ORIGINS OF THE SIT-DOWN ERA: WORKER MILITANCY AND INNOVATION IN THE RUBBER INDUSTRY, 1934-38

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On June 8, 1937, Byron H. Larabee, former assistant city law director of Akron, Ohio and executive secretary of the Greater Akron Association, a business organization recently investigated by the LaFollette Committee, spoke knowingly to the local Rotary. In a nation convulsed by worker unrest, labor management confrontation, and that novel, often frightening phenomenon, the sit-down strike, Akron, he said, "has a civic and industrial stability that many Akron citizens would have considered . . . impossible twelve months ago." He believed that Akron had passed through a cycle . . . which practically all industrial sections of the United States are destined to pass through before the present . . . unrest has reached a stopping point."[1] Larabee's analysis was overly optimistic, particularly in proclaiming the return of "industrial stability," but it contained a valuable insight. For reasons distinctive to the rubber industry and its employees, Akron played a key role in the labor upheaval of the mid-1930s. Rubber workers pioneered the sit-down strike and helped ignite the wave of unrest that engulfed American industry between 1936 and 1938. Most important, their experiences anticipated the complex process of initiative and reaction that characterized industry generally in the late 1930s and made the

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[1] *Akron Beacon Journal*, June 8, 1937.

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sit-down era the decisive phase in the turbulent years of labor dynamism and innovation inaugurated by the Great Depression.

The decade after 1933 was a critical period in American labor history. Spurred on by Section 7A of the National Industrial Recovery Act, hundreds of thousands of hitherto unorganized industrial workers formed local and national organizations in 1933-34 and became a force in and out of the plant. Initially, however, their external impact exceeded their effect on the factory or mine. Worker militancy was a major force in the rise and decline of the NRA, the breakup of the early New Deal coalition, and the fragmentation of the AFL, but it had only a fleeting effect on the operation of most industries.[2] Between 1936 and 1938 workers and unions once again seized the initiative, with far more profound and permanent results. Together with the NLRB they inaugurated the modern era of industrial relations and labor politics. Public hostility and the recession of 1937-38 curbed the workers' activities but did not restore the pre-1936 status quo. The sit-down movement, the most prominent symbol of the resurgent militancy of the mid-1930s, was thus the critical link between New Deal labor initiatives and the wartime period of consolidation, the final phase of the turbulent years.

The dynamics of reemergent worker militancy were first apparent in the rubber industry and the city where it was peculiarly concentrated—Akron, Ohio. In 1936-37 sit-down strikes overshadowed more familiar contemporary events—the lingering depression, the New Deal, even the union organizing campaigns and the AFL-CIO split—and brought far reaching, even revolutionary changes to industry and community alike. First, they accelerated the process of industrial evolution that was a major effect of the labor unrest of the 1930s. More than in any previous period, production workers became the principal agents of change. Their actions profoundly, irreversibly influenced the operation of the factory. Second, worker militancy had an ambiguous impact on the labor movement, alternately stimulating and retarding it. To union officials, particularly those at the

[2] See William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and The New Deal* (New York, 1963), Ch. 5; Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years* (Boston, 1970), Chs. 4-6; Sidney Fine, *The Automobile Under the Blue Eagle: Labor, Management, and* the *Automobile Manufacturing Code* (Ann Arbor, 1963), *passim.*

higher levels, the effect was highly unsatisfactory. Long before the sit-down had spread from Akron to Detroit, Flint, and the nation, the leadership had resolved to curb rank and file activism. Finally, labor militancy had a disruptive effect outside the factory and union hall. It polarized the local community, unleashed virulent anti-union forces, and persuaded manufacturers to flee. Militancy and "decentralization"—the movement of the industry to other, usually non-union towns, were two sides of a common coin.

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Since the turn of the century the rubber industry had consisted of two contrasting elements. The first, embracing a majority of firms, produced traditional industrial and consumer products—mechanical goods, footwear, and rubber sundries. Most of these firms were small, family-owned operations; the exception was the DuPonts' United States Rubber Company, a late 19th century trust that had combined the largest and most efficient companies of that era.[3] In this sector of the industry technology was simple and labor intensive. Working conditions were disagreeable, often dangerous, and wages were among the lowest in all northern manufacturing. Nearly half the employees were women.[4] Clustered in Boston, central Connecticut, New Jersey, and scattered midwestern towns, these manufacturers and their employees left little mark on the industry or the United Rubber Workers before World War II. The plants were relatively easy to organize, but the tangible benefits of union membership were slight. The very marginality of the firms acted as a deterrent to militancy and innovation.

The other sector of the industry, the manufacture of automobile tires, could not have been more dissimilar. With few exceptions the tire companies were products of the auto era. Survivors of a harsh winnowing process, they were large and efficient; by the 1920s and 1930s tire manufacturing was probably the most

[3] Glenn D. Babcock, *History of the United States Rubber Company: A Case Study in Corporate Management* (Bloomington, 1966), Ch. 2.

[4] See US Dept. of Commerce. Bureau of the Census, *Biennial Census of Manufactures, 1935* (Washington, DC, 1938), 757, 764. Low wages and women workers were also the rule in the non-tire divisions of the tire plants in Akron and other cities. For a similar situation in another industry see Robert H. Zieger, "The Limits of Militancy: Organizing Paper Workers, 1933-35," *Journal of American History*, 63 (1976), 638-57.

highly concentrated major industry in the United States.[5] Goodyear Tire & Rubber, the industry leader with a market share of more than 30 percent, Firestone, B. F. Goodrich, General Tire, and the tire division of U.S. Rubber accounted for 96 percent of US production.[6] Geographical concentration was almost as great. In 1935 two thirds of the tires manufactured in the US were made in Akron.[7] Mechanized, conveyorized, meticulously organized, the Akron tire factories were tributes to the ingenuity of the engineer and the transforming influence of the automobile.

The aura of centralization, power, and modernity that impressed visitors to the factories was nevertheless misleading. The extension of the automobile market led to the establishment of regional manufacturing facilities in Los Angeles, Gadsden, Alabama, and other sites in the 1920s. In the factory itself, the development of the Banbury mixer drastically altered the economics of tire production.[8] A capital and labor saving invention, the Banbury eliminated the slower roller method of "milling" the rubber, the first major step in the production process. But it also affected the entire manufacturing process. Because of the Banbury, optimum plant size fell to as little as 1000 casings per day, approximately 2 percent of the capacity of the giant Goodyear or Firestone plants.[9] By the mid-1930s the competitive edge of the large Akron plants had disappeared. Manufacturers faced new challenges and opportunities. In time the Banbury became an important anti-union weapon.

