

Sitdown strike

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(Redirected from Sit-down strike)

A **sit-down strike** is a form of civil disobedience

in which an organized group of workers, usually employed at a factory or other centralized location, take possession of the workplace by "sitting down" at their stations, effectively preventing their employers from replacing them with scab labor or, in some cases, moving production to other locations.

Workers had used this technique since the beginning of the 20th century, not only in the United States, but also in Italy, Poland, Yugoslavia, and France. The United Auto Workers used this tactic with great success, most famously in the Flint Sit-Down Strike, in which strikers not only held a number of General Motors plants for more than forty days, but repelled the efforts of the police and National Guard to retake them. A wave of sitdown strikes followed, but ended by the end of the decade as the courts and the National Labor Relations Board held that sitdown strikers could be fired. While some sit-down strikes still occur in the United States, they tend to be spontaneous and short-lived.

French workers engaged in a number of factory occupations in the wake of the French student revolt in May, 1968. At one point more than twenty-five percent of French workers were on strike, many of them occupying their factories.

The sit-down strike was the inspiration for the sit-in, where an organized group of protesters would occupy an area they are not wanted by sitting and refuse to leave until their demands are met.

- The Wobblies - first to employ sit-down strikes (<http://www.iww.org/en/culture/articles/zinn13.shtml>)

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Categories: Activism | Civil disobedience | Labour relations | Protests

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Flint Sit-Down Strike

Flint Sit-Down Strike

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Flint Sit-Down Strike



Sit-down strikers at Fisher Body Plant (1937)

The Flint Sit-Down Strike changed the [United Automobile Workers](#) from a collection of isolated locals on the fringes of the industry into a major union and led to the unionization of the [United States automobile industry](#).

The UAW had only been formed in [1935](#) and held its first convention in [1936](#). Shortly thereafter the union decided that it could not survive by piecemeal organizing campaigns at smaller plants, as it had in the past, but that it could only organize the automobile industry by going after its biggest and most powerful employer, [General Motors](#) Corporation, focusing on GM's production complex in [Flint, Michigan](#).

Organizing Flint was a difficult and dangerous plan. GM controlled city politics in Flint and kept a close eye on outsiders. As Wyndham Mortimer, the UAW officer put in charge of the organizing campaign in Flint, recalled, when he visited Flint in [1936](#) he received a telephone call within a few minutes of checking into his hotel from an anonymous caller telling him to get back where he came from if he didn't "want to be carried out in a wooden box."

GM also maintained an extensive network of spies throughout its plants. Mortimer concluded after talking to Flint autoworkers that the existing locals, which had only 122 members out of 45,000 autoworkers in Flint, were riddled with spies. Accordingly, he decided that the only safe way to organize Flint was simply to bypass those locals. Mortimer, Bob Travis, Roy Reuther, Henry Kraus and Ralph Dale began meeting with Flint autoworkers in their homes, keeping the names of new members a closely guarded secret from others in Flint and in UAW headquarters.

As the UAW studied its target it discovered that GM had only two factories that produced the dies from which car body components were stamped: one in Flint that produced the parts for [Buicks](#), [Pontiacs](#) and [Oldsmobiles](#) and another in [Cleveland](#) that produced [Chevrolet](#) parts. The union planned to strike these plants after the New Year, when [Frank Murphy](#) would become Governor of [Michigan](#).

Events forced the union to accelerate its plans, however, when the workers at Cleveland's Fisher body plant went on strike on [December 26, 1936](#). The UAW immediately announced that it would not settle the Cleveland strike until it reached a national agreement with GM covering all of its plants. At the same time the Union made plans to shut down Fisher # 1 in Flint.

On [December 29, 1936](#) the Union learned that GM was planning to move the dies out of Fisher # 1. Travis immediately called a meeting at lunchtime at the union hall across the street from the plant, explained the situation, then sent the members across the street to occupy the plant. The Flint sit-down strike began.

In a conventional strike the union takes its members outside the plant and attempts to prevent the employer from operating by discouraging other employees from entering. In a [sit-down strike](#), the workers physically occupy the plant, keeping management and others out.

