of them were non-union. Some probably were afraid not to stick. Some were bewildered. Others amused. There was much laughter in the works. Oh boy, oh boy! Just like at the ball game, eh?" "Yeah, a sit-down: don't you know what a sit-down is, you dope? Like what happened at the ball game the other Sunday." (1)

Between 1933 and 1936 the sitdown gradually became a tradition in Akron, with scores...
of sitdowns, the majority probably not instigated even by rank-and-file union organizers, and almost invariably backed by the workers in other departments. It became an understood principle that when one group of workers stopped work everyone else along the line sat down too. To explain this, Adamic listed the advantages of the sitdown strike, "from the point of view not so much of the rank-and-file organizer or radical agitator as of the average workingman in a mass-production industry like rubber."

To begin with, the sitdown is the opposite of sabotage, to which many workers are opposed.

It destroys nothing. Before shutting down a department in a rubber plant, for instance, the men take the compounded rubber from the mills, or they finish building or curing the tires then being built or cured, so that nothing is needlessly ruined. Taking the same precautions during the sitdown as they do during production, the men do not smoke in departments where benzine is used. There is no drinking. This discipline is instinctive.

Sitdowns are effective, short, and free from violence.

There are no strikebreakers in the majority of instances; the factory management does not dare to get tough and try to drive the sitting men out and replace them with other workers, for such violence would turn the public against the employers and the police, and might result in damage to costly machinery. In a sitdown there are no picket lines outside the factories, where police and company guards have great advantage when a fight starts. The sitdown action occurs wholly inside the plant, where the workers, who know every detail of the interior, have obvious advantages. The sitters-down organize their own 'police squads,' arming them in rubber -- with crowbars normally used to pry open molds in which tires are cured. These worker cops patrol the belt, watch for possible scabs and stand guard near the doors. In a few instances where city police and company cops entered a factory, they were bewildered, frightened, and driven out by the 'sitting' workers with no difficulty whatever.

The initiative, conduct, and control of the sitdown come directly from the men involved.

Most workers distrust -- if not consciously, then unconsciously -- union officials and strike leaders and committees, even when they themselves have elected them. The beauty of the sitdown or the stay-in is that there are no leaders or officials to distrust. There can be no sellout.

Such standard procedure as strike sanctions is hopelessly obsolete when workers drop their tools, stop their machines, and sit down beside them.

Finally, the sitdown counters the boredom, degradation, and isolation of the factory.

Work in most of the departments of a rubber factory or any other kind of mass-production factory is drudgery of the worst sort -- mechanical and uncreative, insistent and requiring no imagination; and any interruption is welcomed by workers, even if only subconsciously. The conscious part of their mind may worry about the loss of pay; their subconscious however does not care a whit about that. The sitdown is dramatic, thrilling.

... the average worker in a mass-production plant is full of grievances and complaints, some of them hardly realized, and any vent of them is welcomed.

The sitdown is a social affair. Sitting workers talk. They get acquainted. And they like that. In a regular strike it is impossible to bring together under one roof more than one or two thousand people, and these only for a meeting, where they do not talk with one another but listen to speakers. A sitdown holds under the same roof up to ten or twelve thousand idle men, free to talk among themselves, man to man. "Why, my God, man," one Goodyear gum-miner told me in November 1936, during the sitdowns last spring I found out that the guy who works next to me is the same as I am, even if I was born in West Virginia and he is from Poland. His grievances are the same. Why shouldn't we stick?"
In 1935, Goodyear announced that it was shifting from the six- to the eight-hour day, admitting that 1,200 men would be laid off and that other companies would follow suit. The announcement created shock in Akron -- unemployment was still high and six hours under speed-up conditions were already so exhausting that rubberworkers complained "When I get home, I'm so tired I can't even sleep with my wife." (4) As the companies began "adjusting" piece rates in preparation for introducing the 8-hour day, a wave of spontaneous work stoppages by non-union employees forced a slowing of production. (5)

January 29, 1936, the truck tirebuilders at Firestone sat down against a reduction in rates and the firing of a union committeeman. The men had secretly planned the strike for 2:00 a.m.; when the hour struck,

the tirebuilder at the end of the line walked three steps to the master safety switch and, drawing a deep breath, he pulled up the heavy wooden handle. With this signal, in perfect synchronization, with the rhythm they had learned in a great mass-production industry, the tirebuilders stepped back from their machines.

Instantly, the noise stopped. The whole room lay in perfect silence. The tirebuilders stood in long lines, touching each other, perfectly motionless, deafened by the silence. A moment ago there had been the weaving hands, the revolving wheels, the clanking belt, the moving hooks, the flashing tire tools. Now there was absolute stillness, no motion anywhere, no-sound.

'We done it! We stopped the belt! By God, we done it!' And men began to cheer hysterically, to shout and howl till the fresh silence. Men wrapped long sinewy arms around their neighbors' shoulders, screaming. 'We done it! We done it!' (6)

The workers in the truck tire department sent a committee around the plant to call but other departments, another to talk with the boss, and a third to police the shop. Within a day the entire Plant No. 1 was struck, and when, after 53 hours, the workers at Plant No. 2 announced they had voted to sit down in sympathy, management capitulated completely. Two days later, pitmen at Goodyear sat down over a pay cut, were persuaded to return to work by the company union, sat down again and were again cajoled back to work, sat down a third time and returned to work under threat of immediate replacement by the Flying Squadron, a special strike-breaking force in the plant. February 8 the tire department at Goodrich sat down over a rate reduction. The strike spread through the rest of the plant, stopping it completely within six hours, and management rapidly capitulated to the sitdowners. The sit-down had shaken each of the big three within a ten-day period.

The crisis finally came Feb. 14. A few days before Goodyear had laid off 70 tirebuilders and the workers assumed that this was the signal for introducing the 8-hour day. At 3:10 a.m., 137 tirebuilders in Dept. 251-A of Goodyear's Plant No. 2 -- few if any of them members of the union -- shut off the power and sat down. (7) The great Goodyear strike was on.

Akron workers had developed the sit-down strike largely because the union had failed to control the speed-up. It had called strikes and then called them off at the last minute, called them again and then reached a settlement which management described accurately as "no change in employee relations," after which rubber workers had stood on street corners tearing up their union cards. But by now the United Rubberworkers Union had changed its course, replaced union professionals with former rubber workers in offices, and allied itself with the new C.I.O. industrial union movement. With each sit-down, the union signed up the participants, and now workers flooded back into the union halls. The initiative for the sitdowns, however, did not come from the union; indeed, as labor historian Irving Bernstein pointed out, "The U.R.W. . . . disliked the sitdown." (8) Thus U.R.W.A. officials now persuaded the Goodyear sitdowners to leave and marched them out of the plant. Goodyear offered to take the laid-off men back, but by now the rubber workers of the entire city were up in arms, determined to make a stand against the 8-hour day. "1500 Goodyear workers met and voted unanimously to strike, but four days later the president of the union local was still saying the strike was not a U.R.W.A. affair." (9)
Meanwhile, the workers began mass picketing at each of the 45 gates around Goodyear's 11-mile perimeter, putting up 300 paper shanties to keep warm. The men elected picket captains who met regularly, coordinated strike action, and set the strike's demands. Inside plant No. 1 hundreds of men and women staged a sitdown until a union delegate marched them out. At the union hall, "committees sprang up almost by themselves" to take care of problems as they arose. A soup kitchen developed out of the sandwich- and coffee-making crew, staffed by volunteers from the Cooks and Waitresses Union. (10) On the 6th day of the strike the CIO sent in half-a-dozen of its top leaders to Akron, and the U.R.W. executive board sanctioned the strike.

The company now tried to break the strike by force. It secured an injunction against mass picketing, which the workers simply ignored. The sheriff put together a force of 150 deputies to open the plants, but 10 thousand workers from all over the city gathered with lead pipes and baseball bats and the charge was called off at the last possible second. Next a Law and Order League was organized by a former mayor with money from Goodyear which claimed 5,200 organized vigilantes. Word spread that an attack was planned for March 18. The union went on the radio all that night while workers gathered in homes throughout the city ready to rush any place an attack was made. The Summit County Central Labor Council declared it would call a general strike in the event of a violent attack on the picket lines. In the face of such preparations, the vigilante movement was paralysed.

President Roosevelt's ace mediator, Ed McGrady, proposed that the workers return to work and submit the issues to arbitration. To this and other proposed settlements the workers at their mass meetings chanted "No, no, a thousand times no, I'd rather die than say yes." (11) After more than a month Goodyear capitulated on most of the demands, although without agreeing to formal recognition. The rubberworkers returned to work largely victorious and proceeded to implement their position with the sitdown. In the three months after the strike there were 19 recorded sitdowns at Goodyear alone, with any number more "quickies" unrecorded. (12) Louis Adamic described the situation he found in Akron in 1936:

a week seldom passed without one or more sitdowns. . . . A typical one took place on November 17, when I was in Akron, in the huge Goodyear No. 1 plant. After an inconclusive argument with the management over an adjustment in wage rates, ninety-eight workers in one of the departments sat down, stopping the work of seven thousand men for a day and a half, at the end of which period the company promised speedy action on the adjustment.