The work of the tire plants revolved around a few key tasks. In essence chemical reactions transformed a natural material into a complex consumer good. Machines guided these processes and men supplemented the machines, overseeing their operation and performing tasks that resisted mechanization. In a large tire plant nearly 20 percent of the employees were tire builders—assemblers—and 15 percent were vulcanizers or "pit" workers.[10] Most

[5] See Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., "The Structure of American Industry in the Twentieth Century: A Historical Overview," *Business History Review*, 43 (1969), 258-59.
[6] "The Rolling Tire," *Fortune*, 14 (Nov., 1936), 99.
[7] *Census of Manufactures, 1935*, 757.
[8] Ralph William Frank, "The Rubber Industry of the Akron-Barberton Area: A Study of the Factors Related to Its Development, Distribution and Localization (unpublished PhD Diss., Northwestern Univ., 1952), 27; D. H. Killeffer, *Banbury the Master Mixer* (New York, 1952).
[9] Frank, 27; Lloyd G. Reynolds, "Competition in the Rubber-Tire Industry," *American Economic Review*, 28 (1938), 466.
[10] See "Statements of Enrollment," NLRB Files, RG 25, Box 2116, File 1832, National Archives.

tire workers facilitated machine operations; tire builders performed manual tasks with the aid of machines. Yet unlike assembly line workers in the mechanical industries they made the entire product. The essential attributes of a tire builder were agility and quickness. Any reduction in his pace immediately affected work in the pit and eventually in other departments. To maintain production schedules, foremen "drove" the tire builders, who responded with informal production limits.[11] The pit or curing room worker was also a select employee. Because of the heavy work and debilitating heat of the pit, he had to be strong and durable. The rule of thumb was that pit workers had to weigh at least two hundred pounds. Like the tire builders, they were aggressive, self-confident individuals, proud of their abilities and awesome duties.

Tire employees in general were an elite element of the industrial labor force. Their work was not skilled in the usual sense; manufacturers classified only 10-15 percent of their employees, principally machine repairmen, as skilled operatives.[12] But tire manufacturing was responsible work. The slightest dereliction could destroy the casing or tire. Competence and diligence if not manual dexterity, experience, and creativity were essential. This characteristic of tire production coupled with rapid technological change accounted for the industry's high wage rates. In the 1920s and 1930s tire workers were among the best paid mass production workers.[13] Despite the trials of the following years, they maintained that distinction; at the time of the sit-downs they earned on the average 10 percent more than the typical auto worker.[14]

These features of the industry made Akron a mecca for ambitious young men in the pre-Depression years. During the World War I boom, manufacturers had turned to the South for their workers. Perhaps to their surprise, the employers liked what they found. By 1920 they had a clear conception of the ideal worker. He was a product of Appalachia, had the rudiments of a formal education, and took hard physical labor for granted.[15]

[11] Interview with John D. House, April 5, 1972.
[12] Frank, 83-101.
[13] John Dean Gaffey, *The Productivity of Labor in the Rubber Tire Manufacturing Industry* (New York, 1940), 138-39.
[14] *Akron Beacon Journal*, July 13, 1937.
[15] Howard and Ralph Wolf, *Rubber A Story of Glory and Greed* (New York, 1936),

The fact that he was willing to undertake an uncertain trek to a distant city testified to his ambition. Eschewing elaborate interview procedures. IQ tests, and other accoutrements of wartime personnel management, personnel officials at Goodyear and Firestone asked to see the prospective employees' hands. The uncalloused applicant had little future in the tire shops.[16] Though Akron, like most cities, had immigrant enclaves, the rubber plants were known for their strapping young "Snakes"—the local pejorative for West Virginians.[17]

To retain their employees, manufacturers introduced extensive welfare plans during and after the war. They emphasized insurance and athletic programs, the types of benefits that supposedly appealed to a predominantly male labor force. Goodyear supplemented its efforts with an Industrial Assembly, an elaborate "congressional-style company union.[18] Although the Industrial Assembly had limited powers, it performed useful services and commanded the sympathies of a substantial group of workers. Moreover, it was a symbol of the advanced state of tire company management. By 1930 Goodyear and Firestone were notable examples of firms that had stripped the foreman of most of his traditional powers in production and personnel management, and had created a direct link between the corporation and the worker.[19]

The Depression had a devastating impact on the social system of the tire plants. Production and employment declined precipitously; short hours became the rule for those who remained. To preserve the labor force, manufacturers went to four six-hour shifts in 1931, but this move only partially offset the downward spiral. By 1933 the surviving workers were veteran employees, individuals with five or more years service. Of this group the men most sensitive to their plight were the instigators of the

435-37; Hugh Allen, *The House of Goodyear* (Akron, 1949), 167, 175, 178.

[16] This is a frequent observation of retired workers. See references to oral history interviews.

[17] Alfred Winslow Jones, *Life, Liberty and Property* (Philadelphia, 1941), 59, 64-5.

[18] Paul W. Litchfield, *Industrial Voyage* (New York, 1954), 183-86; Paul W. Litchfield, *The Industrial Republic* (Akron, 1919).

[19] See Allen, *The House of Goodyear*, 181-191; Alfred Lief, *The Firestone Story* (New York, 1951), Ch. 5. For welfare capitalism in the 1920s see David Brody, "The Rise and Decline of Welfare Capitalism" in John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody, eds., *Change and Continuity in Twentieth Century America: the 1920s* (Columbus, 1968), and Stuart D. Brandes, *American Welfare Capitalism* (Chicago, 1976).

union movement. At Goodyear, where a systematic survey was made in the late 1930s, United Rubber Workers officers had been the upwardly mobile young men of the 1920s. Nearly every union official had been a delegate to the Industrial Assembly or a member of the "flying squadron," an elite corps of versatile workers that supplied a large proportion of Goodyear supervisors.[20] In the other locals a similar pattern was evident. Rarely did such men have trade union experience; even more rarely were they committed agitators or ideologues. They were, on the contrary, men closely identified with the pre-1929 status quo.[21]

The early history of the Rubber Workers reflected the industry dichotomy and the larger trends of the NRA period. Spontaneous organization occurred in rubber factories throughout the country during the summer and fall of 1933. In the eastern plants local leadership was the decisive factor. Where a strong individual or group appeared, organization was rapid and successful; the employer's position was usually too precarious for an extended contest. However, where union leadership was weak or divided, the organization languished and died. The net result was a handful of enclaves and several thousand dedicated members. The eastern plants had little or no impact on the early development of the union.[22]

In Akron organization closely followed the pattern of the auto and other "mass production" industries.[23] With the passage of the NIRA tire workers rushed to join the AFL federal union locals, creating unprecedented challenges for the manufacturers and the AFL. By late 1933, 85 percent of Akron area rubber workers were union members.[24] Led by the tire builders and pit employees, the locals negotiated grievances and pressed for the recognition of seniority in layoffs and transfers. Their fates depended

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20 "List of Officers, U.R.W.A. Local 2 from 1937 to Date," NLRB Files, G 25, Box 1873, #1578. For a similar pattern in the electrical industry see Ronald Schatz, "American Electrical Workers: Work, Struggles, Aspiration, 1930-1950" (unpublished PhD diss., Univ. of Pittsburgh, 1977), 88.