The Flint sit-down strikers did just that, electing their own "Mayor" and other civic officials and maintaining the plant throughout the strike. The Union kept up a regular supply of food to the strikers inside while sympathizers marched in support outside.

A state court judge issued an [injunction](#) ordering the strikers to leave the plant. The UAW discovered, through investigative work, that the judge held roughly \$200,000 in GM stock, which disqualified him from hearing any case involving GM.

The Flint police attempted to enter the plant on [January 11, 1937](#). The strikers inside the plant turned the fire hoses on the police while pelting

them with hinges and other auto parts as members of the women's auxiliary broke windows in the plant to give strikers some relief from the tear gas the police were using against them. The police made several charges, but withdrew after six hours. The strikers dubbed this "The Battle of Bulls Run," a mocking reference to the police ("bulls").

GM obtained a second injunction against the strike on [February 1, 1937](#). The union not only ignored the order, but spread the strike to Chevrolet Plant # 4. To avoid tipping its hand, the union let it be known in the hours before the move that it intended to go after another plant in the complex, only changing directions at the last minute. GM, tipped off by an informant within the UAW, was ready and waiting for the union at the other plant and caught completely off guard at Plant # 4.

That development forced GM to bargain with the Union. [John L. Lewis](#), President of the [United Mine Workers](#) and founder and leader of the [CIO](#), spoke for the UAW in those negotiations, while the UAW sent its President Homer Martin on a speaking tour to keep him out of the way. GM's representatives refused to be in the same room as the UAW's, so Governor Murphy acted as courier and intermediary between the two groups. The parties finally reached agreement on [February 11, 1937](#) on a one page agreement that recognized the UAW as the exclusive bargaining representative for GM's employees who were members of the union for the next six months.

As short as this agreement was, it gave the UAW instant legitimacy. The UAW capitalized on that opportunity, signing up 100,000 GM employees and building the Union's strength through grievance strikes at GM plants throughout the country. Several participants in the strike, including [Charles I. Krause](#), went on to greater prominence within the union.

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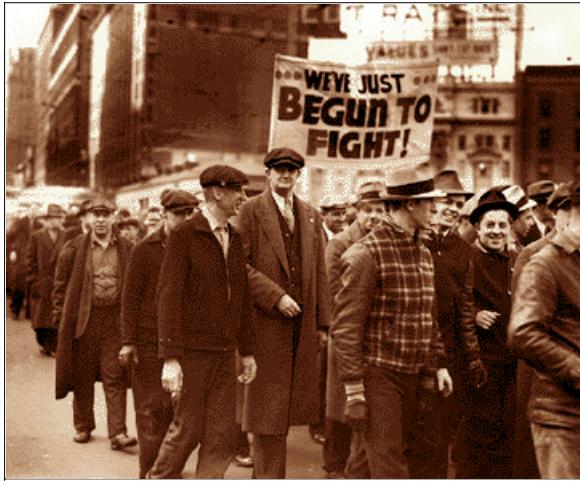
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Union workers and sympathizers march toward a rally in Detroit's Cadillac Square in early 1937. The fledgling United Auto Workers were striking General Motors plants in Flint and other locations, and were encouraged when the Detroit rally drew 150,000 supporters.

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The historic 1936-37 Flint auto plant strikes

By Vivian M. Baulch and Patricia Zacharias / *The Detroit News*

The most important strike in American labor history, historians agree, began at the end of 1936. The feisty young United Auto Workers launched the first of a series of sit-down strikes against General Motors at Fisher Body Plant No. 1 in Flint.

The feisty young United Auto Workers launched the first of a series of sit-down strikes against General Motors at Fisher Body Plant No. 1 in Flint. The goals were to earn recognition for the UAW as the bargaining agent for GM workers, and to make the company stop shipping work to plants with nonunion workers. The strike lasted 44 days and became the first of many union victories.

The UAW was formed in 1935 by union activists dissatisfied that the auto union under the AFL had not been allowed to name its own leaders. Homer Martin was elected president, and Walter and Victor Reuther and George Addes were officers. The Reuther brothers, originally from Wheeling, W. Va., had come to Detroit in 1927 to find work in the auto industry and soon became active in the union movement.