Officials of rubber companies, with whom I talked, were frantic in their attempts to stop the sitdowns. They blamed them on 'trouble-makers' and the union movement in general. They tried to terrorize union sympathizers. The Goodyear management, for instance, assigned two non-union inspectors to a department with instructions to disqualify tires produced by known union men. After petting them with milk bottles for a while, the men sat down and refused to work until the inspectors were removed. The company rushed in forty factory guards with clubs, but a 65-year-old union gun-miner met the army at the entrance and had them 'beat it.' They went -- and the non-union inspectors were replaced.

Akron sitdowns were provoked by various other causes. In the early autumn of 1936 S.H. Dalrymple, president of the U.R.W.A., was beaten by thugs employed by a rubber factory, whereupon the factory workers sat down in protest, forcing the company to close for a day. When work was resumed the next night, a K.K.K. fiery cross blessed up within view of the plant. This caused the man to sit down again -- and to dispatch a squad of 'huskies' to extinguish the cross. (13)
The scene of the sit-down story now shifts to the auto industry, where Machine Operator No. 8004 worked in the camshaft department of the Chevrolet factory in Flint, Michigan. The men he worked with produced 118 shafts a shift, naturally reducing a few more in the first half when they were fresher than in the second. One day in 1935 management suddenly announced that they would have to increase production in the second half to the level of the first, turning out 124 instead of 118 a shift. The men accepted the increase, but then organized informally to prevent any further speed-up. As one of them put it, "Any man who runs over 124 every night is only cutting his own throat." (14) They also carefully planned not to produce more in the first half, least management again use the differential against them. If they ran past 62 shafts, they would hide the extras in the racks under the machines, covering them with rough stock. The pickup man checked every hour to see how many shafts were completed and passed the information along, allowing the workers to keep a steady and equalized pace. If a worker turned out 70 shafts, he picked up only 62 of them. Machine Operator No. 8004 fought the movement, telling his fellow workers to "knock the production out and forget about trying to set an amount for each man to run" (15); he was almost beaten up for his pains. This case of workers controlling the speed of production is documented -- unlike thousands of others that have remained unrecorded -- because Machine Operator No. 8004 was a labor spy. (16)

As a study of the auto industry in 1934 by the NRA Division of Research and Planning revealed prophetically, the grievance "mentioned most frequently... and uppermost in the minds of those who testified is the stretch but [speed-up]. Everywhere workers indicated that they were being forced to work harder and harder, to put out more and more products in the same amount of time and with less workers doing the job... If there is any one cause for conflagration in the Automobile Industry, it is this one." (17) According to Sidney Fine, whose Sitdown is the basic scholarly study of the great General Motors strike of 1936-7, the speed-up was resented not only because of the absolute rate of production, but also because the mass production worker "was not free, as perhaps he had been on some previous job, to set the pace of his work and to determine the manner in which it was to be performed." (18) A Buick worker complained "You have to run to the toilet and run back. If you had to... take a crap, if there wasn't anybody there to relieve you, you had to run away and tie up the line, and if you tied the line up you got hell for it." (19) The wife of a GM worker complained, "Yes," replied another, "they're not men anymore if you know what I mean. They're not men. My husband is only 30, but to look at him you'd think he was 50 and all played out." (20)

The development of unionism in Auto followed closely that in Rubber. Herbert Harris estimated that with the coming of the New Deal's National Recovery Administration, which
guaranteed workers' right to collective bargaining. 210,000 auto workers joined the AFL auto locals, though the figure may be excessive. Since the employers refused to give any significant concessions, important auto locals voted to strike and a strike throughout the industry seemed inevitable; workers flooded into the unions to take part in the strike — 20,000 in Flint alone. (24) The AFL leadership, however, wanted to avoid a strike at all costs, and managed to postpone it again and again. Finally Collins, top AFL official in the auto industry, asked President Roosevelt to intervene. Roosevelt immediately demanded that the strike be postponed. That afternoon Collins told union leaders, "You have a wonderful man down there in Washington and he is trying hard to raise wages and working conditions." (25) According to Kraus, "The attitudes of the auto workers toward the President those days bordered on the mystical:" the local representatives agreed to cancel the strike. Thereupon Roosevelt announced a settlement conceding nothing to the workers but an Automobile Labor board to hear discrimination cases, legitimizing company unions, and virtually exempting the auto industry from the NRA's protection of collective bargaining; (26) "We all feel tremendously happy over the outcome in Washington," a GM vice-president reported. (27) In the words of Sidney Fine, "The President made the victory of the automobile manufacturers complete on the issue of representation and collective bargaining." (28) Leonard Woodcock recalls that when the workers in Flint heard of the settlement they felt "a deep sense of betrayal," and began to tear up union cards. By October 1934, paid up membership in Flint had plummeted to 528. (29) In several subsequent local strikes, the AFL played a strikebreaking role, even marching its members with a police escort into a Motor Products plant struck by another union. (30) Those few, mostly young and militant, who remained in the auto union bitterly fought AFL control, and eventually took control of the union and aligned it with the newly emerging CIO.

Like the rubber workers, the auto workers turned to the sitdown and other forms of job action against speed-up; we have given one example in a camshaft department above. Quickies occurred sporadically, especially in auto body plants in Cleveland and Detroit, from 1933-35. (31) By late 1936, the highly visible sitdowns in Akron were being imitated by auto workers all over, especially since it was the 'grooving in' period in which new models are introduced, and management as usual tried to raise speed and cut piece rates on new jobs, lifting resentment to a peak. In Flint, heart of the GM empire, there were seven work stoppages in Fisher Body #1 plant in one week. One day the trim shop knocked off an hour early as a protest. Workers in another shop struck for an extra man and got the line slowed from 50 to 45 jobs. Another action won a 20% restoration of a wage cut. Henry Kraus, author of a book on the GM strike and at that time editor of the union paper in Flint, describes this as "largely a spontaneous movement onto which the union had not yet securely attached itself." (32) He describes Bub Simons, a union leader in the fisher plant, coming to Bob Travis, the UAW organizer in Flint, and saying, "Honest to God, Bob, you've got to let me pull a strike before one pops somewhere that we won't be able to control!" (33)

The union tried to win the confidence of the workers by supporting the sitdowns and making itself the agency through which they could be spread. On November 12, for example, supervision reduced by one of the 'bow-men' who welded the angle irons across car roofs. The other bow-men were two brothers named Perkins and an Italian named Joe Urban; none of them were in the union but they had been reading about the Bendix sitdown and, adopting the idea, simply stopped working. The foreman and superintendent rushed over and tried to talk them into going back to work, but the men just sat there arguing until twenty unfinished jobs had passed on the production line. The whole department followed the argument with intense excitement. Finally the bow-men agreed to go back to work till they could talk to the day-shift about it, but everyone left that night talking about the sitdown. Next day when the Perkins came to work they were sent to the employment office and told that they were fired. They showed their firing slips to Bub Simons and he and the other union committee men
ran through the "body in white" department where the main welding and soldering work was done, crying, "The Perkins boys were fired! Nobody starts working!"

The whistle blew. Every man in the department stood at his station, a deep, significant tenseness in him. The foreman pushed the button and the skeleton bodies, already partly assembled when they got to this point, began to rumble forward. But no one lifted a hand. All eyes were turned to Simons who stood out in the aisle by himself.

The bosses ran about like mad.


But the men acted as though they never heard them. One or two of them couldn't stand the tension. Habit was deep in them and it was like physical agony for them to see the bodies pass untouched. They grabbed their tools and chased after them. "Rat! Rat!" the men growled without moving and the others came to their senses.

The superintendent stopped by the "brow men."

"You're to blame for this!" he snarled.

"So what if we are?" little Joe Urban, the Italian, cried, overflowing with pride. "You ain't running your line, are you?"

That was altogether too much. The superintendent grabbed Joe and started for the office with him. The two went down along the entire line, while the men stood rigid as though awaiting the word of command. It was like that because they were organized but their organization only went that far and no further. What now?

Simons, a torch-solderer, was almost at the end of the line. He too was momentarily held in view by the superintendent's overt act of authority. The latter had dragged Joe Urban past him when he finally found presence of mind to call out:

"Hey, Teeze, where you going?"

It was spoken in just an ordinary conversational tone and the other was taken so aback he answered the really impertinent question.

"I'm taking him to the office to have a little talk with him." Then suddenly he realized and got mad. "Say, I think I'll take you along too!"

That was his mistake.

"No you won't!" Simons said calmly.

"Oh yes I will!" and he took hold of his shirt.

Simons yanked himself loose. And suddenly at this simple act of insurance Teeze realized his danger. He seemed to become acutely conscious of the long line of silent men and felt the threat of their potential strength. They had been transformed into something he had never known before and over which he no longer had any command. He let loose of Simons and started off again with Joe Urban, hastening his pace. Simons yelled:

"Come on, fellows, don't let them fire little Joe!"