21 Radical writers have greatly exaggerated the role of Communists in the early URW. See Ruth McKenney, *Industrial Valley* (New York, 1939) and John Williamson, *Dangerous Scot* (New York, 1969), Ch. 9.

22 See Harold S. Roberts, *The Rubber Workers* (New York, 1944), 100-104.

23 See Roberts, Ch. 5; Irving Bernstein, Chs. 2-4; Sidney Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-37* (Ann Arbor, 1969) Chs. 2-3; Walter Galenson, *The CIO Challenge to the AFL* (Cambridge, 1960), Ch. 6.

24 W. W. Thompson, "History of the Labor Movement in Akron, Ohio," CIO Papers, National and International (Catholic University)..

less on local leadership than on AFL policy—a policy that soon proved deficient. AFL organizers emphasized craft organization and the negotiation of collective bargaining contracts, neither of which was feasible in 1933-35. When the locals urged strikes to break the manufacturers' resistance, AFL officials counseled patience. With considerable difficulty local leaders restrained their charges. Finally, the General Tire local, the strongest of the federal unions, rebelled. Rejecting AFL leadership, the local officers waged a successful strike, including the nation's first important sit-down, in June and July 1934. The settlement provided for an informal bargaining arrangement with the General Tire management. Meanwhile, the other Akron locals declined rapidly.[25] By late 1935, when they rebelled and formed an international only nominally tied to the AFL, the locals retained only a fraction of their former strength.

The revival of the Rubber Workers did not await favorable political developments, outside leadership, or elaborate organizing campaigns.[26] For the tire workers the business revival of late 1935 and 1936 had an effect similar to the boom of the 1920s and the passage of Section 7A. The increase in hours, income, and employment opportunities that swelled the factory throngs revived the sense of opportunity that had been missing in the early 1930s and again in 1934-35. However, there was no parallel resurgence of faith in the industry or its employers. Energies that in earlier years had been devoted to personal advancement now were devoted to the reconstruction of the union, the improvement of the workers' status in the plant, and acts of defiance. Prosperity reignited the forces of worker militancy that made the industry a model for unionization in American manufacturing in 1936.

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The strike "started when I walked through the plant and gave the signal to shut it down."[27] In this fashion Rex Murray, pres-

[25] "Report of General President Sherman H. Dalrymple, September 14, 1936," *Report of Executive Officers and Research Director to the First Convention, URWA, September 14, 1936* (Akron, 1936), 4.

[26] Compare this situation with the union resurgence in the auto, steel and other mass production industries. See for example, Bernstein, Chs. 10-12.

[27] Daniel Nelson, "The Beginning of the Sit-Down Era: The Reminiscences of Rex Murray," *Labor History*, 15 (1974), 94; *Akron Beacon Journal*, Mar. 29, 1937. Larry Englemann exposes the myth of the 1934 sitdown at Hormel Co. in "'We were the Poor People' The Hormel Strike of 1933," *Labor History*, 15 (1974),

ident of the General Tire local, inaugurated the sit-down era in June 1934. The next sit-downs occurred in November 1935 as conditions improved. Between early 1936 and late 1937 at least sixty-two sit-downs, including forty in the critical months before the great General Motors strike, in December 1936, provided a focus for the expanding influence of the workers and the URW in the industry. There were three distinct phases to the Akron sit-down movement. The first covered the period from June 1934 to February 18, 1936, and culminated in the five week Goodyear strike of February-March, the "first CIO strike." The second extended from March to December 1936, when the sit-down emerged as a popular protest technique in other industries. The third stage lasted from December 1936 to June 1938; during this period worker militancy took other forms and the sit-downs declined, casualties of the reactions they had set in motion and the return of depression conditions.

The 1934 General Tire sit-down was a model for the sit-down movement of 1936-37. It was a planned, possibly rehearsed move by local union leaders. It lasted approximately eighteen hours, was non-violent, and ended when union officials decided to evacuate the plant and conduct a conventional strike.[28] In later years no union president or executive board ever called a sit-down (though critics frequently charged that they acquiesced in the actions of unruly followers). Otherwise, the General Tire strike serves as a useful guide to the Akron sit-downs.[29] Just as it reflected the militancy of the NRA period, so the sit-downs were expressions of the resurgent activism of the mid-1930s. The sit-downs of 1936-37 were diverse, embracing four of the five categories of sit-downs the Bureau of Labor Statistics identified in 1937.[30] They lasted anywhere from a few minutes to nearly three days, and they involved anywhere from a single individual to several thousand employees. They were generally non-violent. Although strikers made no formal arrangements to avoid the destruction of machines or tires, property damage was negligible.

497-99, 507-08.

[28] Nelson, 93-7.

[29] The following analysis of the Akron sit-downs is based on newspaper accounts, oral history interviews, and government documents. I have only footnoted quotations and references to sources of special importance.

[30] "Sit-Down Strikes During 1936," *Monthly Labor Review*, 44 (1937), 1233-34. URW strikers did not use the "third" technique, sitting for the length of a shift only.

Pit workers, who might have destroyed tires simply by not tending their machines, scrupulously synchronized their work with their protests. Personal injuries were somewhat more frequent, particularly at Goodyear, where a large anti-union group added special turbulence to the sit-downs. But with one possible exception, the injuries were not serious. Violence was a common feature of conventional URW strikes and organizing campaigns, but not the sit-downs.

There was another similarity with the General Tire strike. Whatever the causes of the sit-downs, they did not result in efforts to control factory operations. There were few explicit challenges to the foreman's realm, no reports of shared power, no efforts to redefine the managerial role except in the personnel area. Tire builders had traditionally attempted to limit production; their sit-downs against renegade workers in 1936-37 were simply a new phase of an old contest. The one exception was the workers' efforts to control the labor force. But even this activity was confined to discrimination against non-union workers. Once a man became a URW member in good standing, he became immune from attack. In this area, as in others, the sit-down was an act of censure rather than a step toward a new type of industrial management.[31] As a result the sit-downs had a greater impact on the distribution of power and authority among managers than they did on the duties of workers.

The General Tire strike also foreshadowed the employer's role in the sit-downs. No manager ever attempted to expel strikers. Even after August 1936, when city police were available for strikebreaking duty, there was no effort to forcibly remove the workers, presumably because of danger to the plant. Nor was there any attempt to invoke the law against participants in sit-downs. The only instance when workers were prosecuted was an unusual case; the charge was not that they sat down, but that they held their supervisors hostage. In general manufacturers were remarkably accommodating. They kept cafeteria and janitorial employees on the job and maintained heat and light in occupied departments. By the summer of 1936 they concluded

[31] In this respect the rubber workers were apparently like other CIO militants. See David Brody, "Radical Labor History and Rank and File Militancy," *Labor History*, 16 (1975), 123.

that the most effective response to the sit-downs was simply to close the plant until the dispute ended. By this tactic they insured that non-striking workers and townspeople, frightened by the specter of a silent factory, would pressure union leaders and strikers for a settlement.