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**Gov. Frank Murphy ordered 4,000 National
 Guardsmen to the Flint plants, but would not give
 orders to use force against the workers.**

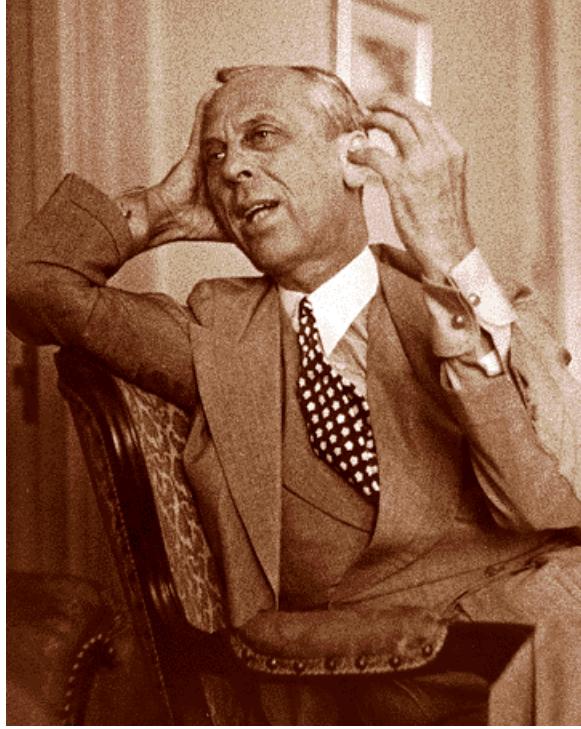
On Nov. 18, 1936, the UAW struck a Fisher Body plant in Altanta. On Dec. 16, they hit two GM plants in Kansas City, and on Dec. 28, a Fisher stamping plant in Cleveland. Two days later they struck Fisher Body No. 1 in Flint. Within two weeks, approximately 135,000 men from plants in 35 cities in 14 states were striking General Motors.

As the nation was emerging from the Great Depression, the striking workers enjoyed the sympathy of most of the people, including Michigan governor Frank Murphy and popular New Deal President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Roosevelt had promised in his inaugural speech to drive out the "economic royalists," a pointed reference to the General Motors officials.

Those against the upstart union included Al Sloan, the GM president, and his comrade, the opinionated Henry Ford, who felt more sympathy for his competitor than for workers. Ford, however, refused to shut down his plants in sympathy for GM. Of course, the stockholders sided with their profit maker. And one Gallup poll revealed that 53 percent of those polled sided with the company.

But GM vice-president William S. Knudsen, despite being on the management side, felt that collective bargaining's time had come.

Before the Depression there were 470,000 auto workers. The number fell by half, as did the wages, which had been reduced from \$40 per week to about \$20. Because these harsh times still haunted the workers, job security was an important issue. Another bone of contention was the hated "spies" informing on union members. The workers could be fired by any foreman anytime. The work itself -- dangerous, difficult, and boring -- caused many injuries, often for simple reasons such as lack of gloves. Exertion caused the families extreme exhaustion, which distressed the workers' families, who shared the fear of possible job loss. Could the worker endure? They needed the money. The rock and the hard place squeezed them all.



**Alfred P. Sloan Jr., president of General Motors,
considered his workers to be among the most
"pampered" in the industry.**

The company, dubbed "Generous Motors" by many who wished for jobs with the prosperous firm, was caught off guard by the strike, because it considered its workers to be among the most "pampered" in the industry. GM had just given workers a Christmas bonus of \$47 from its "GM Appreciation Fund." The union seemed to have ignored the "GM Layoff Benefit Plan" and the "Income Security Plan" offered by the company in 1936. Both plans emerged much later as the SUB pay union plan.

The Flint sit-down strike began the evening of Dec. 30, 1936, when the night shift stopped the loading of dies being shipped by the company to places where unionism was weaker. The union had noticed that the sit-down method of protest, which had started in Europe, seemed to work successfully. So the workers sat down and locked themselves in, trying to protect their jobs from being removed.

