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THE GREAT FLINT SIT-DOWN STRIKE AGAINST GM 1936-37



SOLIDARITY PAMPHLET No.31

This is an abridged version of a pamphlet published some time ago by the Radical Education Project, Ann Arbor, Michigan (48107), USA. It had previously appeared in the February-March 1967 issue of the American magazine Progressive Labor. The author, a former editor of Challenge, is presently National Trade Union Organiser of the American Progressive Labor Party (PLP), a Maoist organisation. We do not of course endorse the views of the PLP on current problems, and would almost certainly differ from them on many problems of historical appraisal. But we feel the factual material described in this pamphlet should now become part of the historical heritage of the working class, which is larger than any organisation.

The original text contained a systematic criticism of the role of the Communist Party during the events described - in particular of their complete lack of understanding of the role of the capitalist state and of its various agencies (governors, courts, police, etc.). Although we endorse a great deal of this criticism - and fully realise that the British Communist Party today, with its 'parliamentary road to socialism' is not really any different - we have reluctantly omitted the detailed personal criticisms of the various personalities involved in order to shorten the text a little and because, a generation later and in a different national context, these details have lost some of their pungency.

SOLIDARITY PREFACE

This pamphlet has a definite aim. It is not a 'retreat into the past'. Nor is it a collector's piece in the Museum of Labour History. It is a contribution to the developing discussion among industrial militants concerning methods of struggle more effective than the simple strike. We firmly believe that without knowledge there is little understanding - and that without understanding there can be little meaningful struggle. We hope that reinforced by knowledge the current discussion on tactics will soon culminate in some really effective action.

In France (May 1968) and Italy (throughout 1969) thousands of workers have recently occupied their factories.* The lessons and implications of these occupations still have to be digested. We have to study the hopes they gave rise to, the difficulties they encountered and their real, positive achievements. We have to understand the links between such struggles and our objective of a world where the whole productive apparatus of society is managed by working people themselves. In Britain - where all we have had so far is the abortive attempt to take over the Liverpool GEC factories ** - these lessons are particularly important.

This pamphlet documents a classical example of the tactic of the mass sit-down strike. It tells the story of what happened at the General Motors plants at Flint (Michigan) in the USA in 1936-37. What is important to us about these events of 30 years ago are the methods and tactics used. These are becoming increasingly relevant today when more and more workers are realising the limitations of the traditional strike.

When workers in dispute just down tools and walk out, they leave their factory or site - the proper arena of struggle - uncontested. A walk-out leaves the boss in physical control of his factory - a vantage point which we believe should be challenged and denied to him. 'Walking out' does not contest the employers' right to manage 'their' enterprises. It breaks the unity and solidarity of the men. It does little to strengthen their confidence in their own power and in their own ability to manage the plant. It has no obvious connection with the ultimate aim of workers' management of society as a whole.

* For a description of the French events, see Solidarity Pamphlet No.30, 'Paris, May 1968'. We hope in the near future to publish an extensive study of recent struggles in Italy.

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See 'Solidarity' vol.VI, No.2 for an analysis of the achievements and shortcomings of this movement.

This pamphlet deals in depth with how the American auto workers of 1937 planned, executed and internally organised their occupation of the Flint plants. It describes the day by day details of the occupation, the defence and supply arrangements and how it was ensured that as many workers as possible were involved in as many tasks as possible. The role of the women, the tactics of management, police and state officials, and the role of the AFL bureaucrats are all gone into. Also described is how the strong plants were used to pull out the weaker ones. Militants will find much of interest in these and other details.

The mass sit-down strikes in America in the thirties achieved their objective: industrial unionism. But let's make no bones about it - these objectives are not ours. Today demands such as 'industrial unionism' or 'one big union' are totally meaningless in terms of job organisation, if not positively harmful. Workers should beware of 'industrial unionism' when everyone from the Daily Telegraph to company directors, from retired trade union officials to retired generals, is jumping in on the act. What these people have in mind is better methods of 'disciplining' and controlling the workers - a closed shop applied by the management, all union dues deducted from the wage packet by the employers, officials everywhere, snooping around to prevent any self-activity of the rank and file. Industrial unionism today simply means workers having to deal with larger and more monolithic trade union bureaucracies which are just as much obstacles on the path of rank-and-file organisation as any employer. The development of the United Auto Workers - which emerged as a powerful force as a result of the events described in this pamphlet - is an object lesson in this respect. Within two decades the UAW had become an instrument for controlling and dominating the workers instead of an instrument by which the workers might exercise some control and domination over their conditions of work. The inherent tendencies towards bureaucratisation, built into the original structure of the UAW, were given a tremendous impetus by the Second World War, when union representatives sat on many government bodies. (The same process has gone on more slowly in relation to British unions, but the direction is undoubtedly the same.) The real lesson is to learn how to avoid creating a Frankenstein.

Some might ask whether the tremendous Flint struggle was 'worthwhile' if all that resulted, two decades later, was an additional straitjacket upon the American auto workers, namely the bureaucracy of the UAW. It is meaningless, however, to pose the question in this way. Conditions in the GM plants were intolerable prior to the sit-down and improved substantially as a result of this gigantic struggle. In this sense the struggle was 'worthwhile'. What our hypothetical questioner probably means however is 'could more have been achieved had all this tremendous energy and courage been harnessed to different ends, namely to the creation of genuinely working class organisations, genuinely controlled by the rank and file?'. We doubt whether in 1936 this was a real alternative. The problem of the bureaucratisation of the UAW and of the CIO - and of the struggle against this process - could only have been posed in fairly abstract terms in 1936.

Today, as a result of the development of modern capitalism, the problem of the bureaucratisation of all working class organisations is part of the daily experience of every worker in every industry in every country of the world. This altered environment ensures that today the demand for self-management (requiring new forms of independent organisation) appears meaningful to many. In 1936 criticism of the UAW - at that time still excluded from the GM plants - would have been difficult to understand and unlikely to be accepted.

This pamphlet is not a blueprint for today's struggles, but an accurate description of what happened in Flint in 1936. We even think some of the policies pursued there may have been mistaken. There was possibly too much manipulation and not enough mass participation, even there. A slavish following of the Flint example, in the Britain of 1969, would be a big mistake. We simply present these facts as a part of working class experience to be thought about, discussed and modified in the light of present-day requirements.

Nor do we recommend the sit-in as the sole method of struggle which needs to be considered. Far from it! We are and always have been advocates of the widest possible range of industrial responses. The range of methods of struggle available to the ingenious is immense. Working to rule, withdrawals of good will, go-slows, guerrilla strikes, withdrawal of care for machines (as well as the sit-in) can all be applied with many variations, and they are often much cheaper for the men and more expensive for the employer to bear than more traditional forms of struggle.

There is a final reason for the publication of this pamphlet at this particular time. It looks as if the British motor industry is heading for a series of major clashes, particularly at Fords and at General Motors-owned Vauxhall. We feel that the record of what happened at Flint will give British motor workers particular food for thought.

Our efforts to produce this pamphlet at this critical time will be wasted unless it gets into the hands of motor workers, and others, in large numbers. We would like to make a special appeal to readers (particularly to those working in the motor industry) to take bulk orders to sell to their workmates. The better the facts of the Flint struggle are known, the more likely it is that these experiences will be assimilated and acted upon.



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The foreman paced slowly past his workmen, his eyes darting in and out of the machines, eager for any betraying gestures. He heard no word, and he saw no gesture. The hands flashed, the backs bent, the arms reached out in monotonous perfection. The foreman went back to his little desk and sat squirming on the smooth-seated swivel chair. He felt profoundly disturbed. Something, he knew, was coming off. But what? For God's sake, what?

It was 1.57 am, January 29, 1936.

The tirebuilders worked in smooth frenzy, sweat around their necks, under their arms. The belt clattered, the insufferable racket and din and monotonous clash and uproar went on in steady rhythm. The clock on the south wall, a big plain clock, hesitated; its minute hand jumped to two. A tirebuilder at the end of the line looked up, saw the hand jump. The foreman was sitting quietly staring at the lines of men working under the vast pools of light. Outside, in the winter night, the streets were empty, and the whir of the factory sounded faintly on the snow-swept yard.

The tirebuilder at the end of the line gulped. His hands stopped their quick weaving motions. Every man on the line stiffened. All over the vast room, hands hesitated. The foreman saw the falter, felt it instantly. He jumped up, but he stood beside his desk, his eyes darting quickly from one line to another.

This was it, then. But what was happening? Where was it starting? He stood perfectly still, his heart beating furiously, his throat feeling dry, watching the hesitating hands, watching the broken rhythm.

Then 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 synchronisation, 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.

Out of the terrifying quiet came the wondering voice of a big tirebuilder near the windows: 'Jesus Christ, it's like the end of the world'.

He broke the spell, the magic moment of stillness. For now his awed words said the same thing to every man, 'We done it! We stopped the belt! By God, we done it!'. And men began to cheer hysterically, to shout and howl in the fresh silence. Men wrapped long sinewy arms around their neighbors' shoulders, screaming, 'We done it! We done it!'

For the first time in history, American mass-production workers had stopped a conveyor belt and halted the inexorable movement of factory machinery.

From 'Industrial Valley', by Ruth McKenney,
New York, 1939, pp. 261-2.

Introduction

The 1936 victory of the Akron rubber workers revealed the full power of the sit-down strike for the first time. The tactic of seizing possession of, and holding, great plants was not entirely unknown to the workers of the United States, but nothing like its mushrooming during the struggles of the mid-Thirties had ever been seen before. In the sit-down strike the workers found a weapon with which they could conquer the powerful resistance to unionisation they met in the drive to organise rubber, auto, steel, electrical and other basic industries. One by one giant manufacturing corporations like General Motors, United States Steel, General Electric and Good-year, the massive industrial aggregates of monopoly capital, were compelled to recognise and deal with the union. In some cases the resistance of the giants collapsed at scarcely more than the threat of a sit-down because they had seen its power. We could say that industrial unionism was born in the sit-down strikes. Certainly the impetus given to unionisation by the sit-down strikes in 1936-7 was the main force that finally brought more than 5 millions into the emerging Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO).

One union more than any other, the United Auto Workers (UAW), can be singled out as the greatest contributor to the organisation of the CIO and the success of industrial unionism because it took leadership and because its struggle was fought out most decisively.

One company more than any other, General Motors, can be singled out as the key to the organisation of the auto workers because it was the largest manufacturer in the industry - and the largest manufacturing corporation in the world - and was the first to be organised.

One part of the GM empire more than any other, Flint, Michigan, was the bastion that the workers had to take in order to smash the open shop among the mass of unskilled workers in the auto industry. It was here that most of the bodies for all GM cars, and all the engines for its biggest money-maker, Chevrolet, were manufactured. Flint was possibly the most completely controlled of any company town in the country.

For 44 days, from December 30, 1936 to February 11, 1937, the GM workers fought the corporation in a great sit-down struggle, centered in Flint, to test whether a union could or could not exist in General Motors. In this test GM employed every tactic its strength and cunning could devise, including full use of every level of government it controlled. The workers, employing the tactic of the sit-down to a degree unequalled in the country's history, met attack with counter-attack, took the offensive and finally emerged with a decisive victory. This is the story of this struggle.