The five sit-downs that occurred at Firestone, Goodyear, and Goodrich between January 28 and February 18, 1936, built on the pioneering General Tire strike.[32] They reflected the improving economic environment, the managers' determination to return to "normal" operations, the workers' familiarity with the sit-down tactic, the decline of URW effectiveness, and the impotence of the company unions. In every case tire builders were the leaders. By trade union standards the sit-downs accomplished little. By the historian's gauge, however, they were a social innovation of the greatest significance. At a time when New Deal initiatives in the labor area had stalled and manufacturers were recapturing their customary prerogatives, successful acts of defiance were more meaningful than the settlement of any grievance.

The Firestone sit-down of January 28-30 was probably the single most important event in the history of the sit-down movement. In late January the company cut piece work rates in the tire room. When the tire builders, all URW Local 7 members, slowed their pace in protest, the company assigned a non-union man named Godfrey to the tire room, presumably to act as a "pacemaker." Godfrey proceeded to disregard the disapproving looks of his fellow workers and traded insults with Clay Dicks, the Local 7 committeeman. At one point Godfrey suggested that Dicks would be more circumspect without a "gang" to back him and Dicks accepted the challenge. The two men met at the plant gate after work and exchanged blows; Godfrey was knocked unconscious. He promptly complained to his supervisor who suspended Dicks for a week. When Local 7 officials objected, W. R. Murphy, Firestone's personnel manager, agreed to meet them.

[32] There was also a sitdown on November 8 by Goodyear first shift tire builders. It lasted less than an hour and resulted in a delay in a wage cut. Its most interesting feature, however, was the fact that first shift workers instigated it. In the following months first shift tire builders, the oldest, most secure employees, led the anti-URW, anti-sit-down effort at Goodyear. The November 8 incident was quickly forgotten, perhaps because the memory of the first Goodyear sit-down embarrassed first shift workers and URW militants alike. *Akron Beacon Journal,* Nov. 8, 1935.

However, before the local officials had an opportunity to plead Dicks' case, the tire builders stopped work and refused to resume their duties until Dicks was reinstated. Their action was spontaneous, as surprising to union officials as it was to the management. The protest spread to the auto tire room and other departments. "In place of feverish work a carnival spirit pervaded the shop." The workers "clustered in groups and talked. Some played cards. Others played checkers with the tops of pop bottles."[33] After a day of fruitless negotiations the local leaders turned to the International union for assistance. Sherman H. Dalrymple, the International president, henceforth led the union negotiators. "Our main effort," he explained on January 30, "is to get all those men back to work as soon as possible."[34]

The key incident in the dispute occurred later that evening. Murphy offered to pay the workers half their customary wages for the time they had lost if the union would drop the Dicks' case. Dalrymple and the Local 7 negotiators rejected this offer, insisting that Dicks be reinstated. As the meeting broke up a superintendent suggested to a Local 7 executive committee member that Murphy might pay Dicks too. Dalrymple immediately reconvened the conference and settled the strike on that basis.[35] The reason for this remarkable concession—paying the suspended man for his lost time—is unclear. Whatever Murphy's motive, "union men were unanimous in their declarations that the outcome of the protest was a 'victory.'" Dicks called the settlement "the finest thing in the world."[36] In his official statement Dalrymple asserted that the incident would "teach the men what an organization can do to settle their grievances."[37] In fact, the sit-down taught the men what they could do for themselves. The Firestone "victory" rekindled the optimism of 1933-34 and confirmed the lesson of the General Tire experience. Progress did not have to await a formal contract.

The sit-downs of the next two weeks bore the imprint of the Firestone strike. On Friday January 31 non-union Goodyear Plant 1 pit and tire workers sat down to demand the restoration

[33] *Akron Times Press*, Jan. 30, 1936.
[34] *Akron Beacon Journal*, Jan. 30, 1936.
[35] *Akron Times Press*, Jan. 31, 1936; *Akron Beacon Journal*, Jan. 31, 1936.
[36] *Akron Beacon Journal*, Jan. 31, 1936.
[37] *Akron Times Press*, Jan. 31, 1936.

of a piece rate cut. The head of the company union dismissed the sit-down as a reaction to the Firestone incident and maintained a "hands off attitude."[38] URW Local 2 officers were equally unenthusiastic at first. Secretary E. E. White told the press that "It isn't our baby and we're paying no attention to it."[39] Over the weekend, however, they did pay attention to a sudden resurgence of interest in the union. Men who had left in disgust paid back dues and others joined for the first time. On Sunday the union endorsed the protest and on Monday union members gathered at the gates to urge workers to continue the sit-down. First shift employees sat down briefly at 6 am and second shift workers sat down from noon to 2 pm, until the personnel manager threatened to discharge them. Work resumed but negotiations, with Local 2 representing the workers, continued through the week. In the meantime Goodrich tire builders sat down on February 7 to protest wage losses due to minor changes in the piece rate system. Negotiations followed and the company, as one committeeman reported, gave "more than had been asked for." But when the settlement was announced, the men sat down again demanding half pay—à la Firestone—for the time they had been on strike. Only when Dalrymple explained in the strongest possible terms that "they could not expect the company to pay them 'strike defense funds'" did they agree to leave the plant. On the following Sunday the International held a mass meeting for tire workers. Dalrymple led a parade of union officials, including Adolph Germer of the CIO, in condemning the sit-downs. "Such cessation of work does not demonstrate efficiency," he declared. "On the other hand it does demonstrate a dual movement. The proper way to handle grievances is through your union officers. . . ."[40]

Five days later another major sit-down occurred at Goodyear Plant 2. At 3 am on February 14 the fourth shift truck tire department foreman began to notify between fifty-five and seventy non-union tire builders that they were to be furloughed as the company returned to the eight-hour day. As he went from machine to machine the men stopped their work to watch. Soon

[38] *Ibid.*, Feb. 5, 1936.
[39] *Ibid.*, Feb. 1, 1936.
[40] *Akron Beacon Journal*, Feb. 10, 1936.

they gathered around him. The news was disheartening; fourth shift workers were low seniority employees who had been recalled in late 1935. Pleading that he was simply the bearer of bad news, the foreman suggested that the tire builders choose a committee to talk to the shift foreman.[41] This move proved to be a turning point in the history of the sit-down. The committee members—notably C. D. "Chuck" Lesley, George Boyer, and James W. "Jimmy" Jones—became leading figures in the sit-downs of the following transitional months. If the Firestone strike provided the spark that ignited the movement, Lesley—a large, tough National Guardsman and former anti-union militant who "spoke well," Boyer—a spare family man who had weathered the worst of the Depression on a hard scrabble southern Ohio farm, and Jones—a small "dapper" Georgian and union zealot, provided the fuel that sustained it.