The charismatic, aggressive young Walter Reuther became the workers' champion, and he won their hearts. He did not fear violence, nor did his brothers Victor and Roy. Biographers of the future UAW president would call him the "crown prince of labor" and "the most dangerous man in Detroit."

On Jan. 3, 1937, The Detroit News reported that Knudsen said: "A meeting between the management and the union was scheduled for Monday, Jan. 4, but on Wednesday, before that meeting could take place, the second shift sat down and caused the plant to close, throwing out of work 7,000 men. More than 1,000 are still in the plant." Nearly all 7,000 plant workers were union members.



Retired Major Henry A. Geerds examines a model of a machine gun made by strikers at the Fisher Body Plant no. 2 in Flint.

The News gave the union version: "Flint Fisher Body Plant No. 1 sat down at 10 p.m. Wednesday because the company was reported moving dies from the plant to Grand Rapids and Pontiac, which the union contends amounted to breaking faith."

The union called for supporters to gather at Cadillac Square in Detroit as a show of strength. The overflowing crowd of 150,000 supporters surprised even the union sympathizers and gave the union the self-confidence they needed to show its power and solidarity over its management "oppressors." Other union workers joined in sympathy strikes, closing plants in other states.

Among the plants closed by a sit-down strike was Fisher No. 2, also in Flint. The company responded by turning off the heat, and the cold winter caused the strikers there to compare themselves to George Washington and his men at Valley Forge.

Then, on Jan. 11, 1937, the police tried to stop food delivery. A riot ensued.

"The rioting at Flint resulted in injury to 16 strikers and spectators and 11 officers," The Detroit News reported. "The condition of one striker was reported to be critical. Most of the strikers were injured by buckshot fired from riot guns by the Flint police. The officers were injured principally by missiles thrown from the plant by the stay-in strikers."



Walter Reuther, future president of the UAW, was one of the leaders of the Flint strikes.

"A pitched battle raged at the gates of the plant for 20 minutes, with 30 to 40 policemen opposing several hundred enraged strikers. The strikers pelted the officers with iron nuts, bolts and milk bottles and spurted thick streams of water on them from fire hoses. The police retaliated with tear gas and riot guns."

Biographer Nelson Lichtenstein tells of the Reuther brothers' role in the incident: "Roy and Walter were in the thick of the twilight battle, but Victor proved the real hero. For hours he manned the UAW sound car, from which he poured forth a constant stream of encouragement and tactical guidance described by one observer as 'an inexhaustible furious flood pouring courage into the men.'"

Twice the attacking police were repulsed. The winds had shifted and sent the tear gas back on the officers, who were then pelted with metal hinges thrown by the strikers. A crowd of sympathizers protected the strikers and the police retreated.

"The battle ended with the strikers in complete control of the gates," The News continued. "A crowd of nearly 2,000 watched the struggle. The plant lies in a valley, on the north side of the Flint River. The onlookers stood on both slopes of the valley, well out of harm's way. There was little to be seen from these points of vantage. The clouds of tear gas obscured the battlefield."

"After the fighting had subsided, the crowd grew to about 5,000. They stood there most of the night, awaiting new developments which did not come."



A United Auto Workers rally in Detroit's Cadillac Square drew È 150,000 supporters.

News of the riot, dubbed "the Battle of the Running Bulls," reached Gov. Frank Murphy in Lansing before midnight. Before he left by auto for the riot site, he said, "It won't happen again ... Peace and order will prevail. The people of Flint are not going to be terrorized. The State of Michigan will be supreme."

However, despite his mobilizing 4,000 National Guardsmen, Murphy refused to use them against the workers. The besieged sit-downers held. They continued to warm themselves with barrels of burning coke. Wives and others sympathizers brought food and news to the windows.

Inside, they formed different groups such as guards, cleaners, news gatherers and food handlers. Others played cards, while some played musical instruments smuggled in, undoubtedly singing union folk songs.

Paralysis of the Chevrolet and Fisher Body division plants in Flint developed as the union's foremost objective. The future of the union depended on its ability to keep these key units of GM out of production.