Some early sit in strikes

One of the first sit-down strikes occurred in 1906 at General Electric's Schenectady, New York plant.(1) In 1910, women garment workers in New York City sat down in a shop to prevent their bosses from farming out work to contractors not on strike.(2) Variations occurred in Poland, Yugoslavia and France from the end of the First World War to the early 30s. In 1933, 2500 workers stayed inside the Hormel Packing Company plant in Austin, Minnesota, during a three-day strike.(3)

An origin of the concept among the rubber workers is cited by labor historian Louis Adamic.(4) Two teams of rubber workers were playing baseball in Akron one Sunday afternoon in 1933. Suddenly they refused to continue the game because they discovered that the umpire, whom they and the fans disliked anyway, was not a union man. They just sat down on the field. The fans, mostly rubber workers, half seriously and half in fun, yelled for 'a union ump'. The 'scab' was forced to retire from the field and a union man was found to take his place. A few days later a dispute broke out in the plant. When the foremen denied their grievance, the men, remembering the tactic successfully employed on the ballfield, sat down -- and won. The tactic spread rapidly through the industry; the event described by Ruth McKeaney in 'Industrial Valley' was the beginning of the first factory-wide sit-down by rubber workers. From there the concept spread to workers of the other basic industries. Adamic attributes the leadership of the early rubber industry sit-downs to left-wingers working in Akron at the time. European press coverage of the 1936 Akron sit-downs was believed to have directly influenced the sit-down strike in the Semperit rubber works in Cracow, Poland, on March 22, 1936, in which 6 workers were killed and 22 wounded.(5)

U.S. workers found the sit-down to have many advantages over the traditional forms of strike. It prevents the use of scabs to operate a factory, since the strikers guard the machines. It is harder for the company to oust men from inside a plant than break through an encircling picket line. Bosses are more reluctant to resort to strike-breaking violence, because it directly endangers millions of dollars of company property, vast assembly lines and unfinished products. The use of machine guns, tear gas and gangsters is much less effective. It is harder to label strikers aggressors while they are inside.

In a sit-down the workers' morale is heightened. They are inside and therefore know for certain that scabs are not operating the machines; they are really protecting their jobs and this leads to a higher degree of

solidarity and militancy. The men are protected from weather. They are never scattered, but are always on call at a moment's notice in case of trouble. The basic democratic character of the sit-down is guaranteed by the fact that the workers on the line, rather than outside officials, determine its course.

Finally, defence against labor spies - a constant threat in the 30s - is perfected because a sit-down can be started by one or two rank-and-file leaders over an issue that affects the entire plant. The workers vote by putting down their tools.

GM: the background

There is no question that the auto workers needed a new weapon with which to fight the giant corporations that owned them body and soul. GM ran Flint like a feudal barony. 80% of the population of 150,000 were directly dependent on GM for livelihood, 20% indirectly. 45,000 men and women toiled in the GM Flint plants, heart and nerve center of the corporation's world-wide empire. In the summer of 1936 every city official - the mayor, city manager, police chief and the judges - were GM stockholders or officials, or both. The only local newspaper, The Flint Journal, was 100% GM, all the time. The corporation controlled the radio station directly: even paid-for time was denied the union during the fight for unionisation. The school board, welfare department and all other government agencies were directly under the thumb of the corporation. Billboards throughout the city acclaimed 'the happy GM family'.

Total domination of the workers and the community in which they lived was part of the system by which GM was able to net an average annual profit of \$173 millions from 1927 to 1937 (6) during the depths of the Great Depression. 80 stockholders became millionaires in four years during the late Twenties on GM dividends alone. In 1936 the auto giant completed a quarter century with profits that totaled an astronomical \$2.5 billions, a figure unequalled by any other corporation in the world to that time. Its 1936 net profit was \$225 millions, a rate of 24% on a capitalisation of \$945 millions. No wonder it has earned and kept the title of the 'world's greatest money-maker' among all corporations.

GM in 1936, employing 55% of all U.S. auto workers in 69 plants, was bigger than Ford and Chrysler combined. 350 of its officers and directors were paid ten million dollars in salaries that year. Its two top officers, Alfred Sloan and William Knudson, received \$375,000 each in 1935. Its seventh vice-president, one Charles Wilson, received \$190,000.(7) The giant was controlled by the DuPont interests, which owned about a quarter of the stock.

The condition of the auto workers was in stark contrast to that of their bosses. In 1935, a year in which the government declared \$1600 as the minimum income on which a family of four could live decently, the average auto worker took home \$900. Most lived in fearful insecurity. A foreman could fire at will. Layoffs between the old and new model year

lasted from 3 to 5 months, without unemployment insurance. A compulsory loan system prevailed, under which GM deducted principal plus interest on the workers' return to employment in the autumn, cutting wages 10%.

But it was the speed-up that made life intolerable. A wife described her husband as 'coming home so dog tired he couldn't even walk upstairs to bed but crawled on his hands and knees'.

One witness reported: 'The men worked like fiends, their jaws set and eyes on fire. Nothing in the world exists for them except the line chassis bearing down on them relentlessly. They come along on a conveyor, and as each passes, the worker has to finish his particular job before the next one bears down on him. The line moves fast and the chassis are close together. The men move like lightning. Some are underneath on their backs on little carts, propelling themselves by their heels all day long, fixing something underneath the chassis as they move along'.(8)

Young workers, unused to the unbearable pace, couldn't eat until they threw up their previous meals when they got home. One worker told 'Atlantic Monthly' that he had been made so dizzy by the constant noises of the assembly line that when he left the plant he could not remember where he had parked his car.(9)

Flint workers were described as having a 'peculiar, gray, jaundiced color', like 'a city of tuberculars' (10) and in July 1936, when temperatures soared over 100 degrees, deaths in Michigan's auto plants rose into the hundreds.(11)

The speed-up was intensified by the ever-present threat of layoffs. 'The fear of layoff is always in their minds, even if not definitely brought there by the foremen. The speed-up is thus inherent in the ... lack of steady work and an army of unemployed waiting outside'.(12)

It was the speed-up that organized Flint.

If any worker had 'strange ideas' in his head about a union, a vast network of company spies was present to ferret him out immediately. Inexorable working class pressure had forced exposures like those that came out of a Senate subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, headed by Robert LaFollette. Testimony before that Committee - much of it by workers at the risk of their lives - revealed that GM spent \$839,000 in 1934 alone on 'detective work' (13), more than half of it paid to the Pinkerton agency. Hundreds of spies worked in the plants, seeking out those who had union 'inclinations'. GM was a member of the National Metal Trades Association, a company group that supplied labor spies to terrorise workers and import scabs and helped set up company unions to break or forestall legitimate unions. The Committee reported that the Justice Department and Army and Navy Intelligence worked with this outfit in union-busting forays. Little came of these revelations since, in the final analysis, it was the union victories of the workers themselves that ended the terror in the plants.

In addition, GM used the forces of the notorious Black Legion, a DuPont-financed terror group that beat, tarred and feathered and murdered active unionists. GM foremen were actually seen donning black robes inside the plant in preparation for a Black Legion raid.(14) Organised force inside the plants had to be defeated to bring the union to auto.

Growth of the U.A.W.

Prior to 1930 there had been little organising attempted in the auto industry. However, in 1933, the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), a left-led organising group, created the Auto Workers Union along industrial lines. It conducted strikes which eventually involved tens of thousands and which were met with ferocious brutality, especially at the Briggs Auto Works in Flint. The TUUL-type militancy not only earned the hatred of the corporations but also of the staid, sell-out business unionism of the American Federation of Labour (AFL) piecards.

The AFL since its birth had opposed the organisation of unskilled workers, and especially along industrial lines - that is, placing all the different types of workers in one plant into the same union. The AFL had intended all along to keep auto workers divided, both along craft lines and from one plant or company to the next. It organised federal locals for this purpose - groups of workers in a particular plant responsible directly to the national Federation and barred from joining together with all other auto workers on an industry-wide basis. These locals were ruled by national officers and an executive board appointed by AFL President William Green!

Disregarding the interests of the rank and file while negotiating with the companies, the AFL leadership sacrificed every single demand, including the essential one for union recognition. Thousands of auto workers made huge bonfires of their union cards and quit in disgust. The left-wingers organised the Cleveland Auto Council which sponsored a national conference at which 37 locals were represented. The AFL intervened to try to prevent an industrial union from forming.

At that point even a government report warned that because of 'insecurity, low annual earnings, inequitable hiring and rehiring methods, espionage, speed-up and displacement of workers at an extremely early age ... Unless something is done soon, they (the workers) intend to take things into their own hands to get results'.(15)

Finally, with pressure growing for the mass organisation of auto workers, agreement was won in May 1936 to give the auto workers autonomy inside the AFL for what was, in effect, an industrial union. The infant UAW - along with the other unions affiliated to the newly-emerging Committee for Industrial Organisation - were suspended in August by the AFL leadership because of their industrial union concepts. In April 1936 however the AFL was still trying to keep its foot in the door. It succeeded in getting a compromise candidate elected President of the new UAW. He was

Homer Martin, a former Baptist minister and Kansas City Chevrolet worker. Martin was long on oratory and had a flair for phrasing the workers' aspirations, but he was short on organising ability and on understanding the dynamics of industrial unionism. For these reasons the AFL officials felt Martin was someone they could use, unlike the militant left-wing industrial unionists. Mortimer was elected first vice-president.

In June Mortimer was selected by the fledgeling UAW to be its organiser in the heart of GM territory. Martin agreed to this because he thought Mortimer would be broken there and would cease to be a threat to Martin's position in the union.(16) Mortimer came from a union family; his father had been a leader of the central Pennsylvania Knights of Labor. UAW's Flint organiser had been a miner, railroad brakeman, steel worker and machinist at White Motor.

When Mortimer arrived to begin his work in the summer of 1936, there were barely 100 union members in the city, and the majority of those were company spies.(17) All the others, 20,000 of them, had quit. The sell-out policies of the AFL leadership and Roosevelt's intervention had helped the auto companies destroy any union organisation, however shaky, that had existed in Flint. Recognising the stoolie-ridden, AFL-organised Flint local for what it was, Mortimer set about organising a completely independent group, visiting workers from door to door, signing them up, and sending the records to UAW national headquarters. This enraged the GM labor spies, but, though tailed and watched at every turn, Mortimer succeeded in keeping membership lists out of their hands. He began publishing a newsletter which went out to 7000 workers each week. He also organised a secret union group in the Fisher Body No.1 'body-in-white' department, where the main soldering and welding was done.

Slowly but surely the UAW gained strength. The fact that the discredited AFL had suspended the CIO helped draw workers into the new industrial union. Seniority agreements were won at Chrysler Dodge. In Fisher Body union stickers began to appear on auto bodies and carry their message the length of the assembly line. With GM supporting Landon for President but losing as the workers voted for Roosevelt overwhelmingly, the union began to resist the corporation more strongly. Seven stoppages, provoked by speed-up and wage cuts, occurred at Fisher Body No.1 in the second week of November 1936. When Travis* asked Simons (a local organiser) if the men were ready to strike, Simons said, 'Ready? They're like a pregnant woman in her tenth month!'.(18) On November 9 Travis met with 40 members, key men from each department, to plan how to organise a sit-down should an incident occur. Three days later, on November 12, it did.

* Travis had succeeded Mortimer as vice-president of the UAW. In his early thirties he had been successful in leading and organising Toledo Chevrolet. He shared Mortimer's left-wing views and was regarded as a top-flight organiser despite his youth.

First skirmish

A foreman eliminated one man from a three-man unit and ordered the other two to do the work. Although the other two were not union members, they stopped working and were fired the next morning. Starting from Simons' group on the incoming night shift, word spread through the 7000-man plant: 'Nobody starts working'. The foreman seized the man who had been removed from the group and began to shove him toward the plant superintendent. Simons stepped in and stopped him while the entire assembly line watched. A committee was picked on the spot to meet with the boss as a committee - the first time this had ever happened at Fisher Body.

The super was stunned. He gave in and agreed to rehire the two workers who had been fired, but the men, in spite of an agreement that they would not be docked for time lost in the stoppage, still refused to go back to work. They demanded that the two workers be brought back to the plant. The company was forced to broadcast over local and police radio to find the two men, one of whom was on a date with his girl. No one started working until he had driven her home, changed his clothes and reported for work!

This story spread through Flint like wildfire. Workers began signing up by the hundreds. GM was forced to bargain with various units on day-to-day grievances.