From that point the Goodyear dispute escalated rapidly. The Lesley committee received no satisfaction from the shift foreman and returned to the tire department at 5 am. When asked to leave the plant Lesley supposedly challenged his coworkers: "What are we, mice or men? If we're going to be men, let's stick with it." The men responded: "We're going to be men!"[42] They sat down for the rest of their shift and half of the morning shift. When they left at 9 am, having been promised a meeting with the plant manager and personnel manager later that day, John D. House, Local 2 president, was waiting at the gate. He offered support and the use of the union hall. Local 2 thus became a factor in the protest. Sit-downs on the afternoon and evening shifts closed the plant—as it turned out, for more than a month. On the evening of February 17, Local 2 held a rally for tire workers. After several hours of increasingly strident speeches, a union officer, without prior warning, seized a flag from the podium and led a motley army to the plant gates. The great Goodyear strike had begun.[43]

The Goodyear conflict, famous for reviving the URW and inaugurating the CIO, was also important as a gauge of public

[41] Interview with George Boyer, July 1, 1976.
[42] *Ibid.*
[43] For various accounts of the strike, none of which is entirely satisfactory, see Edward Levinson, *Labor on the March* (New York, 1938), 143-46; Jones, 99-103; McKenney, 277-370; Roberts, 147-51; and Bernstein, 593-97.

attitudes toward the union and its tactics. Local 2 was hardly a formidable contestant; it had a paid-up membership of less than six hundred, perhaps 5 percent of the Goodyear labor force, when the strike began.[44] It succeeded because it commanded a much larger informal following, both in Goodyear and in the community at large. This support reflected widespread disillusionment with the corporation and a feeling that the strikers were merely demanding what they deserved. Many local residents, non-union workers and others, undoubtedly saw the sit-downs as appropriate responses to the company's intransigent approach to New Deal labor initiatives, including the union. As a result local businessmen contributed more than $25,000 to the strike relief fund.[45] The two local newspapers maintained a careful neutrality, and most important, the city administration of Republican Lee D. Schroy refused to allow the police to be suborned into a strike breaking force. The concessions the union ultimately won seemed just rewards for what had been a broad-based public undertaking.

The settlement of the Goodyear strike on March 21 marked the beginning of the second, more innovative and disruptive phase of the sit-down movement. In January and February worker militancy revived the union; between April and the Fall it had a far more profound impact on factory operations and public attitudes toward the union and labor issues. By the time of the General Motors strike, the process of innovation and adjustment was largely complete. The subsequent history of the sit-down movement in the industry and the nation was largely an extension of the experiences of the turbulent spring and summer of 1936.

Between April and November periodic waves of sit-downs convulsed the rubber factories. Typically a sit-down in one plant would spark a rash of sit-downs in other plants. There was no apparent pattern to the waves nor any indication of coordinated activity. Even the workers' most vocal critics never detected a conspiracy of militants.[46] Indeed, they agonized over the opposite tendency, the "chaotic," "anarchistic," and "syndicalistic"

[44] Local 2 Membership Record.
[45] *United Rubber Worker*, 1 (May, 1936), 1. For public opinion, see Jones.
[46] The Goodyear management suggested that "communistic" or "radical" influences were behind the sit-downs on several occasions, but with little effect.

character of the sit-downs.[47] In January and February workers sat down in response to managerial initiatives, wage cuts and layoffs; after April they sat down for varied, occasionally frivolous reasons. The most common substantive grievance, a reflection of the Goodyear role and the growth of the URW in 1936, was the presence of non-union workers in a department. This complaint accounted for approximately one-third of the sit-downs. Other grievances included wage adjustments, layoffs and transfers, and the refusal of a worker or group of workers, often non-union employees, to adhere to production limitations. However, external concerns—the beating of Dalrymple by local toughs in Gadsden, Alabama, a cross-burning near the Goodyear plant, and the supposed abduction of a Goodyear committeeman—also prompted sit-downs. Others were responses to rumors; still others seem to have had no reason at all. A common management complaint was that it was impossible to negotiate because no grievances had been presented. Charles L. Skinner, Local 2 vice president, recalled that "sometimes it was laughable. I've been so damn mad I could have killed them all."[48] Clearly, the workers' new outlook rather than any shop problem or group of problems provided the principal stimulus for the sit-down movement.[49]

If there was a central theme to the sit-downs of mid-1936, it was their association with night work. Of the 35 sit-downs that occurred during this period (and the Goodyear management claimed a dozen more), at least twenty-two started between 6 pm and 6 am. At first this tendency surprised observers who assumed that the low seniority night employees, the principal beneficiaries of the economic boom and the men most vulnerable to layoff, would be least troublesome of all the workers. But two factors appear to have offset their insecurity. First, night shifts workers were younger and freer. Though industry veterans, they

[47] See for example *Akron Times Press,* Feb. 9, 1936; *Akron Beacon Journal,* May 8, May 20, May 23, 1936.

[48] Interview with Charles L. Skinner, April 23, 1976.

[49] A similar perspective fueled Detroit area sit-downs after the General Motors strike. Carlos A. Schwantes writes that Michigan sit-downs "cannot be linked solely to the mode of production, but must also be considered a psychological phenomenon. . . ." Carlos A. Schwantes, " 'We've Got 'em on the Run, Brothers;' The 1937 Non-Automotive Sit Down Strikes in Detroit," *Michigan History,* 56 (1972), 190.

were less likely to have mortgages and other inhibiting commitments. Second and possibly more important, the euphoria of the sit-down era militated against a long-term outlook or a rational calculation of costs and benefits. To many workers the possibilities of the moment were all that counted. "We didn't care" is a common recollection of the sit-down veterans.[50]

Of the night shift employees, the Goodyear Plant 2 tire builders were by far the most belligerent and irrepressible. Between May and July, the period during which more than half the sit-downs occurred, the Lesley group was the major irritant in the industry. They struck at least 10 times, set off three waves of sit-downs, and insured that the sit-down strike remained a major topic of discussion in and out of the plant.

The group's most controversial acts occurred in late May. During a sit-down in the Plant 2 tire department on May 6, the shop supervisors had remained in one of the plant offices. The reason for their action is unclear, but Lesley and his followers observed the supervisors' behavior, possibly encouraged it, and certainly learned from it. On May 20, Plant 2 third and fourth shift tire builders and pit men sat down to protest the transfer of a non-union man to the fourth shift pit crew. Lesley and Jones took control of the tire room and herded supervisors into a "bullpen," an area of the room they set off by arranging tire racks in a rectangular shape. A crude poster identified the men as "red apples"—friends of the management. The strikers kept the supervisors in the bullpen for the duration of the strike.

A foreman recalled his experience:

> I had been in the office not more than five minutes when I was informed by — — — that I was to go with a number of other supervisors. I asked where we were to go and — — — replied, 'Come on, get out of here, don't ask questions.'
>
> We were marched to the south end of building 73 and told to stay in the location of the repair section. The section was guarded by quite a large number of men varying from 15 to 50 at various times. . . .
>
> I walked to the windows once to look out and was told by — — — to get back in my place. He was armed with an iron pipe about two feet long in one hand and home-made black jack in the other hand.

[50] Interview with George Boyer, July 1, 1976.