A 1930 aerial view of the Chevrolet plants in Flint. È È Paralysis of the Chevrolet and Fisher Body division plants in Flint - key units in the production of GM parts - was the union's prime objective in 1937.

GM had rejected flatly all of the union's demands early in January, 1937. The corporation tried to push a back-to-work movement and sought federal assistance to sweep the sit-down strikers out of its plants.

On Jan. 29, GM went to court to request an injunction ordering the strikers out. The judge, Edward Black of Genesee County, owned \$150,000 of GM stock and his order was derided by laughter. It only caused more union reinforcements to pour into Flint.

Other than "the Battle of the Running Bulls," only one other violent incident was reported during the sit-down strikes, on Feb. 1, when some 28 persons were injured. Striker Earl DeLong, 22, shot in the stomach, was the most seriously hurt.

The Feb. 1 riot happened at Chevrolet plant No. 4 in Flint, when the union tried to encourage the 6,000 day shift workers to join the sit-down strike. Five hundred union men entered the plant to protest "discrimination against union members." The News reported that the union men began breaking factory windows. Tear gas and missiles were thrown, but no shooting was reported. Roy Reuther and Powers Hapgood manned the sound truck. The plant, a few blocks from the Fisher Body plant, had resumed work a week earlier because the workers decided to go back.

The News gave this account: "The guardsmen forming a line around the No. 4 plant were part of a contingent of 1,200 who formed a bayoneted ring of steel around the 80-acre grounds which house all 12 plants of the Chevrolet Motor Car Co. at Flint. Machine guns emplacements

were at strategic approaches and except for a small group of pickets outside the gates of the No. 4 plant, all visitors were barred unless they had special military passes.

"The guardsmen surrounded the grounds and 'enforced peace' on orders of Gov. Murphy, following the rioting."

The News also gave the union version: "Then company police and hundreds of thugs, armed with tear gas pistols, tear gas bombs, blackjack and clubs manufactured in the Chevrolet woodshop, attacked all workers in the plant, using floods of tear gas. It was a clear case, apparently, of company thugs against the workers since all the injured workers were found in the plants and no one was injured on the outside of the company property. City police do not seem to have been involved."

The National Guard fixed bayonets and halted any delivery of food to the occupiers. But the governor never ordered the troops into action.

The strikers vowed a hunger strike until their families could bring them food, or their demands were met. The sit-downers appealed to the governor.

President Roosevelt asked GM to meet with the union once more. The tension subsided. General Motors signed an agreement with the UAW, giving the union bargaining rights in 17 GM plants shut by sit-downs.

Employees at the 17 plants involved got 5 percent pay hikes and were allowed to speak in the lunchroom. The company agreed not to discriminate against union members and agreed to begin negotiations on other matters.

A synopsis of the issues included in the union demands:

1. Recognition of UAW as sole bargaining agency.
2. Abolition of piece work in favor of straight hourly rates.
3. A 30 hour week and 6 hour day, with time and a half for overtime.
4. A "minimum rate of pay commensurate with an American standard of living."
5. Seniority rights based on length of service.
6. Reinstatement of all employees "unjustly discharged."
7. Mutual agreement on "speed of production."

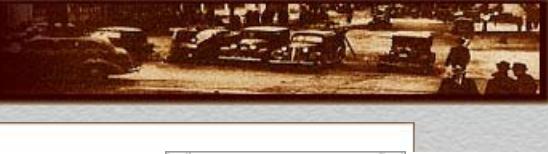
The dramatic military style battles depict the times and the desperation of those involved. The outcome much later in time proved that both the union and the company could coexist and indeed prosper beyond anyone's expectations. Those who made the cars could finally afford to buy them, pouring profits back to the stockholders. Spreading the wealth caused more to be created. The pension and wages won by the workers raised the standard of living for the whole country.

(This story was compiled using clip and photo files from The Detroit News Library.)



the Flint Sit-Down Strike

AUDIO GALLERY



THE STRIKE

On the night of December 30, the majority of employees who had been working their shift at Fisher 1 and Fisher 2 left the plants. Some left only to celebrate the New Year and returned later. Others took up picket and food-gathering activities on the outside. The lives of those who remained on the inside for the duration quickly fell into a disciplined and organized pattern. Committees for such things as cleaning up, exercise, security, entertainment, and defense were quickly assembled, and the property of the company was strictly kept from harm. This discipline and organization was maintained through the insistence of strike leaders Bob Travis and Roy Reuther, both of whom were already veterans of this new way of striking.