Among units of the GM empire, the Fisher Body 'mother plants' in Flint and Cleveland were the heart. They produced dies and chassis on which three-fourths of GM production depended and the company found it too cumbersome to store chassis against a strike. Without the chassis there could be no automobile. Production was crippled if the supply was cut off at the source. Another key plant was Chevrolet No.4 in Flint. Every engine for one million Chevrolets was assembled there each year. Chevy No.4 was called 'the hellhole' by its 8000 workers; it was dominated end to end by its manager, Arnold Lenz, a Hitler sympathiser. But when the union ferreted out and exposed a couple of stoolies at Chevy 4, respect for the union shot up and a rapid increase in membership followed.

The decision was made by the UAW leadership not to call a national strike until Fisher Body in Flint and Cleveland were ready, which Travis estimated would take another month. Knowing this, GM tried to force the issue by provoking a strike on December 16 at Kansas City, a union weak spot. GM hoped to lure the union into a national walkout when it wasn't prepared. Again the union held firm and the Kansas City strike, later found to have been set off by a Pinkerton agent, was localised.

The strike begins

On December 17, Martin requested national collective bargaining in a telegram to GM management. Management, aiming to split the union into 69 parts, replied that it would bargain only on a plant-to-plant basis. On December 28, the first action occurred at Fisher Body in Cleveland where the

workers in the quarter panel department yanked the power when the plant manager postponed a bargaining session for a few hours. All other departments followed and by one o'clock in the afternoon the plant was dead. Through the mediation of Mayor Harold Burton, later a Supreme Court justice, GM tried to bargain on a local basis; but the union turned down the ruse. A unanimous vote at a plant mass meeting decided the sit-down would be ended only as a part of a national settlement. This action had disrupted the timetable of even the UAW leadership, which had planned to begin strike action against GM in Flint. A few weeks later the Cleveland workers had to leave the plant and conduct their strike from the outside because they did not have the strength to maintain the sit-down. It was the Flint workers who had to carry the ball.

Their strike began at Fisher Body No.1 on December 30, only 2 days after the start of the Cleveland sit-down. When the night shift came on at No.1 on the 30th, they found that the company had backed up a string of railroad cars and was starting to move dies. This was the GM version of the runaway shop, an open attempt to shift production to a plant where the union was weak and thus destroy Fisher Body No.1 as a decisive unit. Travis was notified at the union office across the street. He immediately called the workers to a lunch-hour meeting by the pre-arranged signal of a 200-watt red lamp which the workers could see flickering in the union headquarters. When they had filled the hall, Travis said, 'What do we do about the dies?'. A worker answered: 'Well, them's our jobs. We want them left right here in Flint'.

Travis reviewed the company moves. He pointed out that the Cleveland workers were out on strike to save their jobs, and again he asked, 'What do we do?'

'Shut her down! Shut the goddamn plant!' came the cry.(19)

Henry Kraus, a UAW editor at the meeting, describes the scene: 'The men stood still facing the door. It was like trying to chain a natural force. They couldn't hold back and started crowding forward. Then suddenly they broke through the door and made a race for the plant gates, running in every direction towards the quarter-mile-long buildings'.(20)

One group raced to the railroad dock where a plant manager was directing the coupling of loaded cars. 'Strike on', yelled the men to the locomotive engineer. 'Okay', he nodded, waved to the brakeman to stop the work and trotted off.

The workers inside immediately began to secure the plant against any attacker. They moved scores of unfinished Buick bodies in front of all entrances to form a gigantic barricade. With acetylene torches they welded a steel frame around every door. Bullet-proof metal sheets were put in position to cover every window, while holes were carved in them and threaded to allow the nozzles of fire hoses to be screwed into them. Wet clothes were kept in readiness to be placed on the face as protection against tear-gas attacks. Large supplies of metal parts were placed in strategic spots. Paint guns for spraying would-be invaders were located throughout the plant.

The back-to-work whistle blew, but there was no movement. Suddenly the third-floor windows were flung open to reveal workers waving arms and shouting, 'Hooray Bob, she's ours!'. The women of the cut-and-sew department were told to report to union headquarters. Nearly all the remaining 3000 night workers struck.

* * * * *

With a simultaneous sit-down in the smaller Fisher No.2, GM body production ground to a halt. Thousands of stop-orders went out to suppliers and assembly plants all over the country. On January 1 all Chevrolet and Buick assembly plants were closed. By January 7, 100,000 GM workers were idle. On January 3 a national union conference of 300 from 10 cities met in Flint and formulated demands: union recognition for the UAW, reinstatement of all workers fired because of union membership or activity, seniority to govern all layoffs, new wage minimums, a 30-hour, 5-day week with time and one-half for overtime, abolition of piecework, and a slowing down of the assembly line.

The press and the company raved and ranted about a 'Soviet-style tyranny' being imposed on the country. The New York Times editorialised that it was 'highly doubtful whether union leaders were speaking for the great mass of workers'. They were striking 'for an abstract principle of labor organisation in an industry ... (in which) earnings were 20% above the average'. (January 4, 1937) There were constant references to 'Lewis' strike' and Lewis 'ordering the men in or out' and 'Lewis ordering the strike at strategic points' (21) as if the rank and file had determined nothing. It continued to whine that a 'small minority coerces the majority'. (22) Headlines were constantly slanted against the strikers: 'Ultimatum to Knudson by Auto Union'; 'Sloan Bars Pact with "Dictators".' (23)

Sloan later reported to the GM stockholders that the sit-down 'denies the right of duly constituted branches of government to interfere ... It is revolutionary in its dangers and implications'. (24)

Internal organisation

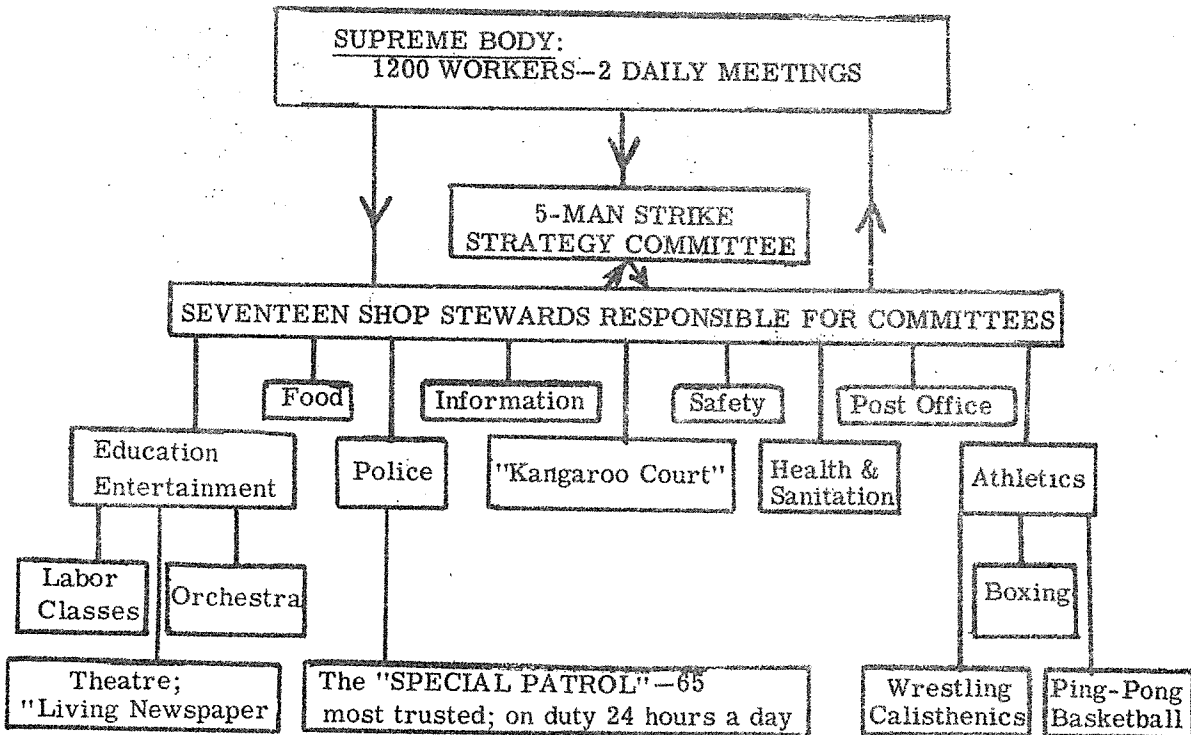
The workers in Fisher Body No.1 paid little heed to the rantings of GM and its press. Once inside they set about organising one of the most effective strike apparatuses ever seen in the United States. Immediately after securing the plant, they held a mass meeting and elected a committee of stewards and a strike strategy committee of five to govern the strike. Bud Simons was elected chairman, and Walter Moore and Joe Devitt, all leaders of the original sit-down on November 13, had central roles on this body. Then committees were organised: food, police, information, sanitation and health, safety, 'kangaroo court', entertainment, education and athletics. Since all committees were democratically elected, their authority was unquestioned. The supreme body remained the 1200 who stayed to hold the plant, the rest being sent outside to perform other tasks. Two meetings of the entire plant were held daily at which any change could be made in the administration.

The strike committee posted rules on all bulletin boards: smoking only in restricted areas, liquor and gambling banned, information given only through the regular committee and no phone calls by individuals. All questions from the press and 'outside world' in general had to be written in advance and answered only in the presence of the strike strategy committee.

The police committee was responsible for guarding every entrance to the plant and posted the names and shifts of every man on the bulletin boards. Within this committee of 65 the most trusted workers constituted the Special Patrol. Their job was to make a complete 35-minute round of the plant every hour, 24 hours a day, throughout the entire strike. They would check out all rumours and report any violations of rules or discipline. Violators were tried by the 'court' and initially given minor punishments. After three convictions a striker was sent out.

No one could enter or leave the plant unless checked out by the reception committee. One reporter among the hundreds covering the story describes this process: A 'reception committee of five searched my party and car for weapons outside the plant'. Then 'we walked up to the plant itself. All doors were shut and barricaded. I climbed onto a pile of packing bags and swung over a heavy horizontally-hinged steel door into the plant. On a platform inside there was another reception committee which checked credentials again'.(25)

The Organization Inside Fisher No.1



Such care was necessary since the company was always attempting to spread rumours of scandals inside. They even smuggled a prostitute in another guise into the plant but she was discovered and sent packing.

Inside every worker had a specific duty for six hours a day. They were on duty for three hours, off for nine, on three and off nine, in each 24-hour period. Every day at 3 pm there was a general cleanup. No matter how cold the weather, all windows were opened wide and teams of workers moved in waves on, and in between, the assembly lines for the entire length of the plant, leaving it spick-and-span. Personal cleanliness also took high priority, every worker taking a 'shower a day'.

The strikers divided themselves into social groups of 15, setting up 'house' in some cozy corner and living family-style for the 'duration'. They made mattresses of car cushions, took out the seats and made beds of the car floors. Every visitor was impressed with the extreme neatness and the care taken with all plant property. The spirit and determination that developed among the workers was reflected in letters to their families:

'I don't know how long we will be here but we will never give up. We are holding the fort strong and have everything we need. Cots and cigarettes and plenty of food. We sure done a thing. GM said it could never be done when we took possession ... Drop me a line and send my union receipt'.

A plant post office was established to handle all mail, which included censoring every letter. Daily visits were arranged whereby workers' children could be handed through a window while workers talked to their wives as they stood outside. At one point the organisation was so confident of its fortress that workers who lived nearby were allowed the liberty of going home for a day at a time.

The class consciousness and absolute rank-and-file democracy was at a peak during the sit-down, as the following story reveals. A cameraman for Hearst's pro-GM Detroit Times presented his union card to the reception committee but it was torn up. He pleaded to be allowed inside to take pictures and appealed to higher union officials, but was told the plant committee would have to rule on it. A formal debate was held, the cameraman stating his own case, saying he was an 'active union man', that he personally differed with his boss, and that 'freedom of the press' should be respected. The strikers' view was presented by one worker who simply said, 'But goddamitall, his boss is Hearst!'. The ballot was unanimous to keep him out.