About a dozen boys shot out of the line and started after Teeze. The superintendent dropped Joe like a hot poker and deck-footed it for the door. The men returned to their places and all stood waiting. Now what? The next move was the company's. The moment tingled with expectancy.

Teeze returned shortly, accompanied by Bill Lynch, the assistant plant manager. Lynch began to make a friendly sort of person and was liked by the men. He went straight to Simons.

"I hear we've got trouble here," he said in a chatty way.

"What are we going to do about it?"

"I think we'll get a committee together and go in and see Parker," Simons replied.

Lynch agreed. So Simons began picking the solid men out as had been prearranged. The foreman tried to struggle in a couple of company-minded individuals, so Simons chose a group of no less than eighteen to make sure that the scrappers would outnumber the others. Walt Moore went with him but Joe Devitt remained behind to see that the bosses didn't try any monkeyshines. The others headed for the office where Eva Parker, the plant manager, greeted them as smooth as silk.

"You can smoke if you want to, boys," he said as he bid them to take the available chairs. "Well, what seems to be the trouble here? We ought to be able to settle this thing."

"Mr. Parker, it's the speedup the boys are complaining about," Simons said, taking the lead. "It's absolutely beyond human endurance. And now we've organized ourselves into a union. It's the union you're talking it right now, Mr. Parker."

"Why that's perfectly all right, boys," Parker said affably. "Whatever a man does outside the plant is his own business."

The men were almost bowed over by this manner. They had never known Parker as anything but a tough cold tomato with an array sergeant's style. He was clearly trying to play to the weaker boys on the committee and began asking them leading questions. Simons or Walt Moore would try to break in and answer for them.

"Now I didn't ask you," Parker would say, "you can talk when it's your turn!" In this way he sought to split the committee up into so many individuals. Simons realized he had to put an end to that quickly.

"We might as well quit talking right now, Mr. Parker," he said, putting on a tough act. "Those men have got to go back and that's all there is to it!"

"That's what you say," Parker snapped back.

"No, that's what the men say. You can go out and see for yourself. Nobody is going to work until that happens."

Parker knew that was true. Joe Devitt and several other good men who had been left behind were seeing to that. The plant manager seemed to soften again. All right, he said, he'd agree to take the two men back if he found their attitude was okay.

"Who's to judge that?" Simons asked.

"I will, of course!"

"Uh-uh?" Simons smiled and shook his head.

The thing bogged down again. Finally Parker said the Perkins brothers could return unconditionally on Monday. This was Friday night and they'd already gone home as there was no point holding up thousands of men until they could be found and brought back. To make this arrangement final he agreed that the workers in the department would get paid for the time lost in the stoppage. But Simons held fast to the original demand. Who knew what might happen till Monday? The Perkins fellows would
have to be back on the line that night or the entire incident might turn out a flop.

"They go back tonight," he insisted. Parker was fit to be tied. What was this? Never before in his life had he seen anything like it!

"Those boys have left!" he shouted. "It might take hours to get them back. Are you going to keep the lines tied up all that time?"

"We'll see what the men say," Simons replied, realizing that a little rank and file backing would not be out of the way. The committee, real and started back for the shop.

As they entered a zealous foreman preceded them, hollering: "Everybody back to work!" The men dashed for their places.

Simons jumped onto a bench.

"Wait a minute!" he shouted. The men crowded around him. He waited till they were all there and then told them in full detail of the discussion in the office. Courage visibly mounted into the men's faces as they heard of the unwavering manner in which their committee had acted in the dreaded presence itself.

"What are we going to do, fellows," Simons asked, "take the company's word and go back to work or wait till the Perkins boys are right there at their jobs?"

"Bring them back first!" Walt Mouat and Joe Devitt began yelling and the whole crowd took up the cry.

Simons seized the psychological moment to make it official.

"As many's in favor of bringing the Perkins boys back before we go to work, say Aye!" There was a mur in answer. "Opposed, Nay!" Only a few timid voices sounded — those of the company men and the foremen who had been circulating among the workers trying to influence them to go back to work. Simons turned to them.

"There you are," he said.

One of the foremen had taken out pencil and paper and after the vote he went around recording names. "You want to go to work?" he asked each of the men. Finally he came to one chap who stuck his chin out and said loudly:

"Emphatically not!" which made the rest of the boys laugh and settled the issue.

Mr. Parker got the news and decided to terminate the matter as swiftly as possible. He contacted the police and asked them to bring the Perkins boys in. One was at home but the other had gone out with his girl. The police short-waved his license number to all scout cars. The local radio station cut into its program several times to announce that the brothers were wanted back at the plant. Such fame would probably never again come to these humble workers. By chance the second boy caught the announcement over the radio in his car and came to the plant all bewildered. When told what had happened the unappreciative chap refused to go to work until he had driven his girl home and changed his clothes! And a thousand men waved another half hour while the meritorious fellow was getting out of his Sunday duds.

When the two brothers came back in to the shop as last, accompanied by the committee, the workers let out a des-
The power revealed here was the workers' own power to halt production. But the union claimed credit for having led the action, and largely in response to this victory, union membership in Flint increased from 150 to 1500 within two weeks. (35)

The union's objective was to win recognition as the bargaining representative for the auto workers. Discontent was seething in the auto plants and breaking out in strikes all over. Since the auto companies were not willing to recognize the union voluntarily, the obvious approach for the union was to "strike itself" to this strike movement, lead it on a company-wide basis, and use it to negotiate for recognition by the company. As one U.A.W. National Council member put it some time before, "the only means we have now is to strike...we must prove to the automobile workers we can help them.

(36) Indeed, such "organizational strikes" became the basic tactic of the CIO unions in winning union recognition. Yet the union leadership was ambivalent about a strike. According to J. Raymond Walsh, later research and education director for the CIO, "The CIO high command, preoccupied with the drive in steel, tried in vain to prevent the strike..."

(37) Leadership of the UAW believed a strike was necessary, but wanted to postpone it until they were better organized -- membership from April to December 1936 averaged only 35,000 for the entire industry, which on the average employed 460,000 (38) -- and resisted attempts to spread various strikes that broke out in November and December. This attitude was based on the fact that G.M. would be little hurt by strikes in peripheral plants, whereas if the Fisher-Body plants in Cleveland and Flint could be closed, perhaps 3/4ths of GM's production could be crippled. (39)

On the other hand, local leaders often reflected the turbulence of the workers in the shops; as Adolf Gerner, CIO representative for the auto industry, complained;

There is...a strong undercurrent of revolt against the authority of the laws and rules of the organization...It is not that the boys are defiant of the organization; I attribute it rather to their youth and dynamic natures. They want things done right now, and they are too impatient to wait for the orderly procedure involved in collective bargaining. (40)

The union finally requested a collective bargaining conference with G.M., the key company in the industry. It also announced the goals with which it hoped to gain leadership of the workers: an annual wage adequate to provide "health, decency, and comfort," elimination of speed-up, seniority, an 8-hour day, overtime pay, spreading work through shorter hours, safety measures, and "true collective bargaining." (41) It expected events to move toward a head sometime in January. Events, however, did not wait for them; the workers all over began striking on the company's own: as Gerner complained, "It seems to be a custom for anybody or any group to call a strike at will..." (42)

In Atlanta November 18, the local called a sitdown over prestige reductions, to the consternation of national officials of the UAW. A week later, the UAW local at the Bendix Corporation in South Bend won a contract after a 9-day sitdown, and a sitdown at Midland Steel Frame Company in Detroit won a wage increase, seniority, and time and a half for overtime. In early December a sitdown at Kel- sey-Hayes Wheel Company in Detroit forced union recognition: in Kansas City Dec. 16 workers sat down over the firing of a union man for jumping over the conveyor to go to the toilet. (43) Bigroth experienced a virtual sitdown wave in December '36, with workers at the Gordon Baking Company, Aloos. National Automotive Fibers, and Bohlen Aluminum and Brass Co. all sitting down. (44)

Those union leaders who wanted a strike against G.M. were most worried about whether the Fisher plant in Cleveland would come out -- many union workers there had lost their
jobs in the wake of previous strikes, and no more than 10% of the workers were in the union. (45) But resentment was running high over grooving-in speedup, and when on Dec., 28 management postponed a long-awaited meeting to discuss grievances, workers in the quarter panel department said "to hell with this stalling" and pulled the power switch. Workers in the steel stock, metal assembly and trim departments quit work and soon 7,000 workers were sitting down. (46) The local leadership was "taken completely by surprise." (47)