> Practically all the guards were armed with clubs, tomahawks, shears and one man carried a rubber mallet.
>
> When the prisoners wanted to go to the lunch room, the guards would permit only three to go at one time. — — — would pick the three prisoners and appoint three or four guards to accompany them.
>
> The same condition existed when one of us wanted to go to the toilet or get a drink of water.
>
> During the morning, the group of tire builders, assisted by some men from the pit, would bring in more prisoners. A pit man, who I later learned was Steve Friday [the non-union man] was brought back and told in very unpleasant words to stay with the rest of the 'red apple' bunch.
>
> — — — told the group at this time not to bother Friday if he stayed in his place but if he got out of place to give him the works—that he didn't give a damn.
>
> Later on another pit man was brought in who showed evidence of having been handled rather roughly. His forehead was cut and he also looked bruised about his face, head and shoulders.
>
> Some of the gang said 'Stand this — — — against a post and don't let him sit down.' He stood for 10 minutes and then two guards were appointed to take him to the hospital.[51]

The sit-down ended at noon on May 21 when the management agreed to transfer the non-union man to another shift.

The next morning at the 6 am shift change, Jones and other fourth shift tire builders confronted Lyle Carruthers, a first shift worker who was a leader of the anti-union group. Blandishing "tomahawks," heavy knife like tools, they attacked Carruthers, chased him through the plant, surrounded him, and beat him unmercifully. When another worker came to his aid, he too, felt the militants' wrath.[52]

The bullpen and tomahawk episode impressed many observers as revolutionary acts, efforts to use the sit-down to control the plant rather than to "veto" company policies. To John N. Knight, local newspaper editor, the bullpen incident was "guerilla warfare,—undeclared, ruthless, uncontrollable."[53] Company officials, who pressed riot charges against the men, and the local prosecutor apparently took a similar view. In retrospect, however, these accusations seem unduly melodramatic. If the strikers had a larger objective, they never mentioned it, either during the

[51] *Akron Beacon Journal,* May 25, 1936.
[52] *Ibid.,* May 22, 1936; *Akron Times Press,* May 22, 1936.
[53] *Ibid.,* May 21, 1936.

sit-down or afterward.[54] During the bullpen episode Jones, Lesley, and Boyer assigned the participants to various tasks but made no effort to lecture the supervisors, bargain with them, or suggest that the workers would not tolerate certain activities. At his trial in June, Jones described the incident as an attempt to protect supervisors from marauding workers and, more credibly, as a lark. Despite considerable bitterness at their treatment, the foremen subscribed to the latter view. As a result Jones' jury deadlocked and the other tire builders were never tried.[55] Local 2 officials, on the other hand, were less tolerant. They viewed the bullpen episode as an irresponsible act of terrorism, directed as much against the union as the company. Publicly they defended the exuberant tire builders; privately they resolved to put an end to the antics of Lesley and his followers.

Spurred by the tire builders, the Lesley group in particular, workers in the non-tire divisions of the Akron factories and in other local industries also began to sit down in the spring of 1936.[56] During a strike by Goodyear Plant 2 tire and pit workers on May 7, footware employees stopped work for fifteen minutes. Two weeks later Goodrich mechanical goods employees sat down for more than five hours to protest the layoff of three coworkers. This was the first sit-down conducted independently of the tire workers. And on August 18 Firestone mechanical goods employees sat down for twelve hours over a wage dispute. This was the first sit-down involving large numbers of women workers. Although tire builders and pit workers remained at the forefront of the movement, they no longer monopolized it. After May, a sit-down could occur in any department in any plant.

The Akron sit-downs greatly accelerated the process of industrial change that the advent of unions had inaugurated. In the short term, at least, they speeded the organization of the plant, as non-union workers were forced to commit themselves. At Goodyear, where the largest company union group remained, Local 2 grew rapidly. The third and fourth shifts were soon one

[54] Goodyear attorneys questioned the defendants after they had been arrested, very likely to obtain such admissions. Although the men spoke freely their statements were of little value to the prosecution. *Akron Beacon Journal,* May 25, 1936.
[55] *Ibid.,* July 2, 1936.
[56] The first local sit-down outside the rubber industry occurred on Feb. 18, 1936, at the Pittsburgh Plate Glass plant in Barberton.

hundred percent URW. "We put everybody in," Boyer recalled, "of course, some of them joined the union just out of fear."[57] At the other companies the process was less dramatic but the results were similar. By late 1936 the Goodrich and General factories were almost completely organized; even the appearance of a "red apple" would shut down many departments.

The sit-downs also had a profound effect on the day-to-day operation of the plants. Most important, apart from the greater number of workers who looked to the union as well as to the management for direction, were the appearance of large numbers of worker litigants and the steady erosion of the supervisors' already tenuous position. Before 1936 union officers and committeemen had negotiated disputes with company officials. But these sessions had been infrequent due to the uncertain membership of the locals and the presence of company unions. And they had little if any impact on the roles of the foreman and other shop officials.[58] In 1936 this situation changed rapidly. Negotiations became a way of life.[59] The surviving documents do not permit an accurate comparison of the pre and post-Goodyear strike periods, but the number of hours and individuals involved must have risen dramatically. At Goodyear, formal negotiating sessions were nearly daily occurrences.[60] They often began in the affected departments and focused on the foreman's role and behavior. Whatever their cause, the sit-downs raised doubts about the supervisor's competence if not the powers he should exercise. The "bullpen" incident was an isolated event, but it symbolized the degradation of the foremen that may have been the most important long-term effect of the sit-downs. Supervisory morale plummeted in 1936-37. At Goodyear foremen complained bitterly of "insubordination," a "peace at any price policy," "giving undeserving men too many chances," and the "inability to get rid of men that are no good."[61]

As the foremen's confidence and self-esteem declined, the de facto role of the personnel department and its managers grew.

[57] Interview with George Boyer, July 1, 1976.
[58] This conclusion is based on the statements of various union officials.
[59] Interview with A. A. Wilson, May 17, 1973.
[60] Local 2 Plant Legislative Committee records, 1936-37.
[61] "Supervisory Conference, 1937-38," Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co., NLRB Files, RG 25, Box 1873, File 157B. John D. House recalls foremen who welcomed the sit-downs (interview, April 5, 1972).

Foremen and committeemen seldom were able to end sit-downs. If nothing else, the strikers demanded the attention of higher-level managers and union officials. The supervisor necessarily called in the personnel manager and union officers. After that point he had little part in the negotiations. When foremen complained of a "peace at any price policy," they referred to the staff specialists whose paramount objectives were to end disputes and maintain reasonable harmony with the union officials. The personnel experts, the foremen objected, did not have to live with the results of their agreements. Historians have often noted the managerial response to New Deal labor legislation and bureaucratized collective bargaining.[62] In Akron, at least, these adjustments preceded the advent of union contracts and formal negotiating procedures. Earlier stages of the factory revolution, so apparent in the rubber plants, had circumscribed the foreman's role in the personnel area; the sit-downs introduced a second, more decisive phase of that process.