The monotony and boredom, away from the family, was probably the most difficult problem to overcome. Calisthenics were organised daily. The entire plant was wired with a loudspeaker system. A 12-piece orchestra was organised from among the strikers and concerts were broadcast every evening. Each 'social group' had either a radio or phonograph. Ping pong, checkers, chess, cards (using washers as 'money') were provided. The bottoms were knocked out of two wastebaskets and a basketball court set up. Boxing and wrestling teams were organised. The strikers took to writing poems and

songs, the best of which were published in the union paper. They put on skits lampooning the foremen, GM and its bosses.

Labor classes were held daily in the history of the labor movement and instructions given in parliamentary procedure, 'how to run a union meeting' and in the union constitution. A 'living newspaper' was presented to allow the workers to act out the specific events of the strike as it went along. Dramatic groups were invited and Detroit's Contemporary Theatre put on plays. One local movie owner sent entertainers and another who refused to help out was boycotted after the strike. Charlie Chaplin donated his current movie, Modern Times, and film showings were held. A writing class was led by a graduate student from the University of Michigan and workers took to writing plays.

The Women's Auxiliary - which was to play a key role in the strike - organised dancing, representing all national groups, in front of the plant. They formed 'living formations' or mass charades to describe phrases like 'Solidarity forever' or 'Sole Collective Bargaining Agent'. The strikers, in turn, serenaded them with their own band, whose theme song became 'The Fisher Strike' written by the workers to the tune of the well-known southern ballad, 'The Martins and the Coys':

Gather round me and I'll tell you all a story,
Of the Fisher Body Factory Number One:
When the dies they started moving,
The union men they had a meeting,
To decide right then and there what must be done.

Chorus

These four thousand union boys,
Oh, they sure made lots of noise,
They decided then and there to shut down tight.
In the office they got snooty,
So we started picket duty,
Now the Fisher Body shop is on a strike.

Now this strike it started one bright Wednesday evening,
When they loaded up a box car full of dies;
When the union boys stopped them
And the railroad workers backed them,
The officials in the office were surprised.

Now they really started out to strike in earnest.
They took possession of the gates and buildings too.
They placed a guard in either clockhouse
Just to keep the non-union men out,
And they took the keys and locked the gates up too.

Now you think that this union strike is ended,
And they'll all go back to work just as before.
But the day shift men are 'cuties',
They relieve the night shift duties,
And we carry on this strike just as before. (26)

The organisation outside the plant was no less efficient and vital to the existence of the workers inside. Union headquarters at Pengelly Hall was the hub. Committees were established for food preparation, publicity, welfare and relief, pickets and defence and union growth. The responsibility of feeding several thousand workers both inside and outside the plants was enormous. The union kitchen was headed by Dorothy Kraus, wife of the union editor, and a union chef from a large Detroit hotel. One day's food supply included 500 pounds of meat, 100 pounds of potatoes, 300 loaves of bread, 100 pounds of coffee, 200 pounds of sugar, 30 gallons of milk and four cases of evaporated milk. Its transportation was handled by the city's bus drivers who remembered the solidarity of the auto workers in the bus strike. Two hundred people, mostly women, prepared the food. Some crates of fruit were kept inside for snacks and carefully guarded against poisoning. As it later turned out, a Pinkerton agent was on the inside food committee.

Several hundred workers gave their cars for use by the union. Sound equipment, guarded day and night, was used to talk to the sit-downers from outside the plant. The Flint Auto Worker was distributed by the tens of thousands. A 'chiseling' committee was set up to collect food and supplies. Two-thirds of what was needed was obtained in this fashion, the committee going from house to house and to small shopkeepers.

The union headquarters became the center of life for thousands of workers who streamed in and out, bringing their families along. A nursery was set up to take care of the children while their mothers were working for the strike.

There was constant communication between the outside strike leaders and the strike committee inside. Picketing took place around the clock in front of the plant.

The fantastic spirit and organisation of the workers spread across the nation. Sit-downs became a national phenomenon. Workers the country over grabbed newspapers each day to see 'if the boys in Flint were still holding out'. Companion strikes sparked new methods of organisation.* Only one

* When company guards were able to eject the sit-downers at Briggs because primary attention was focused on Fisher Body, Dodge workers leaving the night shift were called to a meeting at 2 am and told that Briggs would open with scabs in the morning. They drove to the plant and ringed it with a mass picket line before 5.30 on the morning of January 20, 1937. At 7 am when the police began attempting to escort scabs inside, the workers started a 'running' picket line, in double time. Would-be scabs trying to enter just bounced off their shoulders. The cops tossed tear-gas bombs but the workers caught them and hurled them back, while rain cleared the air. The plant closed and Briggs signed a union contract.

Another innovation occurred in the Hudson auto plant when the company sped up the line from 140 to 160 units an hour. The workers figured this as a one-seventh increase and began skipping every seventh hood being placed on a chassis. This completely disrupted production, forcing the enraged superintendent to slow the line back to 140 units. Such a tactic became known as a 'skippy' - a partial sit-down.

reason could drag one sit-downer at the Philadelphia Exide Battery Co. outside - he was married at the plant gates. The entire country was union conscious.

Support poured in from all over the country. Despite the attempt of the national AFL to sabotage the strike, its city central bodies in Flint, Detroit, Cleveland and Minneapolis backed the sit-downers with all sorts of aid.

The United Rubber Workers' Goodyear local sent \$3000. \$6000 came from UAW at Studebaker. Trucks of food arrived from Akron. The Hudson and Chrysler workers began a 'one-hour-a-day club': one hour's wages each day donated to the strike fund. Veterans formed a Union Labor Post No. 1 to counteract the 'patriotic scabbing' organized by flag-wavers. Even small businessmen joined the ranks, one drugstore owner telling a reporter:

'This whole block of store is solid for the union. Hell, I never got anything out of GM dividends; a union victory is better for my business'. (27)

Based on the coordination inside and outside, the sit-downers felt as if they were building up an impregnable fortress against the company and police. They were not to wait too long before the first attack was launched.

GM chooses wrong judge

As production decreased daily, GM turned to their courts for an injunction with which to oust the strikers. It was a ticklish legal situation, since the workers were in no way harming the machinery, and, in fact, kept the plants in better shape than the company had. The tactic was 'so new' said one observer 'that no existing law has any relevance in regard to it'. (28) But that, of course, wouldn't stop GM.

It got an injunction from Genesee County Judge Edward D. Black. County Sheriff Tom Wolcott went to the plants to read it to the workers, ordering them out in 24 hours. As the nervous sheriff stood on a table in the Fisher No. 1 cafeteria reading the writ, workers laughed and kidded him and broke out into 'Solidarity forever' when he had finished. Needless to say, the workers refused to budge.

With GM set to request an order for removal, one of the union attorneys dug up information which proved to be a bombshell: Judge Black owned 3,665 shares of GM stock, worth \$219,000. (29) Michigan law stated that 'No judge of any court shall sit as such in any case or proceeding in which he is a party or in which he is interested...' While the judge denied that his stock ownership would influence his decision, this was too blatant even for GM. Shamefaced, it forgot the Black injunction and allowed legal matters to cool awhile before seeking another one.

This exposure proved a boon to the workers' cause as it hit the front pages of every paper in the country and exposed GM's complete control of the political machinery of Flint. But the company had just started.

All of a sudden there appeared on the scene an organisation called the Flint Alliance. It claimed to be composed of 'loyal' GM workers who were laid off in other plants because of the Fisher Body strike and who were demanding an end to 'minority rule'. The president of this group turned out to be one George Boyson, a former Buick paymaster and then owner of a company manufacturing sparkplugs - obviously loyal to GM. The treasurer was revealed as a former Flint city official who had been convicted of embezzling city funds. So 'widespread' was the 'anger' among the 'loyal workers' that these two were picked as the main officers of the Flint Alliance.

In reality, the Alliance was set up both as a strike-breaking group and to mobilise vigilante action against the sit-downers. It was composed principally of GM supervisors, of which there were hundreds, and businessmen. Foremen descended on non-struck plants with membership cards, attempting to intimidate workers into signing. Several received a 'going over' when they refused to join. More than half the cards were filled out with 'names' such as 'John Fink' and 'James Stoolpigeon' or 'Strike Breaker' and 'Mr. Sloan' with the comment added, 'I own General Motors and its employees'.

GM took pictures of 'crowds' of workers supposedly demonstrating to go back to work. The 'demonstrators' later turned out to be men waiting for their paychecks. The company was pushing its back-to-work movement through the Flint Alliance, claiming that a minority of strikers were dictating to a majority of non-strikers. Actually the union was signing up thousands of men and women into the UAW every day. Even those workers who were not on strike and not in the union let it be known, by their presence at demonstrations and picket lines, that their sympathies were with the sit-downers.

GM continued its refusal even to meet with the union unless the strikers vacated the plants. And, of course, the union said they would not do so unless guaranteed that the company would not fill them with scabs, a pledge which GM would never agree to. The tension mounted. Cries were heard in Congress for outlawing sit-down strikes. A Detroit clergyman saw 'Soviet planning' behind the strike. The AFL leadership urged the workers to go back to work.

But the workers, marvelously organised and in high spirits, sat tight. So GM finally turned to violence.

THE BATTLE OF BULLS RUN

On the afternoon of January 11, 1937 as workers were handing food in through the main gate of Fisher Body No.2, company guards suddenly appeared and overpowered them, closing the gate of the smaller plant. The workers quickly ran up a ladder to hoist the food to the second floor, but the guards hauled it down. At that moment, in 16 degree weather, the company turned off the heat.

Word was sent to union headquarters and hundreds of workers raced to the scene. Some were from Buick and Chevy, some were bus drivers who had been helped by the auto workers during their recent strike, some were 'flying squads' in town from Toledo and Norwood, Ohio, to help out. The ever-present sound truck appeared in front of the plant. Immediately 20 outside pickets, Fisher No.2 workers, advanced on the company guards with home-made billy clubs, took their keys and captured the gate, to guard against city cops entering. The company guards phoned the Flint cops and ran to the plant's ladies' room where they barricaded themselves and claimed they were kidnapped. It became obvious that the whole provocation had been pre-arranged.

The cops arrived in minutes, loaded down with revolvers, gas guns, grenades and supplies of tear and nauseating gas. They blockaded the streets, removed parked cars and then attacked the pickets guarding the gate. Women pickets deposited their children at the union hall and raced to the plant.

When the first gas bombs were thrown, the pickets outside retreated temporarily. The wind blew the gas back into the cops' ranks. Inside the plant the sit-downers dragged fire hoses to the windows and began directing streams of water at the advancing cops. Two-pound door hinges began raining down from the roof. Within five minutes, the cops retreated.

The sit-downers started hauling out a supply of empty milk bottles and hinges to the pickets outside, preparing for a second attack. The cops began hurling gas bombs through the plant windows, which were not as well fortified as at Fisher No.1. The workers grabbed them with gloved hands and quickly doused them in buckets of water located nearby for that purpose.

The cops then regrouped and made a second rush but were met with a volley of bottles, hinges and lumps of coal outside and water from the inside hoses. They couldn't get close this time. The sound truck, manned by several organisers, was helping to direct the battle amid a barrage of tear gas. Again the cops retreated, this time with the workers in hot pursuit. The counter-attack was led by Travis, who was later treated for gas burns. The pickets were joined by scores of other workers who were part of a crowd watching the battle.

At that point the cops opened fire. Fourteen were wounded, one, a leader of the bus drivers' union, critically. While fellow workers carried them off, the rest continued on the attack, overturned the sheriff's car

(with the sheriff inside) and spilling large quantities of gas and gas grenades out of the trunk. The cops continued to retreat up the hill, shooting at the windows of the plant.