Meanwhile, events in Flint moved toward the decisive conflict. Two days after the Cleveland strike began, 50 workers sat down spontaneously at the Fisher Body No. 2 plant in Flint to protest the transfer of three inspectors who had been ordered to quit the union and refused. (48) Later that night workers in Fisher plant #1 discovered that the company was loading dies -- critical for the making of car bodies -- onto railroad cars for shipment to plants elsewhere. GM followed a policy described by Knudson as "diversification of plants were local union strength is dangerous": half the machinery in the Toledo Chevrolet plant, for example, had been removed after a strike in 1935, leaving hundreds out of work. (49) The workers were furious, and streamed over to the union hall across from the plant where a meeting had been announced for lunchtime. Kraus, who was present, reports that "Everybody's mind seemed made up before even a word was spoken." (50) When an organizer asked what they wanted to do, they shouted, "Shut her down! Shut the goddamn plant!" (51) They raced back into the plant, and a few minutes later one of them opened a 3rd story window and shouted, "Hurray, Bob! She's ours!" (52)
The occupiers rapidly faced the problem of organizing themselves for life inside the plant. The basic decision-making body was a daily meeting of all the strikers in the plant. "The entire life of the sitdown came into review here and most of its ideas and decisions originated on the spot," Henry Klaas reported. (53) The chief administrative body was a committee of 17 that reported to the strikers; available records indicate that virtually all its decisions were cleared with the general meeting of strikers. (54) The strikers inside the plant, according to Sidney Fine, "displayed a fierce independence in their relationship with the UAW leadership on the outside." For example, the Flint UAW organizer, though personally respected by the strikers, had to ask their permission to send one of his men into the plant to gather material for the press, and he was only allowed in on condition his notes were cleared by the strike executive. A sitdowner told a reporter that he and his companions would not leave the plant even under orders from the union president: or John L. Lewis "unless we get what we want." (55) They had no direct representation in the negotiations, however.

Social groups of 15, usually men who worked together in the shop, set up house and lived together family-style in their own corner of the plant (56) usually with close camaraderie. Each group had its own steward, and the stewards met together from time to time. The actual work of the strike was done by committees on food, recreation, information, education, postal services, sanitation, grievances, tracking down rumors, coordination with the outside, and the like: each worker served on at least one committee, and was responsible for six hours of strike duty a day. The sitdowners sent out their own representatives to recruit union members, coordinate relief, and create an 'outside defense squad.'

Special attention was paid to the question of defense. A 'special patrol' made hourly inspections of the entire plant day and night, looking for signs of company attack. Security groups were assigned to doorways and stairwells. Strikers set up a regular production line (57) to make blackjacks out of rubber hoses, braided leather and lead, and covered the windows with metal sheets with holes for the hoses. The men conducted regular drills with the hoses, and collected piles of bolts, nuts, and door hinges for ammunition.

Sanitation likewise was stressed. At 3:00 p.m. a crane whistle would blow and all the men would line up at one end of the plant. Then the second would put things in order, and the third would sweep the floor. The commissary floor was cleaned once an hour. The men showered daily. These measures aimed at preserving both morale and health. Likewise the workers protected the machinery, in some cases even oiling it, organized fire protection and inspected for fire hazards. Food was prepared on the outside by hundreds of volunteers and brought to the sitdowners by the striking Trolley Couch employees.

Workers established courts to punish infractions of the rules. The most serious 'crimes' were failures to perform assigned duties by not showing up, sleeping on the job, or deserting the post. Others included failing to clean dirty dishes, littering, not participating in daily cleanup, smoking outside, the plant, failure to search everyone entering and leaving buildings, bringing in liquor, or making noise in sleeping areas or the "Quiet Zone" where absolute silence was available 24 hours a day. Punishments were designed to fit the crime: men who failed to take a
daily shower were 'sentenced' to scrub the bathhouse. The ultimate punishment, applied only after repeated infractions, was expulsion from the plant. The courts were generally conducted with a good deal of humor and treated as source of entertainment. For example, a striker who entered a plant without proper credentials was sentenced to make a speech to the court as his punishment; reporter Edward Levinson observed that "there is more substantial humor in a single session of the Fisher strikers' kangaroo courts than in a season of Broadway musical comedies."

This kind of informal gaiety and creativity seemed to burgeon in the strike community. A favorite pastime was for the men to gather in a circle and call out the name of a member, who would then have to sing, whistle, dance, or tell a story. Each plant had its own band, composed of mandolins, guitars, banjos, and harmonicas. The strikers made up verse after verse about the strike to dozens of popular and country tunes. General meetings, by the strikers' decision, opened and closed with singing; the favorite was Solidarity Forever. One sitdowner wrote home, "We are all one happy family now. We all feel fine and have plenty to eat. We have several good banjo players and singers. We sing and cheer the Fisher boys and they return it." (59) Another wrote, "I am having a great time, something new, something different, lots of grub and music." (60) A psychologist declared that the atmosphere of cooperativeness created a 'veritable revolution of personality', indicated, for instance, by workers more frequently saying "we" than "I". (61)

As a reporter in Paul Gallico's novellette on the sitdown sensed, "They had made a palace out of what had been their prison." (62) Outside of the factories, a network of committees supporting the strike, organizing defense, food, sound cars, picketing, transportation, strike relief, publicity, entertainment, and the like. Woman were particularly important in the outside organization. The union leadership had declared that only men would occupy the plants, to the anger of some woman workers.) Wives' support was essential to strike morale, a fact recognized by the company, which sent representatives calling on them to pressure their husbands back to work. But strikers' wives and woman workers poured into strike activities, maintaining the picket line, running the commissary, and working on the various committees. Following a street dance New Year's Eve about 50 woman decided to form a Woman's Auxiliary, and set up their own speakers bureau, a day care center for mothers on strike duty, first-aid station, welfare committee, and the like. After battles began with the police, woman organized a Woman's Emergency Brigade of 350 on military lines, ready to battle police. "We will form a line around the men, and if the police want to fight then they'll just have to fire into us," one of the woman said. "Woman who only yesterday were horrified at unionism, who felt inferior to the task or organizing, speaking, leading, have, as if overnight, become the spearhead in the battle of unionism." (64) Another recalled, "I found a common understanding and unselfishness I'd never known in my life. I'm living for the first time with a definite goal... just being a woman is not enough anymore, I want to be a human being with the right to think for myself." (65)

The strike spread rapidly from Flint and other initial centers throughout the-GM system. The union coordinated the strike and put forward union recognition as its central demand - what recognition meant was never clarified, but workers assumed it meant a powerful say for them in industrial decisions and they supported it enthusiastically. Auto workers sat down at Guide Lamp in Anderson, Indiana, at Chevrolet and Fisher Body in Janesville Wisconsin, and Cadillac in Detroit. Regular strikes developed at Norwood and Toledo Ohio, and Temstedt, Michigan. GM was forced to halt production at Pontiac, Oldsmobile, Delco-Rei, and numerous other plants. (66) GM's projected production for January of 224,000 was cut to 60,000 (67), and in the first ten days of February GM produced only 151 cars in the entire country. (68)

GM refused to bargain until the plants were evacuated and started a counter-attack on three levels: legal action, organization of an anti-strike movement, and direct violence against the strikers. The third day of the strike GM lawyers requested and received an injunction from Judge Edward Black ordering strikers to evacuate the plants, cease picketing, and allow those wanting to work to enter. The Sheriff read the injunction to
the sitdowners, who joined him menacingly until he fled. Then a quick-witted union lawyer checked and discovered that Judge Black owned 3365 shares of GM stock valued at $219,900. This revealed the judge as a party in interest and made the injunction worthless, as well as showing dramatically the corporation's power over government. (69)

The company's next move was to organize the Flint Alliance "for the Security of Our Jobs, Our Homes, and Our Community." It was headed by George Boysen, a past and future GM official, and as a state police investigator reported, it was "a product of General Motors brains"; it worked in close cooperation with Flint City Manager Barringer. (70)

The Alliance began anti-strike publicity and started recruiting anti-union workers, businessmen, farmers, housewives, schoolchildren, and anyone else who would sign a card; a large enrollment was desired, according to Boysen, for "its moral effect toward smothering the strike movement." (71)

For almost two weeks there was little disturbance in Flint. But on Jan. 11 supporters carrying dinner to the sitdowners in Fisher 62 were stopped at the gate by plant guards, whom the strikers had allowed to hold the ground floor of the factory. The pickets started taking food up a 24-foot ladder, but the guards formed a flying wedge and seized the ladder. Suddenly police closed off all traffic approaches to the plant. An attempt was clearly under way either to starve out the sitdowners or evict them by force, and unless the workers took the gates it would succeed. Twenty sitdowners, armed with blackjacks, marched downstairs and demanded the key to the gate. "My orders are to give it to nobody," the company policeman in charge replied. (72) The sitdowners gave them to the count of ten, then charged the gate. The guards fled and locked themselves in the ladies room. The sitdowners put their shoulders to the wooden gates and splintered them, to the cheers of the pickets who had quickly gathered outside. (73)

Then suddenly patrol cars began arriving and city policemen began pouring out and throwing gas grenades at the pickets and into the plant. At this point all the defensive preparations came in useful, as the sitdowners dropped firehoses to the windows and showered the police with two-pound door hangers. Within five minutes the police, drenched and battered, retreated from the vicinity and the factory. The police attacked again, but by this time the outside pickets had regrouped and drove them off again. In retreat the police began firing their guns, wounding 13. (74)

The conflict was quickly dubbed the Battle of the Running Bulls, and was held as a
great victory for the strikers and a demonstration that they could hold out against police attack; in its wake, hitherto neutral or hostile workers who had waited on the sidelines flooded into the union. It also caused Governor Frank Murphy to order the National Guard into Flint.