The waves of sit-downs between April and December were sporadic and unpredictable, but the public response to the sit-downs, particularly as measured by newspaper statements and the actions of community officials, the "public" most critical to the welfare of the union movement, followed a clearer course. In April Goodyear, Goodrich, and General made their first "decentralization" announcements. By implication the sit-downs and the Goodyear strike were the cause, or at least one major cause. The exact reasons are impossible to ascertain—the Banbury mixer and marketing considerations made the establishment of additional branch plants inevitable. But labor militancy, by creating uncertainty among the executives and their customers, was also a factor. Most likely it encouraged manufacturers to confront the challenges of technological change, automobile marketing, and low wage competition in non-tire product markets by moving at least part of their operations elsewhere. Public officials sensed the executives' wariness.[63] With each wave of sit-

[62] See e.g., Thomas C. Cochran, *Business in American Life: A History* (New York, 1972), Chs. 16-17.

[63] Though manufacturers were ambitious about the effects of labor unrest on their plans, city fathers perceived it as one factor they could influence and therefore accorded it great, perhaps undue, significance. See *Akron Beacon Journal*, July 22, Aug. 19, 1936.

downs their concern grew. Regardless of the cause of the sit-down, the number of workers idled, or the immediate consequences, the officials antipathy toward the sit-down and the URW, which they believed had the power to halt the sit-downs, increased. By the Fall the process of polarization was complete. The newspapers, the business community, and the city administration, neutral as late as March, became bulwarks of the anti-union camp. The Greater Akron Association, formed in July to combat decentralization, signified this transformation.

URW International and local union leaders resisted these trends to little avail. Pragmatic politicians, they fought to enhance the union and their authority. This dictated a policy of opposing both the sit-downs and the managers' efforts to deal decisively with men like Lesley. Union news releases at the conclusion of a sit-down typically celebrated the workers' "victory" and condemned their lack of discipline. Dalrymple was the most direct and forthright of the URW officials. As early as May he threatened to expel sit-down leaders.[64] He continued to urge local leaders to take a firmer stand and was probably responsible for the 1936 URW convention resolution authorizing the expulsion of members who caused "a stoppage of work . . . without having the consent of the local union or its executive board."[65] By virtue of his position, moreover, he had another resource that proved more valuable. As the head of one of the early CIO organizations, he had a substantial claim on the Committee. Dalrymple soon turned to John L. Lewis and his United Mine Workers assistants for help in combatting the sit-downs.

In early July Thomas Burns, the URW vice president, met Lewis and other CIO leaders to plan organizing strategies.[66] As a result of these discussions URW leaders pledged a more vigorous effort to recruit members in the East and in other non-union centers. Lewis, on the other hand, agreed to pay the salaries of three rubber industry organizers, two of whom were to be

[64] *Ibid.*, May 9, 1936.
[65] *Proceedings of the First Convention of the URW of A, Sept. 13-21, 1936*, 429-31.
[66] Dalrymple had been severely beaten by anti-union workers in Gadsden, Alabama several weeks before. For the CIO action see "Report of Director to CIO Meeting on July 2, 1936," Minutes of CIO Meeting, July 2, 1936. Katherine Pollak Ellickson Papers (Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park), Reel 1; *Akron Times Press*, July 8, 1936; Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (New York, 1977), Ch. 11.

URW men. The latter included William Carney, a Goodyear Plant 1 militant, who was dispatched to Detroit to devote his abundant energies to organizing the U.S. Rubber Company. (Lesley, who was sent to Gadsden on an organizing mission in June, joined the ranks of URW organizers in September.[67]) The other organizer, Allen Haywood of the UMW, arrived in Akron in late July and spent nine months taming the sit-down monster. Described in the local press as the CIO "disciplinarian," Haywood had a marked effect.[68] In speeches, negotiations, and informal discussions with workers he preached the virtues of routinized grievance procedures, union rules, and group responsibility. In December he became a full-time advisor to House at Local 2, still the source of most of the turmoil.

Local union officials were necessarily more circumspect. The sit-downs had helped revive their organizations and had attracted considerable rank and file support. Nevertheless, the stoppages reflected adversely on their leadership and threatened to discredit their organizations. L. S. Buckmaster, of the Firestone local, often considered the most conservative of the local presidents, was the first of the Akron leaders to attack the sit-downs. Speaking to striking tire builders on May 8, he ordered an end to "unsanctioned stoppages of work."[69] Thus chastened, the men returned to work. Firestone experienced only three other sit-downs and Local 7 soon became the least militant of the major locals. House was the next to act. As a result of a July 14 sit-down, during which a "roving squadron" of fourth shift tire builders closed other departments and drove non-union men out of the plant, House called a mass meeting. After heated discussion, he and other executive board members pushed through a resolution threatening the expulsion of sit-down leaders.[70] In early August L. L. Callahan, the fiery president of the giant Goodrich local, won acceptance of a similar resolution. When workers in the braided hose department sat down in September, local officers, spurred

[67] URW General Executive Board Minutes, Sept. 21, 1936.

[68] *Akron Times Press,* July 22, 1936; Lorin Lee Cary, "Institutionalized Conservatism in the Early CIO; Adolph Germer, A Case Study," *Labor History,* 13 (1972), 483-84, 487-92.

[69] *Akron Times Press,* May 9, 1936. As early as March 29, Adolph Germer had received a sympathetic response from Local 7 leaders when he condemned the sit-downs. Germer Diary, Mar. 29, 1936, Adolph Germer Papers (State Historical Society of Wisconsin).

[70] *Akron Times Press,* July 20, 1936.

by Dalrymple, urged the management to close the plant and discussed sanctions against the men.[71]

Union efforts against the sit-down did little to restore the URW's public standing, however. The city's newspapers occasionally praised Dalrymple, Haywood, and the local presidents for their courage, but more frequently condemned them for weak leadership and "chaotic" labor relations. Resolutions, statements of policy, and threats obviously were not enough to reassure community leaders. Only an end to the sit-downs and evidence that union discipline would end the "decentralization" threat would redeem the union's reputation.

The most serious external effect of the sit-downs was the alienation of the Schroy administration. Faced with decentralization and a restive business community on the one hand and a militant union movement on the other, the mayor found it increasingly difficult to maintain his impartial stance. In late May he called for union-management conferences to deal with the sit-downs, but retreated when Goodyear and Local 2 indicated little enthusiasm for the proposal. He renewed his call at the time of the July 13-14 sit-down. However, when Lesley and the fourth shift tire builders drove non-union men out of the plant, the mayor exploded:

> The city is absolutely through with sit-downs.
>
> I issued orders to the police department to muster every available member . . . to go in and clean out the plants as soon as Goodyear officials saw fit to call us.
>
> We are going to keep the factories running at all costs.[72]

Possibly to his chagrin, the sit-down had ended by the time the police arrived at the plant and the crisis passed without further incident.