One woman, Genora Johnson, whose husband was inside the plant, grabbed the mike in the sound truck and cried:

'Cowards! Cowards! Shooting unarmed and defenceless men! Women of Flint! This is your fight! Join the picket line and defend your jobs, your husband's job and your children's home'. (30)

As the cops stayed on top of the hill, men and women began to organise an all-night vigil. Victor Reuther, manning the sound truck, pointed out that it was not the peaceful workers but GM's cops who were responsible for the destruction. He told the workers that 'they must now fight not only for their jobs but for their very lives. Let General Motors be warned; the patience of these men is not inexhaustible. If there is further bloodshed ... we will not be responsible for what the workers do in their rage! There are costly machines in that plant. Let the corporation and their thugs remember that!'. (31)

The workers outside barricaded both ends of the plant with abandoned cars. Gov. Frank Murphy arrived in Flint and said he was holding the National Guard 'in readiness'. But GM's strategy had failed, for the moment. Attempting to counteract the character of a peaceful sit-down, it had provoked violence at Fisher No.2, much smaller than its sister plant. It wanted to create a situation whereby the Guard would be ordered in and martial law declared. Its hope was to starve out the workers and eventually evict them, thereby giving impetus to a 'back to work' movement led by the Flint Alliance.

The courage, organisation and solidarity of the workers had overcome this strategy. The 'Battle of Bulls Run', as it later came to be known, had ended. The 'bulls' had run.

* * * * *

The next day, January 12, 8000 workers massed in front of Fisher No.2 to celebrate the victory. No cops were in sight as they poured in from Lansing, Detroit, Pontiac, Saginaw, Toledo, Cleveland, South Bend and Norwood to visit the scene of the battle. Thousands were signing up in the UAW every day. Fisher No.1 shored up its defences against the mobilisation of 1500 National Guardsmen. The huge crane whistle was set to blow at the first sign of attack. The boiler was adjusted at full force to hurl water at an invader. One hose was attached to an air line to blow away possible gas fumes. Workers were practicing heaving the two-pounds door hinges at beaverboard targets. Morale was high, especially since many felt that Murphy would not use the Guard against the strikers, that he was on their side.

GM had claimed that the battle had been between the cops and the workers; the corporation had 'nothing to do with it'. But still GM had seven of the wounded men arrested when they were released from the hospital.

The very next day 1200 'John Doe' warrants were made out to be served on the strikers, charging them with 'criminal syndicalism, felonious assault, riot, destruction of property and kidnapping'. The last charge was based on the company guards who had run to the ladies' room.

One of the results of the victory of Bulls Run was the new importance it gave to women in the strike. Up to that time, though joining outside picket lines, most had been involved in preparing food. Many wives of sit-downers had been the victims of malicious anonymous letters telling them their husbands inside the plant were sick. Some women were tricked into demanding that their husbands and sons be brought home. But Bulls Run turned the tide.

Genora Johnson, who had spoken out so militantly in the heat of the battle, began organising the Women's Emergency Brigade, as a vanguard detachment of the Women's Auxiliary. It was composed of volunteers, mostly veterans of the previous battle, organised along semi-military lines. Squad captains (usually those with phones and cars) were leaders of groups of women whom they were expected to round up for any emergency on a moment's notice and transport to the scene of action. One failure to respond meant suspension from the Brigade.

Mrs. Johnson, 23, told them they should 'expect to face tear gas and bullets on the picket line ... be beaten and killed by police attacks' and by 'attempts to break the strike'. Applications poured in. The Brigade began wearing red berets and armbands to identify themselves as they prepared to answer any attack.

'If we go into battle, will we be armed?' Mrs. Johnson asked. 'Yes', she said, 'with rolling pins, brooms, mops and anything we can get'. They began carrying long 'two-by-fours' whittled down at one end for easy handling. The members of the Brigade were described by Mary Heaton Vorse, noted women's leader of the day, as 'strikers' wives and mothers, normally "home-bodies", mature women, the majority married, ranging from young mothers to grandmothers'. (32) Mrs. Vorse remarked that the women were 'doing this because they have come to the conclusion it must be done if they and their children are to have a decent life'.

The workers began holding mass meetings, bombarding Governor Murphy with reminders of his election promises, demanding that no troops be used against the strikers. Although Murphy had raised the National Guard complement to 3000, acting on an 'unlawful seizure' definition of the strike, he was extremely wary about appearing to be taking sides. He declared that the troops were there as much to protect against the vigilante Flint Alliance as against violence from the strikers. Some Guardsmen, workers themselves, wore union buttons, vowing they wouldn't allow themselves to be used as strikebreakers. Murphy was 'the man in the middle', trying to bring about a settlement without harming his political future. He had just been elected by an overwhelming workers' vote two months before.

Double cross

On January 13, Murphy called both sides into conference and two days later GM agreed to a truce. National bargaining would begin on the 18th - solely with the UAW - on all 8 issues. Seventeen struck plants would remain closed pending a settlement. There would be no discrimination against any worker because of union membership. Neither side could break off negotiations for at least 15 days. The sit-downers would evacuate the plants before the 18th but GM would not remove tools, dies or materials from any of the struck plants. The key issue was that the UAW would be the sole bargaining agent.

The rank-and-file sit-downers didn't like the smell of it, although GM had finally been forced to sign something. (Prior to that the corporation said they would not even negotiate unless the plants were evacuated first, and had always maintained that the UAW only represented a small 'minority'.) Travis and the Flint leadership had not been involved in the negotiations leading to this agreement and didn't like it either. They felt it put GM on the offensive again, since with every passing day in the 15-day period there would be increasing pressure on the union to accept less and less of what it wanted before GM would be able to break off negotiations. Travis pointed out that the strike was built around the occupation of the plants and to evacuate them without a contract would appear to be backing down.

For the rank and file it 'was difficult to accept a truce' (33) rather than definite victory and outright union recognition. Nevertheless, plans were made for Fisher Nos. 1 and 2 to march out in a body on Sunday, January 17, after a special chicken dinner inside. Everything was cleaned up, the workers had their bags packed and Fisher No. 1 was about ready to parade to the buses that would take them to No. 2 for a mass demonstration when the hitch came.

Bill Lawrence, a United Press reporter, happened to hand Henry Kraus a press release which he had taken from George Boyson's desk, and asked for the union's comment. The release, scheduled for issuance after the evacuation of the plants, announced that GM had agreed to meet with the Flint Alliance on Tuesday to discuss 'representation' and recognition by the company. This was a direct violation of the agreement to bargain solely with the UAW. Travis sent runners immediately to both body plants to halt the evacuations while the workers discussed the new turn of events. Although UAW president Martin, when notified, saw 'nothing wrong' in the development, CIO director Brophy and vice-president Mortimer agreed with Travis' move.

When the proposal was made to remain inside Fisher No. 1, the workers cheered. A welcoming crowd of 5000 outside applauded wildly when they heard the decision ten minutes after the sit-downers had been scheduled to leave. Horns honked for 5 minutes as the men lined the windows of their

plant, waving to their families and fellow strikers. A dummy figure labeled 'GM stoolpigeon' was lowered to the ground and torn to shreds. Another rally of 10,000 at Fisher No.2 also cheered Mortimer's announcement that the sit-downers had decided to stick it out in the face of GM's double cross.

There was a victory air at Pengelly Hall. 'The strike and the union had suddenly attained full maturity'.(34) The workers felt GM couldn't bargain with two unions - 'You can't have an eight-hour shift on one end of an assembly line and six on another'.

GM then walked out of the negotiations and the workers tightened their lines once more. It was back to scratch again.

Playing for time

On January 20, all Buick plants were forced to close. New negotiations were undertaken in Washington at Roosevelt's request. However, GM quit those parleys two days later and, with production virtually at a standstill, vowed to reopen its struck plants. At that point Lewis demanded that Roosevelt enforce collective bargaining under the law and force GM to negotiate. Roosevelt refused to do this, answering: 'I think in the interests of peace there come moments when statements, conversations and headlines are not in order'.(35)

GM chose to interpret these remarks as a go-ahead signal to open a strike-breaking drive. Economic conditions were worsening, a time when anti-strike movements flourish. While the UAW was fighting to relieve these hardships by getting relief for its members, and was signing up new members all the time, the corporation launched its drive.

It announced that 79% of its workers had 'voted to return to work'. Since GM was very 'concerned' about its workers, it would 'make work' for them and get them off welfare. On the 25th the union answered this with a strike in the Oakland plant, one of the few places where actual assembly work was taking place.

On that same day Boyson announced that the Flint Alliance would 'take an active part in efforts to reopen the plants'. On the 26th GM refused to attend a meeting called by Secretary of Labor Perkins in Washington, which Roosevelt termed 'unfortunate'.(36) Then the company launched an all-out drive to break the strike.

Vigilantes smashed UAW headquarters at Anderson, Indiana and ran the union organisers out of town. Five pickets were clubbed by cops on a line in front of the Cadillac plant in Detroit. Mrs. Agnes Gotten, wife of a striker, sought to block police from escorting scabs inside and was clubbed from behind, requiring five stitches in her head. But 1500 pickets succeeded in preventing any strike-breakers from entering, despite the presence of 200 hose-carrying cops. The Flint Alliance met to whip up a frenzy against the strikers.

The state legislature sponsored a bill to outlaw sit-down strikes. The Alliance besieged four union officials in Saginaw and beat them up, nearly murdering them. Finally, on the 27th, GM reopened non-struck plants, mostly in Chevrolet, employing 40,000 workers. Although it had actually closed them prematurely, to throw workers on the street and blame the UAW for their plight, it was now opening them with no real chance of assembling cars. About all that could be done was to build up an inventory of parts. Travis felt, however, that it wasn't the worst thing for a lot of laid-off members to be working as long as the body plants were closed and GM couldn't start actual production.

But the corporation wasn't content with these counter-moves. It sought out a judge who didn't own GM stock and filed for an injunction, on grounds - true, of course - that it was losing money to Ford and Chrysler. It demanded immediate evacuation of the Fisher Body plants and prohibition of outside picketing. On February 1 the union was served with a show-cause order to explain why it should not bow to the injunction. On the same day a march to Saginaw protesting the beating of the four union officials was countermanded by national UAW headquarters at Murphy's request. Travis, angry, pointed out that Murphy could have protected the officials but didn't.

GM had effectively seized the offensive: it had reopened its non-striking plants, and the union appeared powerless to prevent it. Having passed its peak, the union would inevitably fall back and grow weaker, with the chance that the strike might be lost or demands watered down beyond recognition, unless a counter-offensive were launched. That is exactly what Travis and the strikers produced.

Counter-attack:

THE CAPTURE OF CHEVY 4

Across Chevrolet Avenue from Fisher Body No.2, spread out on 80 acres and bisected by the Flint River, stood 9 Chevrolet factories. At 3:30 every afternoon 7000 night shift workers replaced the 7000 on the day shift. Half of the 14,000 total worked in one factory - Chevy No.4, the motor assembly plant which produced all one million Chevrolet engines each year. It was the largest single unit of the GM empire. To seize it would remove the struggle from the courts and put it back in the plants where the workers had an even chance. Yet, to capture it appeared nearly impossible.

The plant superintendent, storm trooper Arnold Lenz, had instituted a reign of terror. He had concentrated an army of armed guards inside to patrol day and night. The union was growing, and Lenz was firing workers left and right for union activities.

As it happened, the union had uncovered a Pinkerton agent, 'Frenchy' DuBuc, and was holding and using him to get information. Travis ordered the stoolie to call his Pinkerton boss and tell him that Travis had asked him directly about Chevy No.4 - about the docks, the approaches, whether or not a boat could be brought up the Flint River to the plant, etc.

The Pinkerton boss told DuBuc that Travis was kidding him. 'He knows goddamn well the union couldn't take Chevy 4'.(37) Thus Travis established in his own mind that GM was confident the union would not be so foolhardy as to try to sit down in No.4.