Murphy was a New Deal governor par excellence. In Detroit he had been one of the most liberal mayors in the country, providing exceptional public assistance to the unemployed and preventing the police from suppressing radicals. He was elected governor with an overwhelming labor support, and he insisted on making welfare relief available to strikers. He was also on close terms with auto magnates as Walter Chrysler and even Lawrence Fisher of G.M.'s Fisher Body, whose plants were the chief target in Flint. Although it was not known at the time, Murphy was also the owner of 1650 shares of G.M. stock worth $104,875. (75)

Murphy did not intend to use the Guard to drive the sitdowners out by force. In this decision he was fully supported by General Motors, whose officials told Murphy privately that they did not want the strikers “evicted by force.” Knudson stated publicly that GM wanted the strike settled by negotiation rather than violence. Murphy, who believed the sitdown illegal but feared bloodshed in evicting the strikers, used the Guard to prevent vigilante attacks while holding the threat of a starve-out over the workers’ heads. Murphy even succeeded in arranging a truce in which the union would evacuate the plant in exchange for a company pledge not to remove machinery or open the plants for 15 days. This would have given away the strikers’最强的点, but it was scotched when the union labeled GM’s plans to negotiate with the Flint Alliance a double-cross and called off the truce.

Failing to evacuate the plants by negotiation, GM applied for a new injunction from a different judge. Meanwhile pressure built up as strikers were attacked by police in Detroit, vigilantes in Saginaw, and both in Anderson, Indiana. At this point the local leaders in Flint devised a bold initiative to shift the balance of forces by seizing the giant Chevrolet #4 plant. The problem was that union strength at Chevy #4 was limited and the plant was heavily protected by company guards. At a meeting of carefully selected Chevrolet workers which deliberately included company spies, Bob Travis announced a sitdown at Chevrolet #9 at 3:20 the next day, Feb. 1. Key leaders at #9 were told that they need only hold the plant for half-an-hour, as the real target was #6. Leaders in #6 were told the real target, #4. As expected, company guards next day had been shifted from the #4 to the #9 area. At 3:20 workers sat down in #9, company guards rushed in, and the diversionary battle began. Meanwhile a handful of workers in Chevy 4 who knew the plan marched around the factory shouting "shut 'er down!" but were too few even to be heard. Those tipped off in #6, meanwhile, led a small group over to #4. They were still too few to close down the huge plant; however, and it seemed as if the plan had failed. But when they returned to #6, however, they found the whole plant had joined the strike, and the workers marched en masse back to #4 and shut down the plant. About half the #4 workers joined the sitdown, the rest dropping their lunches in gondolas for the sitdowners as they left.

The capture of Chevy #4 succeeded in changing the balance of forces, showing that the workers were still able to expand their grip on the industry. As a result, GM agreed to negotiate without evacuation of the plants. The law-and-order forces tried one more offensive on the ground, however. Jan. 2 Judge Gedola issued a new injunction ordering evacuation of the plants and an end to picketing within 24 hours; when the workers ignored it he issued a writ of attachment and claimed authority to have the National Guard enforce it without approval of the Governor. In the final crisis, thousands of workers poured into Flint from hundreds of miles around — auto plants in Detroit and Toledo were shut down by the exodus of workers to Flint. (78) To avoid the appearance of provocation, the mobilization was declared Women's Day and women’s brigades came in from Lansing, Pontiac, Toledo and Detroit. The crowd of perhaps 10,000 virtually occupied Flint, parading through the heart of the city, surrounding the threatened Fisher #1 plant, armed with 30-inch wooden braces provided from the factory.

Learning that the Guard would not evict the sitdowners, City Manager Barringer ordered all city police on duty and decided to organize a 500-mari "army of our own." (79)
"We are going down there shooting," he announced. "The strikers have taken over this town and we are going to take it back." (80)

The tenor of events is suggested by a plan worked out without union knowledge by the Union War Vets, who had taken responsibility for guarding outside strike leaders. Had outside leaders been arrested under the Gadsden writ, the veterans "would muster an armed force among their own number and in defense of the U.S. Constitution, of 'real patriotism', and the union, would take over the city hall, the courthouse and police headquarters, capture and imprison all officials' and release the union men." (81)

The rug was pulled from under Barringer's army when a GM official asked him to demobilize, saying "The last thing we want is rioting in the streets." (82) A result the mass mobilization would have made inevitable.

After long negotiations GM agreed to recognize and bargain with the union in the struck plants and promised not to deal with any other organization in them for six months. As Sidney Fine wrote,

"What the UAW, like other unions of the time (understood by the word 'recognition' has always been rather nebulous, but the union believed and it had reason to, that it had been accorded a status of legitimacy in GM plants that it had never before enjoyed. It was confident that it would be able to consolidate its position in the 17 plants during the 6-month period because it had no rivals to contend with..." (83).

But if the agreement established the union firmly enough, it did little for the concrete grievances of the workers. When Jack Simons, head of the strike committee in Fisher #1 was awakened and told the terms of the settlement he remarked, "That won't do for the men to hear. That ain't what we're striking for." (84)

(85) When the union presented the settlement to the owners, they asked, "How about the speed of the line?" "How about the bosses-- would they be as tough as ever?" Did the settlement mean everything stood where it did when they started? (85)
The workers' forebodings were borne out by the negotiations which followed the evacuation of the plants. In the words of Irving Bernstein, "The corporation's policy was to contain the union, to yield no more than economic power compelled and, above all, to preserve managerial discretion in the productive process, particularly over the speed of the line." (86) The fundamental demand of the strike from the point of view of the workers had been 'mutual determination' of the speed of production, but under the collective bargaining agreement signed March 12 local management was to have 'full authority' in determining these matters— if a worker objected "the job was to be restudied and an adjustment was to be made if the timing was found to be unfair." (87) Further, instead of having a shop steward for every 25 workers, directly representing those they worked with, the union agreed to dealing with management through plant committees of no more than 9 members per plant. (88) Finally, the union agreed to become the agency for repressing workers' direct action against speed-up or other grievances, pledging that

"every time a dispute came up the fellows would have a tendency to sit down and just stop working." (91) According to Knudson, there were 170 sitdowns in GM plants between March and June, 1937.

For example, March 18th, 200 women sat down in a sewing room in the Flint Fisher Body #1 plant in a dispute over methods of payment. An hour later 280 sat down in sympathy with them in another sewing room. Next 60 men sat down in the shipping department. Soon the entire plant was forced to shut down. "Since the strike was clearly in violation of the agreement ... in which the union promised to protect the company against sitdowns during the life of the agreement, union officials hurried to Flint to settle the
SIT DOWN

(Music and Words by Maurice Sugar, published in the United Automobile Worker, Jan. 1937.)

When they tie a can to a union man Sit down! Sit down! When they give 'im the sack they'll take him back Sit down! Sit down! Sit down, just take a seat, Sit down and rest your feet. Sit down you've got 'em beat. Sit down! Sit down!

When they smile and say, no raise in pay
Sit down! Sit down!
When you want the boss to come across
Sit down! Sit down!

When the boss won't talk, don't take a walk
Sit down! Sit down!
When the boss sees that, he'll want a little chat
Sit down! Sit down!

When the speed-up comes, just twiddle your thumbs
Sit down! Sit down!
When you want 'em to know they'd better go slow
Sit down! Sit down!

CHORUS

(2)

(3)

(4)

CHORUS
Two weeks later 935 men struck in the final Chevrolet assembly plant. Then the parts and service plant struck in sympathy, closing Fisher Body Plant #2. Finally workers in all departments of the Chevrolet complex walked out in sympathy. Meanwhile the Fisher Body Plant and the Yellow Truck and Coach Plant in Pontiac were closed by workers protesting discharge of fellow workers. In all, 30,000 workers were involved in the wildcats at this time. This indicated that the workers had developed the ability to coordinate action between plants and even between cities without the union; union officials told Governor Murphy that they were "mystified" by the sitdowns and that "their representatives in the plants told them they had been 'pushed into' the new sitdowns without union authorization." (93) Equally important, the workers won control over the rate of production, despite the union contract that conceded this authority to management.