FLINT AUDIO MEMORIES

Evelyn Gillette says that the men didn't know whether to sit down or walk out at first.

Andrew Olay talks about men bolting from the plant when it was shut down.

Sheldon McNe remembers the first night of sitting in.

Earl Hubbard talks about life inside the plants.

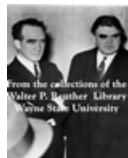
Also talks about how they had to burn burlap when the company shut off the heat-

Roscoe Rich recounts the first few days of the strike- first few days of sitting down; keeping watch and keeping entertained.

Ed Erlich says he was forced to leave the plant temporarily when his youngest child got sick.

Joe Fry (Part I) tried to collect food from area merchants and farmers (Part II).

Mr. K. Gillian remembers a rumor about a goon squad coming to shoot them out.



General Motors brass and many Flint residents were horrified at the sit-down tactic employed by the strikers. They saw it as an offense to the American tradition of property rights and assigned the blame for its introduction in Flint to "outside agitators", "radicals", and "reds." The extent to which this was true is still unclear, yet it is obvious that most of the sit-downers were patriotic American citizens who were otherwise unworldly and reactionary in their views on politics and society. A good percentage of them supported Franklin Roosevelt and Frank Murphy simply because those politicians portrayed themselves as champions of the little guy, and not because of any perceived ideological slant to the Democratic platform. While several leaders of the strike, including the Reuther brothers, Bob Travis, Genora Johnson, Bud Simons, and Joe Devitt had leftist credentials, none passed out Communist or Socialist literature during the strike. Their politics, which came to light after the strike, simply helps to explain their great devotion to the strikers' cause.

FLINT AUDIO MEMORIES

Gerald Healy says it was the sit-down tactic that got everybody's attention.

Henry Kraus discusses the theory of the sit-down.

He also remembers the lack of worldliness among the population of Flint.

Frank Funk claims that the sit-down strike was a Communist weapon, pure and simple.

Leo Robinson claims that the sit-down was John L. Lewis's idea.

Floyd Root says that the sit-down tactic was wholly unconstitutional; yet it was also terribly effective.

Louis Gancos says that the leaders of the strike were radical by necessity.

Dorothy Harbin remembers being contacted by some supervisors who wanted her to be on the lookout for "Communistic" talk.

Harry Fleischman talks at length about how he got involved in the strike as a member of the Socialist Party.

Larry Jones recounts how it took extreme optimism and faith to believe that the strike would be successful.

"Red" Mundale talks about how Fisher 2 wasn't as radical, politically, as Fisher 1.

Stanley Novak says that it was the ethnic groups within Flint who were the radicals.

For those in Flint who opposed the strike or who were unsure what to think about it, there were plenty of influences in town to move the ambivalent towards hostility, and the hostile towards violent action. The Flint Journal, whose editorial board was planted firmly in GM's pocket, carried headlines every day that either exaggerated the nature of the strike or spouted the company's biased interpretations of events. Words like "chaos", "radical", and "mob" were prevalent. Schoolchildren, including sons and daughters of strikers, were told by their teachers to write essays about why the strike was wrong. Churches, for the most part, were piously silent or cautionary on the topic of the strike, and the judges who rendered decisions on the legality of the strike were preemptively opposed to it. Judge Black, for instance, handed down an injunction against the strikers even though his holding of over \$200,000 in GM stock constituted a massive conflict of interest; Judge Gadola once said from the bench that the UAW would be required to compensate GM fully for all of its lost sales during the strike.

FLINT AUDIO MEMORIES

Paul Loisell argues that the strike was really unnecessary.

Peter Schmitz says that the general public was caught by surprise when the strike occurred.

Laura Hayward remembers that the Flint Journal cast everybody involved in the strike as either "Reds" or fascists.