Lenz fired three more men for union activities on Friday, January 29. Travis called a Chevrolet membership meeting for Sunday night and 1500 workers responded. He told them the situation, outlined the goon attacks, and said the union must demand that the UAW members be rehired. The meeting roared approval. He then told the workers to 'keep your eyes open' and 'you'll know what to do'. The meeting was adjourned, but 150 stewards and organisers were told to remain. Travis, Kraus and Roy Reuther went into a nearby darkened room, lighted only by a candle. The men were told to enter one by one. As they did, the three-man committee selected 30 of the 'most trusted', sending the rest home with slips of paper containing 'secret orders': 'follow the man who takes the lead'.

The 30 who remained were told that at exactly 3.20 the next afternoon there would be a sit-down in Chevy 9. Those in Chevy plants Nos.4 and 6 were told to sit tight and remain at work, not to help out at No.9. When some voiced objections to striking No.9, they were satisfied with the answer that No.9 was stronger in union membership and 'easier to defend'.

Travis then took aside the two most trusted union leaders from No.9 and told them that they had to hold the plant just until 4.10, until Chevy No.6 was 'taken', that No.6 was the 'real target'. Meanwhile Travis had told three leaders from No.6 and No.4 - Ed Cronk, Howard Foster and Kermit Johnson - that No.9 was only to be used as a decoy; that Cronk in No.6 was to rally his men and then take them over to No.4 and help the other two pull it down. Thus, only 6 people - Travis, Kraus, Reuther, Cronk, Foster and Johnson - knew that No.4 was the actual target.

But what about the armed camp in No.4? Reuther and Kraus told Travis they were a bit dubious about some of the 30 'select few' he had picked to tell about the plan to take No.9. They said they were sure the information would get back to Lenz through at least one stoolie. That, Travis said, was precisely what he wanted. He felt that whatever these 30 men were told would be all over the company in the morning. The only way to defeat the company's stoolpigeon system was to use it - to go through an intricate, elaborate 'secret' procedure, with 'darkened rooms', 'secret orders' on slips of paper, and the rest.

In this way, when the few 'dubious' choices among the 30 brought the news back to Lenz about Chevy No.9 being the target, Travis reasoned the 'super' would believe it, first because of the extreme measures taken to keep it a secret, and second because Lenz and the Pinkertons were sure the union would never make an attempt to capture the 'impregnable' No.4. Travis was counting on the GM spy system to give the company the wrong information. In this manner No.9 was set up as a decoy to draw all the company guards away from No.4 and allow its seizure by the workers.

The next afternoon, February 1, at the very moment the hearings were taking place in court on GM's new injunction bid, Travis called a mass meeting at the union hall, billed as a mobilisation for a 'protest march' on the courthouse. Thousands showed up and the Women's Emergency Brigade appeared in force. Meanwhile the union sound trucks circled the city, surrounded by union guards, and finally, through devious routes, at 3.05 came to rest facing No. 9 and 6.

Five minutes later at the union hall Dorothy Kraus rushed up to Travis 'breathlessly' and handed him a slip of paper. Travis turned grimly to the crowd gathered to march to the courthouse and said, 'They're beating up our boys at Chevy 9. I suggest we go right down there'. (38) Unknown to the workers, the slip of paper was blank.

The crowd made a mad rush for the stairs and outside a long line of cars was waiting with motors running. The workers were at No.9 in a few minutes. Newsmen, who had been tipped off earlier, were already there. And, sure enough, there was 'trouble'.

Lenz had fallen into the trap completely. The entire armed force from the whole Chevrolet division had been stationed at the personnel building next to No.9. At 3.20, when the night shift marched in yelling 'Strike!' the guards closed the doors and rushed in, with Lenz in the lead, shouting 'Reds! Communists!'. The outnumbered workers fought valiantly. When one woman saw her husband's bloody head gasping for air at an open window she yelled to the 'red berets', 'They're smothering them! Let's give them air!'. The women proceeded methodically to break all the windows in the plant. One of the women later described the scene:

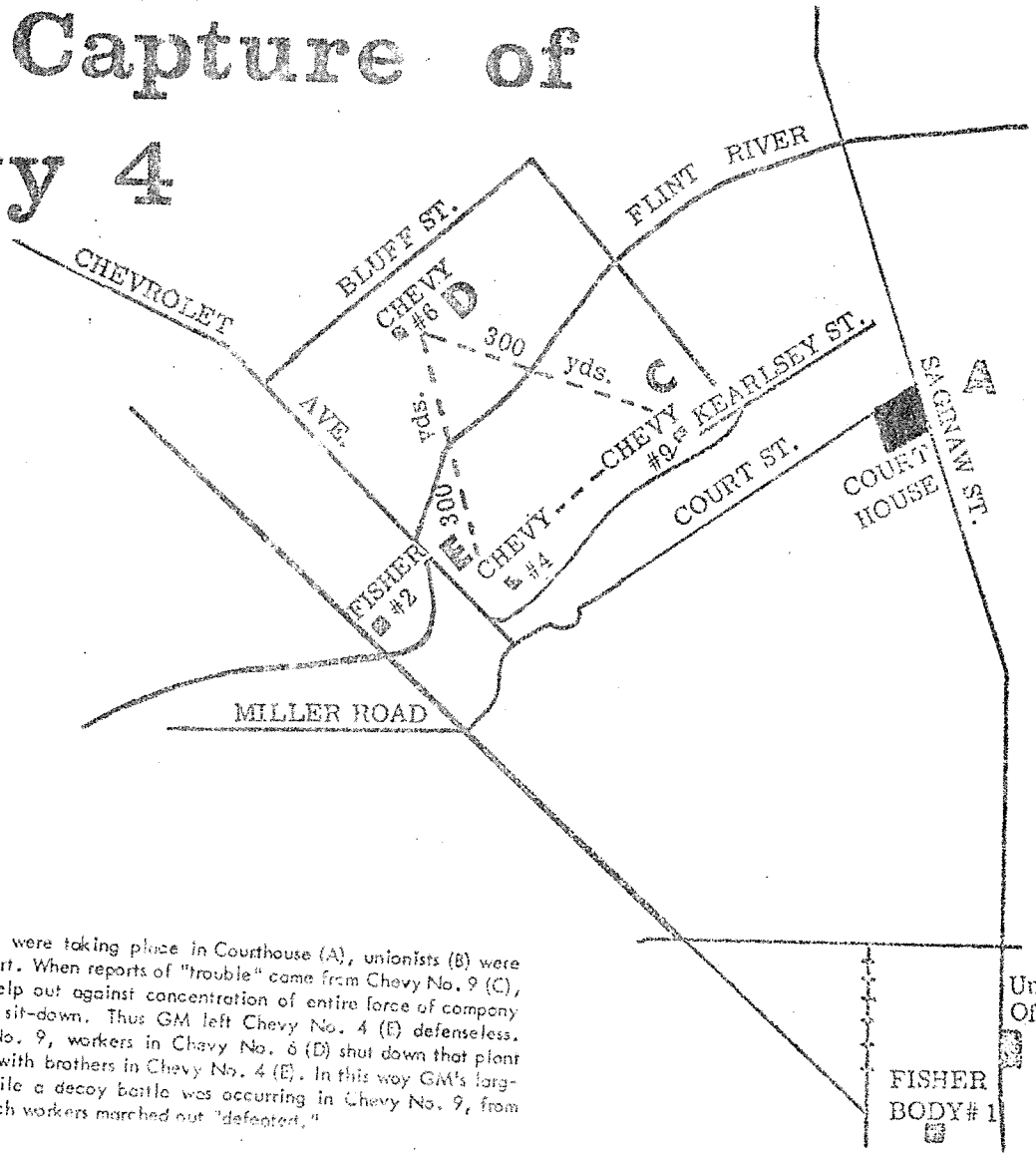
'They were fighting inside and outside the plant. The fighting would have been much worse if it hadn't been for us. We walked right along with our flag at our head. The gas floated right out towards us. But we have been gassed before and we went right on.'

'We had to break the windows... to get air to the boys who were being gassed inside. We just want to protect our husbands and we are going to'. (39)

When the whistle blew at 3.30, the fighting was at its fiercest. The men were using anything they could lay their hands on against the goons' clubs and gas guns. At 3.45 the plant manager at No.4 ran down the lines tapping all the company men and ordering them over to No.9 - leaving No.4 virtually devoid of any pro-company force. Finally at 4.10 the two inside leaders, Ted La Duke and Tom Klasey, figured they had 'done our job' and ordered the men to march out, bleeding and 'defeated'. The injunction was still being argued at the court.

Meanwhile, at No.6 just as the 3.30 whistle blew, Ed Cronk picked up a lead pipe and, waving an American flag, started running through the plant yelling 'Shut 'er off and follow me!', banging the pipe to attract attention over the roar of the plant's machinery. With 35 men he jogged over

The Capture of Chevy 4



While injunction hearings were taking place in Courthouse (A), unionists (B) were preparing to march to Court. When reports of "trouble" came from Chevy No. 9 (C), workers rushed there to help out against concentration of entire force of company guards battling potential sit-down. Thus GM left Chevy No. 4 (E) defenseless. While struggle roged in No. 9, workers in Chevy No. 8 (D) shut down that plant and moved to join forces with brothers in Chevy No. 4 (E). In this way GM's largest plant was captured while a decoy battle was occurring in Chevy No. 9, from which workers marched out "defeated."

to No.4, 300 yards away, only to find Kermit Johnson waiting at the door to tell him he had failed to get a strike started. The plan had been fouled up. Cronk then turned back to No.6 for reinforcements. There he found Carl Bubber's powerful group of 100 dock men and another group of 50 marching in all directions shutting down the plant. They had assumed that No.6 was the real target. With Cronk's 35 men back to help, No.6 was shut down immediately. 'All right', Cronk shouted, 'everyone over to Chevy 4'. The entire plant moved in force.

When they arrived in No.4, there was virtually no opposition except for a few foremen and bosses. The workers split into 2 groups, one moving into the 'test division, the other down the motor lines, threading in and out among the machines, yelling, exhorting, reaching for switches'. One Chevy No.4 man, Joe Sayen, 'leapt from one stationary conveyor to another, shutting them down as he went along', hammer in hand. (40)

Then, as Kraus describes it, in 'crankshafts' Gib Rose 'reached up and pulled the switch and conveyor A-1 was dead. This was the signal for Dow Kehler who headed conveyor A-2. In five seconds she was down too. Kelly Malone ... pulled the switch on conveyor A-3 and the entire division was frozen'.

Many workers, being 'threatened' with dismissal by foremen and straw-bosses, wavered as union men marched around shouting: 'Strike is on! Come on and help us!'. As the number of strikers grew, 'courage added to courage. There was practically no physical violence ... Kelly Malone with wrench in hand (went) tearing down the lines and yelling: 'Get off your job, you dirty scab!'. Yet he never touched a man - all melted with fright before him'. (41)

Soon the strikers were hundreds strong. 'Everywhere at key conveyors, squads of union men were stationed. Others were set to guard gates and mount lookout'. With several departments still to be shut, 'the united union forces ... like a swarm of locusts passed among the machines, leaving silence and inertness where they went'. (42)

When the foremen tried to regroup and one official urged the more passive workers to retake the plant 'Joe Sayen ran perilously along the narrow balcony railing and leaping to a cafeteria table right in the midst of the listeners began shouting to drown the plant official out'. The foremen retreated to the superintendent's office and locked the door, but Cronk and his men broke it open and told them, 'You've got 5 minutes to get out!'. One official tried to call for reinforcements but Cronk pushed him aside and ripped the phone from the wall. The company men fled.

'The fight was over; the enormous plant was dead. The vast complex with its dizzying profusion of conveyors and machines was sprawled out like a wounded giant. The unionists were in complete control. Everywhere they were speaking to undecided workers.