"Production in the Chevrolet motor plants has been slowed down to nearly 50% of former output during the last several weeks by concerted action of the union workers, with key men on the mother line stopping work at intervals to slow down production." (94)

Despite the failure of the union to win control over the production rates, a Fisher #1 worker who had opposed the big strike wrote,

"The inhuman high speed is no more. We now have a voice, and have slowed up the speed of the line. And we are now treated as human beings, and not as part of the machinery. The high pressure is taken off, ... it proves clearly that united we stand, divided or alone we fail." (95)

The top leadership of the union considered these wildcat work stoppages a serious threat to union authority. A N.Y. Times article entitled "Unauthorized Sit-Downs Fought By C.I.O. Unions" (96) described the steps they took against them:

"(1) As soon as an unauthorized strike occurs or impedes, international officers or representatives of the U.A.W. are rushed to the scene to end or prevent it, get the men back to work and bring about an orderly adjustment of the grievances.

(2) Strict orders have been issued to all organizers and representatives that they will be dismissed if they authorize any stoppages of work without the consent of the international officers, and that local unions will not receive any money or financial support from the international union for any unauthorized stoppage of, or interference with, production.

(3) The shop stewards are being 'educated' in the procedure for settling grievances set up in the General Motors contract, and a system is being worked out which the union believes will convince the rank and file that strikes are unnecessary.

(4) In certain instances there has been a 'purge' of officers, organizers, and representatives who have appeared to be 'hot-heads' or 'trouble-makers' by dismissing, transferring, or demoting them."

John L. Lewis and U.A.W. leaders blamed wildcats that tied tens of thousands in early April on Communist agitation, and the N.Y. Times reported Lewis might soon "send some 'flying squadrons' of 'strong-arm men' from his own United Mine Workers to Flint ... to keep the trouble-makers in line." (97) But William Weinstone, Michigan secretary of the Communist Party, hotly denied the charges that Communists were responsible, himself denouncing "helter-skelter use of the sit-down." (98) He added, "I have personally visited Flint today ... and have found not a single Communist party member who countenanced or supported in the slightest the recent sit-down ..." (99) In fact, the Communists' general attitude toward the sitdown closely followed that of the C.I.O.; at a party strategy meeting an Akron Communist leader put it thus:

"The sitdown is an extremely effective organizational weapon. But credit must go to Comrade Williamson for warning us against the danger of these surprise actions. The sitdowns came because the companies refused to bargain collectively with the union. Now we must work for regular relations between the union and the employers. - and strict obser-
The lengths to which union opposition to wildcats went is illustrated by an incident in November, 1937. Four workers were fired from a Fisher Body plant and several hundred of their fellow workers struck and occupied the plant in protest. U.A.W. leaders denounced the strike, but were unable to persuade the workers to leave, and therefore resorted to a stratagem. They persuaded the workers to divide into two shifts and take turns occupying the plant, concentrating their supporters in one of these shifts, and marched the workers out of the plant, turning possession back to the company guards. When the other shift of strikers arrived to take their turn, they found themselves locked out. (101)

It is not surprising that a N.Y. Times reporter found the sitdowns due in part to "disatisfaction on the part of the workers with the union itself," and that "they are as willing in some cases to defy their own leaders as their bosses." They had not reckoned on having the union become the agency for enforcing work discipline in the shops. Yet this had always been the essential policy of the CIO unions, however much they might utilize sitdowns as an organizing tactic. CIO-director John Brophy made this clear in a carefully worded statement issued before the GM strike:

"In the formation and promotional stages of unionism in a certain type of industry the sitdown strike has real value. After the workers are organized and labor relations are regularized through collective bargaining, then we do urge that the means provided within the wage contract for adjusting grievances be used by the workers." (102)

Len De Caux, editor of the CIO Union News Service, elaborated:

"... the first experience of the C.I.O. with sitdowns was in discouraging them. This was in the Akron rubber Industry, after the Goodyear strike. C.I.O. representatives cautioned... the new unionists against sitdowns on the grounds that they should use such channels for negotiating grievances as the agreement provided... when collective bargaining is fully accepted, union recognition accorded and an agreement reached. C.I.O. unionists accept full responsibility for carrying out their side of it in a disciplined fashion, and oppose sit-downs or any other strike action while it is in force." (103)

John L. Lewis was even more blunt: "A C.I.O. contract is adequate protection against sit-downs, lie-downs, or any other kind of strike." (104) Held up as a model was the CIO's largest union, the United Mine Workers, whose "agreement with coal companies now includes guarantees that there shall be no cessation of work during the term of the contract, and its constitution includes definite penalties, including fines, discharges and even a blacklist for anyone calling or participating in an unauthorized strike." (105)

"[In the new unions, it is held in CIO quarters,] must educate and discipline their members or invite a situation of chaos and anarchy which could very well be utilized by either Leftists or Rightists in seizing political power," the Times concluded ominously. Despite the efforts of union and management alike, however, the wildcats in the auto industry continued— and continue to this day.
In the wake of the GM strike, people throughout the country began sitting down. Even excluding the innumerable quickies of less than a day, the Bureau of Labor Statistics recorded sitdowns involving nearly 400,000 workers in 1937. It would be impossible of course even to summarize them all here, but we can learn something of their range and pattern by examining a number of those that occurred in the peak of the wave during and just after the GM sitdown.

The most immediate impact was in the auto industry. The union began negotiations with Chrysler, and the company offered to accept the GM agreement. According to the New York Times, at the start of negotiations...

... the union committee started the discussion on the issue of seniority, but said that the rank-and-file demanded that sole bargaining be put first on the agenda.

Then the various union locals held meetings and passed resolutions ordering the union committee to present an ultimatum demanding a yes-or-no answer from the company on sole bargaining by the following Monday.

When the company replied in the negative, according to the union, the men themselves sat down without being ordered out by their leaders.

The company secured an injunction ordering the 6,000 sit-downers to leave, but as the hour it ordered evacuation came near, huge crowds of pickets gathered -- 10,000 at the main Dodge plant in Hamtramck, 10,000 at the Chrysler Jefferson plant, smaller numbers at other Chrysler, Dodge, Plymouth and DeSoto plants 30 to 50 thousand in all, demonstrating the consequences of an attempted eviction. "It is generally feared," the Times reported, that an attempt to evict the strikers with special deputies would lead to an "inevitable large amount of bloodshed and the state of armed insurrection..." Governor Murphy warned that the State might have to use force to restore respect for the courts and other public authority, to protect personal and property rights, and to uphold the structure of organized society, emphasizing that the State must prevent "needless interruption to industry, commerce and transportation." He established a law and order committee; when top UAW officials refused to serve on it, "Strikers inside the plant could be seen waving their homemade blackjacks in jubilation. Inside the gate about 150 women who had been serving meals in the company cafeteria engaged in a snake-dance, beating knives and forks against metal serving trays."

Shop committees in the occupied plants voted not to leave the plants until they had won sole bargaining rights for the union. Nonetheless on March 24, John L. Lewis, representing the union, agreed to evacuate the plants, on the basis of the GM settlement, which Chrysler had accepted even before the strike began. Many strikers considered the settlement a surrender, but they reluctantly left the plants.

The Chrysler strike was merely the largest of dozens of simultaneous sitdowns in the Detroit area. About 20,000 additional auto workers were out as a result of a sitdown at the Hudson Motor Company. Wildcat sitdowns in General Motors plants, as we have seen, occurred by the score during this period, many of them involving tens of thousands of workers at a time; by April 1 there were more than 120,000 auto workers on strike in Michigan. Workers occupied the Newton Packing Co. in late February and, after 11 days, turned off refrigeration of $170,000 worth of meat, stating that they were "through fooling." In early March clerks sat down in the Crowley-Milner department store and in the Frank & Sedar department store.
Thirty-five women workers seized the Durable Laundry, as the proprietor fired a gun over organizers' heads to "scare them away." The same day Detroit's four leading hotels were all closed by sitdowns and lockouts, the auto workers providing a mass picket line in one case. Women in three tobacco plants barricaded themselves in for several weeks; in one case residents of the neighborhood battled police with rock-filled snowballs. Eight lumber yards were occupied by their workers. Other sit down strikes occurred at the Yale & Towne lock company and the Square D electrical manufacturers.

Unable to challenge the giant Chrysler strike, police moved forcefully against the lesser sitdowns. Early in the afternoon of March 20, police evicted strikers from the Newton Packing Company. Three hours later 150 police attacked sitdowners at a tobacco plant.

Hysterical cries echoed through the building as, by ones and twos, the 86 women strikers, ranging from defiant girls to bewildered workers with gray hair, were herded into patrol wagons and sped away, while shattering glass and the yelled the street through added to the din. (115)

Such action could clearly be an entering wedge against the auto workers, and the U.A.W. responded by calling a mass protest rally in Cadillac Square and threatening to call a strike of 180,000 auto workers in the Detroit area (excluding those at GM for whom they had just signed a contract) and hinting that it would ask for a city-wide general strike unless forcible evictions of sitdowners in small stores and plants was halted. In the judgement of Russell B. Porter,

"... it is wholly possible that the automobile workers' union might get the support of the city's entire labor movement, now bolting over with fever for union organization... for a city-wide general strike. (116)

Telegrams went out to UAW locals in Detroit to stand by in preparation to strike, but the city quickly halted its drive against the more than twenty remaining small sitdowns.