The final break between Schroy and the URW occurred three weeks later when municipal employees struck the water department and URW members from Goodyear and General Tire joined the picket line. Though House and Rex Murray, the General local president, rushed to the scene to keep order and the police reported no incidents, the mayor insisted that the police disperse the pickets. A journalist noted: "At one point Schroy

[71] *Akron Beacon Journal,* Aug. 3, Sept. 23, Sept. 24, 1936.
[72] *Ibid.,* July 14, 1936.

said that if the police department would admit to him it could not clear the grounds 'a group of citizens will go out and show those people they cannot tie up the city.' The mayor called the strikers and strike sympathizers communists."[73] Schroy was more candid in a conference with the president of the central labor union. "You know . . . how far I stuck my neck out for the unions last winter [during the Goodyear strike]," he raged, "and now I'm getting it cut off in nice fashion."[74] The riot that followed the mayor's order also eliminated the last vestiges of impartiality in other quarters. Henceforth Akron consisted of pro and anti-union factions.[75]

By the fall of 1936 an astute observer of the Akron rubber workers could have forecast the effects of the nationwide labor upheavals of 1937 with reasonable success. Months before Roosevelt's reelection, the General Motors strike, the national sit-down movement, the Little Steel strike, and other events associated with militant unionism, Akron residents had had abundant opportunity to examine the new labor activism. In January 1937 the *Akron Beacon Journal* sent its veteran labor reporter James S. Jackson to Flint to cover the General Motors conflict. He found a "stage setting almost identical, a plot that is similar and many leading characters who are the same"—the last a reference to the URW militants who made a similar trek. "The chief difference," he added, "was that events which took a year to transpire in the rubber capital have here been telescoped into a few brief weeks. . . ."[76] Largely as a result of that "telescoping" process, labor activism and the sit-down emerged as national phenomena. Workers, organized and unorganized, instigated far reaching changes in industrial relations. Union leaders labored often frantically, to contain and direct the new activism and the public divided into pro and anti-union factions.[77] Labor militancy became an innovative force in factory and society alike.

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[73] *Ibid.*, Aug. 7, 1936.
[74] *Ibid.*
[75] See Jones, Part II.
[76] *Akron Beacon Journal*, Jan. 4, 1937.
[77] See "Sit Down Strikes During 1936," *Monthly Labor Review*, 44 (May 1937); Joel Seidman, *"Sit Down"* (New York, 1937). For the critical Michigan situation see Fine, *Sit Down*; Fine, *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years* (Chicago, 1979), Chs. 8-9; Schwantes; and Roy Boryczka, "Militancy and Factionalism in The

After December 1936 militancy in the rubber industry became inseparable from larger trends in labor and union affairs. Though the local situation remained as turbulent as before, the roles of managers and workers became more conventional. Manufacturers made important concessions in principle—formal collective bargaining contracts at Firestone in 1937 and Goodrich in 1938 for example—but they also regained the initiative in the industry. Their enlarged personnel and legal staffs, the continued "decentralization" of production, and the anti-union sentiment of business and government leaders in Akron were important, perhaps decisive, factors in the new equilibrium. On the other hand, URW leaders diverted rank and file militancy to more "positive" ends and increasingly relied on the NLRB to preserve their position in the plants. URW legions supported CIO strikers in the auto and steel industries and in numerous local disputes. In the fall of 1937 the URW and other CIO organizations waged an aggressive but unsuccessful effort to capture the city government. These activities were highly controversial, occasionally as controversial as the sit-downs.[78] In addition, union leaders mounted vigorous organizing efforts in the eastern plants. On the eve of the recession they were preparing similar campaigns for new "decentralized" plants in Michigan, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and Tennessee.

In this new atmosphere the sit-downs declined in number and consequence. There were 17 in the Akron rubber factories in 1937 and five in 1938, approximately one-half the total that occurred in the city during that period. At Goodrich, Firestone, and General they were shorter and more peaceful than they had been in 1936. A January 1937 strike at Goodrich, called "the most friendly sit-down ever conducted in American industry," ended with the protesters singing "Happy Birthday" to the plant manager who, because of the disturbance, had missed the party his family had planned.[79] Even at Goodyear there were important changes. As a result of a February 1937 sit-down, Local 2 and the management formed a joint council—"supreme court" was

United Auto Workers Union, 1937-1941," *The Maryland Historian,* 8 (Fall 1977), 13-25.

[78] URW confrontations with Youngstown deputies during the Little Steel strike and with Akron Police during the Enterprise Manufacturing Company strike in July, 1937, are excellent examples.

[79] *Akron Times Press,* Jan. 31, 1937.

the workers' euphemism—to arbitrate grievances that might lead to sit-downs. In the following months the council resolved numerous disputes, and personal relations between plant officials and union leaders improved.[80] Conceivably a permanent relationship might have evolved. Yet a variety of factors in the summer and fall, periodic sit-downs, NLRB litigation, the company's refusal to sign a collective bargaining contract, and the onset of recession, underminded the atmosphere of early 1937. A mass layoff in November provoked an extended sit-down that embittered relations between the union and the company. The last Goodyear sit-down, in May 1938, sparked a three-hour battle between police and militants, the most violent incident in the history of the industry.[81]

With these exceptions the sit-downs of 1937-38 did not have the kinds of effects they had had in 1936. The Goodyear joint council was the only sit-down induced managerial innovation of the period. The protests may have contributed to the growth of anti-union sentiment and ultimately to the URW's difficulties in 1937-38, but other factors, national and local, likely would have had the same effects, given the precedents of 1936. In most respects the creative phases of the sit-down movement in the rubber industry had ended, well before the collapse of the economic "boom" and the revived opportunities that accompanied it.

The legacy of the era was nevertheless substantial. Between mid-1934 and late 1936 the rubber workers inaugurated a new stage in the development of American industry and the public perception of the union and industrial relations. Spurred by economic fluctuations and the signal victories at General in 1934 and Firestone in early 1936 they briefly held the initiative in the industry. Managers, union leaders and public officials recaptured their customary powers in 1937, but the sit-down experience left a permanent imprint on the industry. The workers' actions radically altered the duties of shop managers, the executives' conception of personnel management, and the role of union officials in the day-to-day operation of the plant. They likewise redefined the relationship between components of the union; a loosely organized coalition of locals embarked on the path to centralized

[80] Minutes of Joint Council, NLRB Files, RG 25, Box 350, Folder 8.
[81] Roberts, 169-72.

leadership and bureaucratic structure. Worker initiatives similarly disabused many local citizens of the notion, popular during the NRA years, that union expansion and local economic growth could occur simultaneously. Similar trends were apparent in other industries in the late 1930s. The extent, timing, and specific circumstances of the militant upsurge varied but it was a factor, often the decisive factor, in most of the union initiatives of 1937. The reactions of employers and union leaders also paralleled those of the rubber manufacturers and URW officers. As Byron H. Larabee told the Akron Rotary, "virtually all industrial sections" of the United States were "destined to pass through" the "cycle" that Akron had experienced. The rubber workers, particularly that responsible elite that created and assembled the nation's tires, ignited the labor revolution of the mid-1930s; it remained for others to carry it to fruition.