'We want you boys to stay with us. It won't be long and everything will be settled. Then we'll have a union and things will be different'.

'Many of the workers reached their decision in this moment. Others went home, undeterred by the strikers. About 2006 remained and an equal number went off. But as they left ... the majority of them, following an impulse of incipient solidarity, dropped their lunches into huge gondolas, half-filling several of them with what proved to be a much needed extra supply of food'. (43)

When, at about 4.15, they 'had driven the foremen out, they began barricading the plant exits ... The plant guards returning from Chevy 9 after the battle tried to enter by the northeast gate but the men drove them off with pistons, connecting rods and rocker arm rods while others brought fire hoses and squirted water and foamite at the would-be invaders'. (44)

By this time pickets and a sound truck came over from Fisher No.2 across Chevrolet Avenue. A member of the Women's Emergency Brigade jumped to the mike and reported that the women from Chevy No.9's battle 'have gone to the auxiliary hall to wipe their eyes clear of the tear gas and will soon be back. We don't want violence ... but we are going to protect our husbands'. (45)

Soon down the hill they came, a procession of women hundreds strong in bright red caps, singing 'Hold the Fort for we are coming...' They spread out in front of the plant gates, amid cheers from the men inside and the watching crowd, and locked arms. If any cops or troops were to attempt to break into the plant, it was plain they would first have to go over these women's bodies. ~~For~~ one attempt was made as the women entrenched themselves, preparing to stay the night.

Inside the plant, workers were busily filling huge gondola cars with stock, parts and weights. The electric trucks were hitched to them and dragged the 8000-pound loads against the rear doors. A crane was used to lift a second layer of loaded gondolas on top of the first and then still a third layer was hoisted into place. At 4.45 pm on February 1, 1937 Chevrolet plant No.4, producer of a million motors a year, largest unit in the world-wide General Motors empire, 'impregnable' against attack, had been secured by the men of the UAW-CIO. The women were standing in front of them, daring any cop, company goon or national guardsman to retake it. The brilliant plan conceived by Travis and the ingenuity and heroism of the strikers had stabbed at the very heart of the billion-dollar auto giant.

As darkness descended, Joe Sayen, who shortly before had acted so heroically inside the plant, climbed the fence and addressed the throng: 'We want the whole world to understand what we are fighting for. We are fighting for freedom and life and liberty. This is our one great opportunity. What if we should be defeated? What if we should be killed? We have only one life. That's all we can lose and we might as well die like heroes than like slaves'. (46)

On the 34th day of the great Flint sit-down, the workers had once again taken the offensive.

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Governor Murphy prepares for violence

The GM 'back to work' movement had been stopped in its tracks. Murphy was furious. Negotiations had been 'wrecked', he said. Privately, he had 'violently castigated' the use of the sit-down tactic. (47) He ordered troops into the area around Chevy No.4. They were partly under the command of Captain Henry McNaughton, who had served in the U.S. force that had invaded the Soviet Union after World War I. The troops took possession of all streets and approaches, isolating both the Chevy plant and Fisher Body No.2 across the street. Virtual martial law was declared. Guards with fixed bayonets surrounded No.4. Eight machine guns and 37 mm howitzers were mounted on the hill overlooking both plants. Tear gas was held in reserve. No one was allowed into the plants, which effectively shut off the food supply. Fisher No.2 was completely sealed off from both union contact and from visits by the strikers' families. The National Guard was upped to 2300 and finally to 4000. An injunction signed by Judge Gladola on February 2 ordered the workers to abandon the plants or face 'ejection' in 24 hours. The writ also forbade street picketing. The Women's Emergency Brigade was forced out of the area.

Then the heat was shut off in the two plants. The workers immediately threatened to start huge bonfires to warm themselves. On went the heat. Next the lights were shut. Again the workers warned that every one of the 3000 men now inside would light a torch of waste paper in order to 'see'. On went the lights. On February 3 the National Guard was forced to lift the food ban, under dire threats of 'damage' inside the plants. The lunches left by those workers who had not stayed in Chevy 4 proved invaluable during those first two days.

This war of nerves was too much for GM. With hundreds of millions of dollars worth of machinery at stake, on February 4 it agreed to resume negotiations. By agreeing to talk while the workers remained in possession of the plants, the corporation was making a fundamental concession. Earlier it had refused to negotiate unless the plants were evacuated.

On February 7 Lewis joined the talks in Detroit, along with Mortimer and attorney Lee Pressman. Mortimer replaced Martin who had been sent on tour to prevent him from fouling up the negotiations. The union reduced its 'recognition' demand to one of sole bargaining agent in the 20 struck plants, which included the key one, and agent for its members only in the rest.

Meanwhile, the AFL continued its treachery. Having previously wired GM its support, and labeled the strike a 'defeat', it now 'demanded' that the company reopen its plants. Its own craft members had 'never voted' for a strike, whined the AFL leaders, and therefore they were being 'ordered' back to work. Cleveland's Fisher Body plant had six AFL members. When Lewis was asked what effect this 'order' might have on the strike he replied, 'Did that man go back to work?'. (48)

The tension continued to mount. The sheriff read the injunction order to the sit-downers, demanding they leave the plants. After the workers refused, he asked Murphy for aid in ousting them and arresting their leaders.* By now Fisher No.1 - free from Guard patrol, two miles from the besieged plants - had 3000 men on the inside. Murphy kept holding off, hoping he could get an agreement and maintain an untarnished image. But the company forces would not let him rest easily.

City officials continued to recruit vigilantes. By February 8 there existed an armed force of 4000 National Guardsmen, 1000 deputised vigilantes, the Flint cops and the Flint Alliance, all 'ready to move'. The Michigan Sheriffs' Association offered 1300 additional deputies. The vigilantes were being put through 'dress rehearsals' by the sheriff and city officials. Plans were discussed about how to out the strikers. Many of these forces were among the lesser lights in the company scheme of things and felt a UAW victory would mean the end of their 'cut of the pie'.

The question arose among the union strategists of what to do in case of a full-scale attack. Initially, when the Guard had surrounded the two plants, Walter Reuther (who had come over from Detroit where he headed the West Side Local 174) 'felt that the workers should be told not to resist the Guards actively but to sprawl out on the floors and force the troops to carry them bodily out of the plant'.(49) Kraus and others had disagreed with this idea. When 'passive resistance' or a 'short protest and then surrender' proposal was raised again, Travis shot back:

'You're not going to tell workers to fight five minutes ... and then stop ... They've either got to fight or give in - there's no two ways about it. Well, suppose we tell them not to fight because it's impossible defeating such a superior force? Do you know what will happen? They'll march out of those plants like whipped dogs. Not all the talk in the world afterwards is going to change that. By taking the plants away from those boys now it would mean tearing the heart right out of them'.(50)

The strike leader then declared that 'we've got to tell them to be prepared to fight ... I don't think it'll ever come to that point because Governor Murphy isn't going to be responsible for bloodshed at this late date. But the only way to assure that is to take the attitude that we won't surrender to anybody. We fought the cops, we fought the company thugs, and we can fight the National Guard too, the way we did in Toledo ...' (51) (My emphasis - W.L.) No one challenged this strategy.

Rumors spread that an attack was imminent, that Murphy would finally use the Guard. Inside Fisher Body No.2 one worker, Francis O'Rourke, had been keeping a day-by-day diary: 'Injunction has been granted and Sheriff Wolcott is coming down to take us out. We're not coming out. Waiting, waiting, waiting, won't he ever come? We can't get news from the outside and can't get news out. It's nerve wracking. Just waiting for the Sheriff and wondering when we go into action. I hope none of us get hurt. All good men they are and don't want violence. We're not coming out though ...' (52)

* It was later revealed that, in preparation against such arrests, members of the Union Labor Post No.1 - the 'Union War Vets' - had plans to 'take over the city hall, the courthouse and police headquarters, capture and imprison all officials and release the union men'. (as reported by Kraus, p.248)

Inside Fisher No.1, 3000 workers were preparing for the worst. Daily drills were being held, with an 'Officer of the Day' in command in case of attack. A certain crane whistle was to signal a call to arms. Everyone had his orders. Four men were to attach each hose to the openings in the sheet-metal plates, already fitted with nozzles in place. Water was kept at full pressure at all times. On February 5 a shanty with pickets inside was placed over a nearby manhole cover, guarding the only spot from which the city water supply could be turned off. Foamite guns mounted on two wheels, resembling cannon, were rolled into place. Although banned, there were some rifles and revolvers on hand. The ventilators were plugged to prevent gas from being poured in through them.

A majority of the strikers signed up in a 'fight-to-the-death committee'. Their plan was to battle any attacker on a floor-to-floor basis, right up to the roof. They felt they could hold out indefinitely. A two-week supply of canned food had been shifted upstairs. On February 2, the men in both Fisher Body plants then sent wires to Murphy:

'...The police of the city of Flint belong to General Motors. The sheriff of Genesee County belongs to General Motors. The judges of Genesee County belong to General Motors ... It remains to be seen whether the Governor of the State also belongs to General Motors. Governor, we have decided to stay in the plant; we have no illusions about the sacrifices which this decision will entail. We fully expect that if a violent effort is made to oust us many of us will be killed and we take this means of making it known to our wives, to our children, to the people of the state of Michigan and the country, that if this result follows from the attempt to eject us, you are the one who must be held responsible for our deaths!'. (53)

That was the answer of the strikers inside; outside the preparations were no less militant. Travis had requested mass assistance for a possible showdown. Locals in his Toledo home base immediately began sending five hundred to a thousand men, ready to remain in Flint at least an entire week. Auto-Lite and other plants shut down because so many workers had left their jobs to go to the aid of their brothers and sisters in Flint. Cars were streaming in from all over Michigan. Thousands of workers were pouring over the roads leading from Detroit to the embattled workers. Ten thousand came from that city's Dodge and Chrysler plants alone. Kelsey-Hayes had to shut its doors because its workers were marching to Fisher Body. And 20,000 of Flint's own had begun massing at the two Body plants. Chevy No.4 had been captured after the injunction had been issued and therefore was not included in the ouster order.

The union declared February 3 'Women's Day'. Hundreds of women began arriving - from Detroit, Toledo, Lansing and Pontiac. The Flint Women's Emergency Brigade started massing 5000 women for the occasion.

The women decided to demonstrate right in the heart of Flint. Parading with their children they carried signs reading: 'We stand by our heroes in the plants'; 'Our daddies fight for us little tykes'. As the

deadline neared the women marched to Fisher No.1, merging with the thousands already there and encircled the entire length and breadth of the plant, six abreast in a loop both ways, the biggest picket line in Flint's history. There was to be no last-minute surrender. As the 5000 women wearing their bright red berets arrived at the plant carrying clubs, stove poker, crowbars and lead pipes, the sit-downers inside went wild. A Chevy No.4 worker aptly described their feelings:

'It was like we was soldiers holding the fort. It was like war. The guys with me became my buddies. I remember as a kid in school reading about Davey Crockett and the last stand at the Alamo. You know, mister, that's how I felt. Yes, sir, Chevy No.4 was my Alamo'. (54)

With world-wide interest focused on that 'war', the stage was set for a showdown.

GM capitulate

Murphy had reached the end of his rope. On the evening of February 10 he brought the injunction order to Lewis' hotel room to tell him it would be served to oust the sit-downers. Lewis replied that if that happened he would march straight to the plant and go inside to face the Guard alongside the workers.* (55)

With tens of thousands of workers in Flint surrounding the plants and refusing to surrender, with the heat and light at Chevy 4 turned off on February 9 and 10, and nearly 5000 sit-downers prepared to 'fight to the death', on February 11, the 44th day of the sit-down, General Motors gave up. It signed a contract with the UAW recognising the union as sole bargaining agent in the 20 struck plants, and for all its members in the other plants, and agreed not to deal with any other group for at least 6 months. The union felt confident - and was later proved correct - that this was enough time to assure an overwhelming UAW majority in the GM chain. All union members were to be rehired and would suffer no discrimination because of union activity. Union buttons, a real organising tool at that time, were permitted to be worn inside the plant. Formerly, workers had been fired on the spot for pinning one on. The injunctions were dropped. Negotiations would begin in five days on wages and working conditions. GM immediately raised wages 5c an hour in the hope of 'taking the play away from the union', but nearly all the workers traced this \$25 million increase directly to the UAW victory.