In the two weeks March 7-21, Chicago experienced nearly 60 sitdowns. Motormen on the 60-mile freight subway under Chicago shut off controls and sat down when the employer decided to ship a greater proportion of goods above ground and laid off 35 tunnel workers; they were joined by 400 freight handlers and other employees who barricaded their warehouses. On March 12, sitdowns hit the Loop, with more than 9,000 men and women striking, including waitresses, candy makers, cab drivers, clerks, peanut baggers, stenographers, tailors, truckers and factory hands. 1600 including 300 office workers sat down at the Chicago Mail Order Co. and won a 10% pay increase; 450 at three of Met's tea rooms set down as "the girls laughed and talked at the tables they had served" until they went home that night with a 25% pay increase; next day sitdowns hit 9 more Chicago firms.

The range of industries and locations hit by sitdowns was virtually unlimited. Electrical workers and furniture workers sat down in St. Louis. Workers at a shirt manufacturer sat down in Pulaski, Tenn. In Philadelphia workers sat down at the Venus Silk Hosiery Co. and the National Container Co. Leather workers in Grafton, Ohio sat down, as did broom manufacturing workers in Pueblo, Colorado. Workers sat down at a fishing tackle company in Akron, Ohio. Oil workers sat down in 8 gasoline plants in Seminole, Ohio. The list could go on and on.

Sitdowns were particularly widespread among store employees, so easily replaced in ordinary strikes. Women sat down in two Woolworth stores in New York. Pickets outside one store broke through private guards, opened windows from a ledge 15 feet above ground, and passed through oots, blankets, oranges and food packets to the strikers, who ate with china and silver from the lunch counter. Similar sitdowns occurred in 5 F. & W. Grand stores; in one, strikers staged an impromptu St. Patrick's Day celebration and a mock marriage to pass the time. Having no chairs to sit down on, 150 salesgirls and 25 stock boys in Pittsburgh staged a "folded arms strike" in 4 C.C. Murphy 5-and-10 stores for shorter hours and a raise, also complaining that "we have to pay for our uniforms and washing them and have to sweep the floor." When 12 stores in Providence, R.I. locked out its employees to prevent an impending sitdown, the unions called a general strike of retail trades.

Nor was the sitdown restricted to private
employees. In Amsterdam, N.Y., municipal ash and garbage men sat down on their trucks in the city Dept. of Public Works garage when their demands for a wage increase were refused; when the mayor hired a private trucking firm, the strikers persuaded its men not to work as strikebreakers. A similar strike occurred in Bridgeport, Conn., when 60 trash collectors sat down demanding immediate reinstatement of a fellow-employee and the firing of the foreman who had fired him. In New York, 70 maintenance workers, half whites, half blacks, barricaded themselves in the kitchen and laundry of the Hospital for Joint Diseases; services were continued for patients, but not for doctors, nurses and visitors.

A similar series of sitdowns occurred in the Brooklyn Jewish Hospital. Forty grave-diggers and helpers sat down in the tool house of a North Arlington, N.J. cemetery and prevented burials to demand a raise for the helpers. Seventeen blind workers sat down to demand a minimum wage at a workshop run by the New York Guild for the Blind, and were supported by a sympathy sitdown of 83 blind workers at a workshop of the New York Association for the Blind. Draftsmen and engineers in Brooklyn sat down in the office of the Park Dept. against a wage cut. W.P.A. workers in California sat down in the employment office as flying squadrons spread a strike through the Bay Area.

An important aspect of the sitdown was the extent to which it was used to challenge management decisions. We have already seen various examples of this, such as the Chicago freight subway workers' challenge to the decision to move more freight on the surface. On March 11, workers at the Champion Shoe Company sat down when they found the company had secretly transferred 50 machines to a new plant elsewhere. 250 workers, more than half of them women, occupied a Philadelphia hoselry mill which management intended to close and prepared to block efforts to move the remaining machinery. 115 workers at the Yahr Lange Drug Company in Milwaukee who had resisted efforts to unionize them sat down in protest against a company policy of firing workers as soon as their age and length of service justified a raise. Their sole demand was removal of Fred Yahr as general manager of the company. "The girls sat around and played bridge and smoked, and the men gathered in knots awaiting the results. The telephone was not answered and customers were not served. Salesmen on the road were notified of the strike by wire and responded that they were sitting down in their cars until it was settled."

Far from being limited to employer-employee relationships, sitdowns were used to combat a wide range of social grievances. In Detroit, for example, 35 women barricaded themselves in a welfare office demanding that the supervisor be removed and that a committee meet with the new supervisor to determine qualifications of families for relief. Thirteen young men sat down in an employment agency where they had paid a fee for jobs that had then not materialized. In New York, representatives of 15 families who lost their homes and belongings in a tenement fire sat down at the Emergency Relief Bureau demanding complete medical care for those injured in the fire and sufficient money for rehabilitation, instead of the token sums the Bureau had offered. A few days later 45 people sat in at another relief office, demanding aid for 2 families and a general 40% increase for all families on home relief. In Columbus, Ohio, 30 unemployed men and women sat down in the Governor's office demanding $50 million for poor relief. And in St. Paul, Minn., 200 people staged a sitdown in the Senate chamber demanding action on a $17 million relief plan.

In the Bronx, two dozen women sat down in an effort to prevent the eviction of two neighbors by 25 policemen.
compensation from their husbands. In Michigan, 30 members of a National Guard company which had served in Flint during the G.M. sitdown, staged a sitdown of their own in March because they had not been paid.

The sitdown idea spread so rapidly because it dramatized a simple, powerful fact: that no social institution can run without the cooperation of those whose activity makes it up. Once the example of the sitdown was before people's eyes, they could apply it to their own situation. On the shop-floor it could be used to gain power over the actual running of production. In large industries it could be used for massive power struggles like the G.M. strike. In small shops it could force quick concessions. Those affected by public institutions -- schools, jails, welfare departments and the like -- could use similar tactics to disrupt their functioning and force concessions; these conflicts showed that ordinary people's lack of power over their daily lives led them to revolt not only in the workplace but in the rest of society as well. The power and spread of sitdowns electrified the country: in March, 1937 alone there were 170 industrial sitdowns reported with 167,210 participants -- no doubt a great many more went unrecorded.

The sitdowns provided/orinary workers an enormous power which depended on nobody but their fellow workers. As Louis Adamic wrote of the non-union sitdowns in Akron:

The fact that the sitdown gives the worker in mass-production industries a vital sense of importance cannot be overemphasized. Two sitdowns which completely tied up plants employing close to ten thousand men were started by half a dozen men each. Imagine the feeling of power those men experienced! And the thousands of workers who sat down in their support shared in that feeling in varying degrees, depending on their individual power of imagination. One husky gun-minder said to me, "Now we don't feel like taking the mess-off any shit-nose college-boy foreman." Another man said, "Now we know our labor is more important than the money of the stockholders, than the gambling in Wall Street, than the dolings of the managers and foremen." One man's grievance, if the majority of his fellow workers in his department agreed that it was a just grievance, could tie up the whole plant. He became a strike leader: the other members of the working force in his department became members of the strike committee. They assumed full responsibility in the matter: formed their own patrols, they kept the machines from being pointlessly destroyed, and they met with management and dictated their terms. They turned their individual self-control and restraint into group self-discipline.

This potential of ordinary workers organizing their own action posed an implicit threat to every form of hierarchy, authority, and domination. For if workers could direct a social enterprise as complex as, say, the Flint sitdown, why could they not reopen production under their own direction? Certain experts like engineers and chemists would at certain times be needed, but the foreman and the rest of management would be completely unnecessary. The workers would simply have to provide for their common needs and send out delegates to coordinate with their suppliers, with workers in the same industry, and with those who used their products. The sitdown movement was widely perceived as a threat to management power: as G.M. President Sloan wrote, the "real issue" of the G.M. sitdown was "Will a labor organization run the plants of General Motors... or will the management continue to do so?" (119)

It is not surprising that in the face of the sitdown wave, a great many employers decided to deal with unions voluntarily: by World War II unions were established in practically all large industrial companies. Most significant was the largest corporation of them all, U.S. Steel, which reversed its tradition of bitter anti-unionism to recognize the C.I.O. 's Steel Workers Organising Committee (SWOC). As Irving Bernstein wrote, it made sense for the corporation to engage in collective bargaining "on a consolidated basis with experienced and responsible union officials like Lewis and Murray rather than with desperate local groups led by men with no background in bargaining." U.S. Steel head Myron Taylor "had good reason to trust [CIO headed] Lewis and Murray,... whose he had been bargaining with already in the coal industry." (120)
The new contract cost U.S. Steel little -- a wage increase they recouped twice in a price increase, limitation on hours which was required anyway if they wanted to bid on government contracts, and some deference to seniority in laying off workers. In return the contract provided that

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differences... should be taken up without cessation of work, with the final decision, if an agreement was not reached, to rest with an impartial umpire named by company and union. (121)
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S.W.O.C. was in a strong position to enforce this strike ban: its officials were appointed by the C.I.O., not elected by the steelworkers, all initiation fees and dues went through the central office, and locals were forbidden to sign an agreement or call a strike without its approval. (122) As Myron Taylor wrote a year after the contract went into effect, "The union has scrupulously followed the terms of its agreement." (123)

In early 1937 Louis Adamic had an interesting interview with the head of a small steel company that had voluntarily recognized the CIO soon after U.S. Steel, suggesting how union recognition looked to an employer faced with rising labor militancy. The employer described how he had been visited by a CIO organizer who "began to sell me on the idea of letting the CIO start a union in our plant." The organizer started to tell him "all about the petty troubles and pains-in-the-neck we'd had in the mill the past few weeks, which amounted to a lot of trouble and expense" which "were bound to increase as the years went by."