* Contrary to the widespread assumption that Murphy never intended to use the troops to forcibly remove the strikers, the Governor testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee on January 11, 1939 that, with Roosevelt's approval, he had reached the point of demanding that the writ be carried out when negotiations were near a breakdown. (Detroit Free Press, Jan. 12-13, 1939)

When the settlement was brought to the sit-downers for ratification, sharp discussion ensued. Chevy No.4 workers were somewhat disappointed because they were not included in the sole bargaining provision, but it was felt that this certainly would be achieved in less than six months. The workers at Fisher Body No.2 approved it after a long discussion. But at Fisher Body No.1 the men began firing questions at their leaders: 'How about the speed of the line? How about the bosses - will they be as tough as ever?'

Finally, one striker summed it up when he said: 'What's the use of kidding ourselves. All that piece of paper means is that we got a union. The rest depends on us!'.(56)

The Flint workers had 'struck the blow which shattered the shackles of open shop tyranny'.

Now the workers prepared to leave the plants that had been their home for 44 long days. One of them - 'John Thrasher of Standard Cotton, a small feeder plant for Fisher One, where the sit-down closely paralleled that of the major unit' - set down his thoughts on this occasion:

'As the exhilaration of our first union victory wore off the gang was occupied with thoughts of leaving the silent factory ...

'One found himself wondering what home life would be like again. Nothing that happened before the strike began seemed to register in the mind any more. It is as if time itself started with the strike.

'What will it be like to go home and to come back tomorrow with motors running and the long-silenced machines roaring again? But that is for the future...

'One must pack. Into a paper shopping bag I place the things which helped make my "house" a place to live in: house slippers, extra shirts, socks and underwear; razor and shaving equipment; two books; a reading lamp; and the picture of my wife that hung above my bed...

'It is near time to go. Already there is a goodly number of cars and people outside, brother workers who have come to escort us out of the plant. The first victory has been ours but the war is not over. We were strong enough to win over all the combined forces of our enemies and we shall continue to win only if we remember that through solidarity we have been made free.

'Now the door is opening'.(57)

At 5 pm on February 11 the whistle sounded full blast and the evacuation of Fisher Body No.1 began. The thousands waiting outside cheered as Bud Simons headed up the line of workers coming out under a huge sign bearing the declaration, 'Victory is Ours'. All the strikers carried bundles of belongings on their backs. Waves of deafening cheers resounded as entire families leaped at the men, marching like a conquering army. Lines formed and the two-mile parade to the other plants began. As the double row of marchers reached the top of the hill facing Fisher No.2 and Chevy 4 great flares lit up the area. Confetti poured down and the huge gates of No.4 opened.

As editor Kraus described it: 'Lungs that were already spent with cheering found new strength as the brave men whose brilliant coup had turned the strike to definite victory began to descend the stairs. They looked haggard with exhaustion. The mark of suffering was on them. Yet their collective joy and pride submerged all this. As they came out, wives and children rushed to husbands and fathers who had not been seen for ten fear-filled days. Strong, heavily-bearded men were unashamed of tears.

Then someone began to sing Solidarity:

'Solidarity forever!

'Solidarity forever!

'Solidarity forever!

'For the union makes us strong!'

and as all joined in, the moment was carried beyond its almost unbearable tenseness and emotion.' When Fisher No.2 had emptied, the cheering and noise 'exceeded all bounds of hearing'.

The thousands sang 'Solidarity Forever' as they surged into Third Avenue, a human flood headed for the center of the city. They had made Flint a union town.

As UAW editor Kraus noted (58) the spirit of the time was expressed perfectly by one slightly tipsy worker to another celebrating later in the wee hours of the morning: 'Emmet, you gotta believe me! It ain't me that's talkin', it's the CIO in me!'

AFTERMATH

~~The immediate effects of this victory were enormous. Although AFL head Green called the settlement 'a blow to all labor', a wave of strikes and sit-downs rolled across the country. In Detroit alone, in the next two weeks 87 sit-downs were begun. Packard, Goodyear, Goodrich and General Electric's Lynn, Massachusetts plant announced immediate wage increases. Four days after the workers had marched out of GM's plants UAW membership reached 200,000. Another 100,000 were signed up in the next few months.~~

Briggs and Murray, two body manufacturers, gave wage hikes on Feb. 15th; Nash-Kelvinator settled the next day; a second Briggs plant in Flint won time and one-half for overtime and a wage increase after a 7½ hour sit-down on the 17th; 3000 women in various factories sat down in Detroit on the 18th; 2000 more joined them the next day. By the 22nd there were 75,000 auto workers in the UAW in Detroit alone, and \$75 million had been added to auto workers' wages in that model year. On the 23rd ten strikes were won in a single day and Chrysler offered increases in all departments, while agreeing to negotiate a contract with the UAW for its 75,000 workers.

On the 24th, less than two weeks after the Flint sit-down had ended, United Press estimated that a minimum of 30,000 workers were sitting in across the country. Seventeen strikes were in progress in Detroit and 9000 New England shoe workers had just walked out. The next day 14 new sit-downs began in Detroit. And then came the big one.

On March 2 United States Steel - the largest steel company in the world and the other giant bastion of the open shop alongside GM - signed a contract with the CIO's Steel Workers Organising Committee. - WITHOUT A STRIKE. After long and bloody battles dating back to the 19th century, a union had come to steel. During the auto strike, flying squads of organisers had been blanketing the steel towns of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, and other states signing up workers by the thousands. The giant monopoly apparently saw the handwriting on the wall and wanted no part of a Flint-style offensive in its own mills.

The next day General Electric announced it would meet with the United Electrical workers, CIO, to discuss a contract for its 60,000 workers. By March 3, 47 sit-down strikes had been won in Detroit, and young women working in Woolworth's had smuggled cots into the stores to attempt to bring down that million-dollar corporation.

The CIO had set its sights on organising 5 million workers, a task which was virtually accomplished in less than 4 years. A half-century of battles, of Homestead, Haymarket, 1877, Pullman, packinghouse, 1919 in steel, finally came to fruition in the greatest industrial organising drive the nation had ever seen. It had been nurtured in Akron, spread to Toledo and Cleveland, and then, when the CIO leadership set its sights on steel as the kingpin, the auto workers had come along to upset the timetable. They had determined that GM would be the kingpin, and within GM it was to be Flint, 'the belly of the monster'. There is hardly any doubt that the 44 days spent inside of Fisher Body Nos. 1 and 2 and Chevrolet Assembly No. 4 was the turning point for the unionisation of the mass-production industries in the United States. As one observer declared when the strike was barely ten days old: 'The future of the Committee for Industrial Organisation, most hopeful development in the history of the American labor movement, lies in the hands of the sit-down strikers who have occupied Fisher Body Plant No. 1 at Flint, Michigan'. (59)

That this was a turning point is easily demonstrated: it was the first time that a national union had thrown all its weight behind one of its sections. It represented the triumph of industrial unionism over the more divisive AFL craft-type unionism. As noted previously, it was the most important single factor in spurring the unionisation of Big Steel. It was 'the first major test of the industrial union drive ... moving forward in steel and other mass production industries'. (60) Shortly afterwards, the Supreme Court, 'coincidentally', reversed its previous position and declared the Wagner Act constitutional, making certain basic workers' rights legal.

Even more fundamentally, 'the attack on GM was basically an attack on one of the important sectors of Wall Street', (61) a point well understood by many of its leaders. Mortimer had told the Fisher Body workers:

'This thing is deeper than most people realise. Behind GM is the Steel Institute. Behind the Steel Institute are the DuPonts. It is a fight between the American working class and the tap root of American capitalism'. (62)

And behind GM was also the fascist Liberty League and Black Legion, spawned by some of the biggest corporate interests in the country. The auto monopoly represented a financial power that was interlocked with finance capital throughout the world. In organising GM, the auto workers were breaking through the enemy line at one of its strongest points, which is why the repercussions spread throughout the country. While it was not a revolution - it did not, nor was its aim to, transfer state power into the hands of the working class - it was a major confrontation in the struggle between property rights and workers' rights, and many of the laws established by the ruling class to keep the workers in check were broken. GM's president, Alfred Sloan, himself recognised this new-found power of the workers when he said:

'Through the ... Courts the illegality of the "sit-down" was established. The strikers were ordered out of the Corporation's plants. They deliberately refused to obey the orders of the Court. They were found in contempt of the Court. No effort was made by the local enforcement authorities to enforce the orders of the Court and the State itself took no action toward maintaining the authority of the law. (Sloan should have said no successful effort or action was taken, since they certainly tried. - W.L.) Under such circumstances, the Corporation stood powerless. Manifestly, it became a matter beyond its power to control'. (63)

What exactly was this power that could strike at the 'tap root' of capitalism and render GM 'powerless'?

In the first place it was the overwhelming rank-and-file character of the strike. It should be remembered what the workers would have faced in a prolonged organising struggle: company spies, blacklists, strike-breaking, firing due to union activity, tear gas, etc. The sit-down overcame all of these obstacles. But almost by definition it is in the nature of a sit-down that the rank and file must run it. It cannot succeed otherwise. The sit-down has been described as sort of a 'domestic poll of the workers'. Solidarity and unity are the cornerstones of its success.

Through such participation of the mass, many things became possible: demonstrations; mass picketing barring entry and discouraging attack through active defence; 24-hour picket lines; agitation through bulletins, newspapers, sound trucks, and mass singing of labor songs to bolster morale; a democratically run strike committee with direct and large rank-and-file representation and therefore control; relief committees; free food supply, etc. It was this mass participation that enabled the workers to 'take possession' of the plants and gain backing from the working class population of a company town. This helped provide the strong outside support necessary to guarantee the existence of the sit-downers inside. Many times it was the overwhelming, all-pervasive character of the mass in motion that was largely responsible for the tremendous rapid growth of the union. Workers seeing the power of the organised group found it irresistible, especially as it accumulated victories over a heretofore unbeatable enemy.

The success of the rank and file and its sit-down was also based on the interlocking nature of the assembly line. On the one hand the corporations had constructed a method of production that set men 'apart', concentrating on their 'own' job, as a cog in a wheel, what many called 'dehumanisation'; on the other hand, the assembly line contained within itself the seeds of power to conquer its owners. The key to its operation was usually contained within a few departments, and the organisers set about developing a strong core of union men in those departments, vital links in a spiralling chain. The soldering and welding department, 'body-in-white', was a key link in Fisher Body as was Fisher Body itself in the over-all GM empire. The belt is an interlocking form. Once cut at certain spots it becomes inoperative, as was certainly demonstrated in the lightning-like actions involved in closing down Chevy Nos. 4 and 6.

To start a sit-down, a highly organised core was all that was necessary. But a participating and supporting mass was necessary to win it.

The importance of the workers to the assembly line operation - who individually were cogs in the wheel but who collectively were the wheel itself - was no better described than in the reactions of one of the sit-downers after the plants were shut: 'Now we know our labor is more important than the money of the stockholders, than the gambling on Wall Street, than the doings of the managers and foremen'.

So predominant was this rank-and-file character that it moved in advance of the CIO leaders: 'It is probably true that if ... the CIO had been entirely free to pick (its) own time and place, the struggle in automobiles would have come somewhat later, might even have been postponed until after a victory had been won in steel or in rubber or in coal. The auto workers' strike was primarily a rank and file movement'. (64)

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