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Why? Because, he said, in shops where the union was fought and men belonged to it secretly all sorts of damned things happened all the time, which led to fear, nervousness, and jitters among the men, to secret sabotage and loafing on the job... he proceeded to tell me, too, that if we let the union come in, it would form a grievance committee consisting of workers in the mill; all the union men in the shop would be required, and others allowed, to take their grievances to the committee, which would assemble all the kicks and complaints and what-nots, then take them up with us -- the management... say once a week; and many, perhaps most, of the grievances would be smoothed out by the committee itself without bothering us with them. ... We signed an agreement for a year, the union was formed, about half the men joined, a grievance committee was organized and sure enough, the thing began to work out... It seemed to act as a sort of collective vent.
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The men, bring their grievances to committee members, then argue about them, then the first thing they know, in many instances, the grievances disappear.

His only complaint was that grievance committee members "are new, green, inexperienced fellows, apt to get excited about nothing at all. As yet they can't quite handle authority and responsibility. They get 'tough' with us over little matters." (124)
The thrust of the sitdowns went beyond the simple disruption of production; indeed, the sitdowns were widely felt to have revolutionary implications. A group of Boston "civic leaders" headed by President Emeritus Lowell of Harvard issued a statement that

Armed insurrection -- defiance of law, order and duly elected authority -- is spreading like wildfire. It is rapidly growing beyond control. . . . It attacks and undermines the very foundation of our political and social structure.

If minority groups can seise premises illegally, hold indefinitely, refuse admittance to owners or managers, resist by violence and threatened bloodshed all attempts to dislodge them, and intimidate properly constituted authority to the point of impotence, then freedom and liberty are at an end. Government becomes a mockery, superceded by anarchy, mob rule and ruthless dictatorship. (125)

The unions were fully aware of this threat.

Sooner or later the newer unions, it is held in C.I.O. quarters, must educate and discipline their members or invite a situation of chaos and anarchy which could very well be utilized . . . in seizing political power. (126)

Union leaders emphasized that their "purposes of radical troublemakers was not directed at Communists as such. They are driving out elements that keep the workers stirred up over petty grievances and excite them to stage unauthorized sit-downs for the sake of ultimate revolutionary objectives. (127)

The employers, with great opportunities for profit in the face of growing war production, were able in the years following 1937 to raise wages considerably, and were able to soften the more arbitrary aspects of their power over workers as the unions took over responsibility for disciplining the workforce and maintaining uninterrupted production. With such concessions, union and management succeeded in heading off any such revolutionary development, and gradually reestablished their authority over production. Unofficial job actions, wildcat strikes and other actions by which workers directly counter the power of management continue to the present day. They remain limited, however, just as they did in 1937. A look at some of the factors that limited them may be helpful if and when people again make an assault on the power of the industrial managers.

Perhaps the central weakness is that workers did not fully appreciate their own power. They realized that they could stop the operation of their own employer and thereby force a change in the way things were run, but they did not realize they held the power to stop the country, and therefore could change the whole society. They discovered they could coordinate their own action in the shop, but did not realize they could do so in a city, an industry, a nation, or the world.

A severely limited view of the kinds of action that were possible was both the effect and the cause of this. For example, there was no record of any discussion among the Flint sitdowners of running the auto shops for themselves -- either immediately or someday; the union naturally stressed this fact to the public. Numerous members of Communist, Socialist, and other radical groups took part in the sitdowns, but generally they saw "building the union" as their sole objective; because radicals generally supported state ownership and control of the means of production, they did not interpret the sitdowns as a step toward direct self-management by the workers.
What the workers generally wanted was a counter-power to the power of management -- freedom to set the pace of work, to tell the foreman where to get off, to share the work equitably, to determine their share of the product, and the like. They genuinely believed that trade unionism would give them this. The CIO -- like any other organization trying to win a following -- presented itself as the fulfillment of its constituency's desires. The great objective of the CIO campaigns was that magic phrase 'union recognition' -- magic because it could mean everything or nothing.

To the workers the CIO proclaimed that union recognition meant job security, shorter hours, higher wages, better working conditions, an end to speed-up, vacations with pay, seniority, and -- in the words of John L. Lewis -- "industrial democracy." Furthermore -- and here it won over the great number made cynical about unionism by their experience with the A.F.L. -- the CIO proclaimed that the union meant all workers organized together and fighting the employers. It was this vision, appropriating workers' intuitive understanding of their need to support each other and fight the employers, that created the "myth of the CIO," a vision that dazzled the minds and held the loyalties even of those who found the organizations they had created operating day by day against them.

For of course the CIO had no intention of winning the workers power over management. As Mike Widman, a long-time associate of John L. Lewis and director of the campaign to organize Ford put it, explaining why he turned down a company offer to let the workers elect their own foremen, "My union experience taught me that the direction of the working force is vested in management. The union shall not abridge the right, so long as there is no discrimination or unfairness." (128)

From the union's point of view, this was not deceit but merely realism: the workers' idea of permanent, institutionalized counter-power over production really was illusory. For as long as goods and services are produced for sale in a competitive market, a company that allows workers' needs instead of profit to shape its policies will lose out to the competition; the same is true of a nation. For this reason, trade unions can only win concessions which do not seriously interfere with the profit-making of the employer.

The counter-power the workers expected to win through trade unionism could in fact be won only a) temporarily, by refusing to work whenever things weren't done their way, or b) permanently, by taking over the management themselves and producing for their own needs and the needs of other workers who in turn were producing for them, instead of for profit. The first, they did and still do from time to time despite the opposition of the unions; the second they did not even conceive.

Because they did not appreciate their own power, workers felt they had to rely on the power of others. Most important, they felt that Roosevelt and the New Deal wing of the Democratic Party was on their side and helping them, that the government was their friend. In fact, the New Deal was perfectly happy to see collective bargaining established, fully realizing that far from posing a threat to the system, it would (as the Wagner Act declared) promote economic stability and reduce strikes. Nor was Roosevelt unwilling to capitalize on his image as friend of the common man -- especially as the unions went all out to round up votes for him, even holding off organizing campaigns in the period before elections. The result was that when the New Dealers decided that the disruptive aspects of
the 1936-7 upsurge had gone far enough (as did Gov. Murphy during the Chrysler strike and President Roosevelt when he declared "a plague on both your houses" after the Chicago police deliberately killed 10 strike supporters in the 1937 Memorial Day Massacre) and middle class opinion swung against the workers, the movement suddenly lost its confidence, felt itself to be "running out of steam."

Similarly, because they did not fully realize their own power, workers felt that they needed the kind of strong leadership and powerful central control exemplified by John L. Lewis. For this reason, when unionism failed to make the changes they expected, they responded by trying to get new unions or leaders, or by scaling down their hopes and retreating into cynicism; while they continued to use their own power shop by shop to contest the power of management, the idea of creating their own organizations based on their own power did not arise.

The sitdown strikes revealed the power workers possessed, and still possess, because their work is the basis of society -- when they stop, everything stops. This power is gradually being rediscovered today in the growing number of wildcat strikes: who can predict when it may explode in another general upheaval? Whether or not the sitdown is again the basic tactic of such a movement, the principle that underlies it -- the power of workers over production -- will be its key strength. As in 1936-7, any means necessary -- whether institutionalized representation like the trade unions or the naked force of the military -- will be used to keep workers "in their place" and make them give up their power to decide when and how to work. (In 1970 the National Guard was called out against strikers three times.) In 1936-7, the workers were able to foil the military force turned against them by huge mass picketing in which the entire community joined, but they gave up their power for a promise of "recognition" and "representation." But something has been learned from experience between 1936 and today -- that those who claim to represent you can't fight your battles for you, that they can even fight against you. So in a future upheaval workers may well decide not to give up their power over production -- and their power to stop it -- to anyone. When they refuse to work except under conditions they set, they have already taken over the real power of management, and the old bosses will no doubt do everything possible to take it back. At that point workers will face a choice of returning to "their place" or taking over management of their work themselves.
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