Martin Japinga talks about his experiences as a Flint police officer at the time.

Robert Gibbs says the churches didn't help because of their emphasis on non-violence under any circumstances.

Mrs. Rollin Moon says that company goons tried to scare the wives of strikers at night.

Wife of Judge Gadola talks about having (unnecessary?) police protection at her house.

Gerald Healy talks about an aborted plan to beat up the Reuther brothers.

The two most famous events of the strike were the Battle of Bulls' Run and the takeover of Chevrolet Plant No. 4. The former occurred January 11 when city police in riot gear tried to storm the weakly-held Fisher 2 plant. The latter occurred on February 1 and was accomplished through a remarkable diversionary tactic in which the union let it "leak out" that they were going to try to take over Chevrolet Plant No. 9. Company spies did their job, and on the night of February 1 all of the company's resources were diverted to No. 9. In the meantime, workers from Chevy 6 came over to help shut down the massive No. 4 plant, encountering only token resistance. The Chevy 4 sit-downers constituted the largest group of strikers in Flint, and although they only had to occupy the plant for ten days, their actions precipitated a crisis for General Motors that ultimately forced its recognition of the union.

FLINT AUDIO MEMORIES

Robert Mamero tells the story of the Battle of Bulls' Run.

Roscoe Rich gives his version of the Battle of Bulls' Run.

Ed Erlich manned the hoses during the Battle of Bulls' Run.

Mrs. Hans Larson remembers her husband getting shot.

Larry Jones says that the takeover of Chevy 4 brought GM to its knees.

Also recounts the gassing of the men at Plant 9.

Leo Connelly describes the beginning of the strike at Chevy 4.

Alexander Reider remembers being injured in the Chevy 4 takeover.

Continues his narration of the takeover- **Part I**, **Part II**, **Part III**.

Leo Robinson talks about his tussle with company men on the stairwell at Chevy 4.

Joseph Skunda says that the strike could have been a lot more violent.

In both of the major battles of the strike, women played a key role in the union's successes. From the beginning, a large number of non-working women refused to sit on the sidelines while the strike was going on. Instead, they formed the Women's Auxiliary, which visited the homes of sit-downers to convince their wives that the strike was worth the sacrifice they were experiencing. Later, a smaller group formed the Women's Emergency Brigade, which took the front lines on several occasions against the police and company "goons". Many of these women even enlisted their children in picket duty and ended up giving them an education they could not have received in Flint's schools. Genora (Dollinger) Johnson became the most famous of these women activists, though many dozens besides her put their lives on the line, daring GM to step over it.

FLINT AUDIO MEMORIES

Laura Hayward discusses her work at the union hall.

Larry Jones talks about the role of the "Red Berets".

Says that the involvement of women posed a dilemma for management.

Delia Parish remembers taking food to the strikers at Chevy 4, despite the warnings of guards.

She also put furniture back in the houses of families who had been evicted.



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the Flint Sit-Down Strike

AUDIO GALLERY



AFTERMATH

The strike was settled on February 11, 1937. The UAW did not win all of its demands, but gained an agreement from General Motors to recognize the union in the struck plants and to allow the union exclusive rights for six months to organize in the other plants. The company also agreed not to discriminate against the strikers who were returning to work. The lion's share of credit for the final settlement belongs to Governor Frank Murphy and CIO President John L. Lewis. The possibly legendary story goes that Murphy met with Lewis in his Detroit hotel room. When Murphy expressed determination to execute the laws of the State and to evict the strikers, Lewis reminded him that his (Murphy's) father had once been a striking mine worker. Then the union leader asked the Governor what his father would think if he used force to break up the strike. As a result of this conversation, Murphy agreed to let the strikers stay in the plants, which left GM with practically no other choice but to settle.

FLINT AUDIO MEMORIES

Larry Jones describes the meeting between Lewis and Murphy on February 9.
Leo Robinson refers to the meeting between Lewis and Murphy.
Joseph Skunda says Murphy was never given enough credit.

The first few weeks after the settlement of the strike brought a predictable chaos to the plants. Since the success of the strike had created an unprecedented situation, nobody had a clear idea of what the new relationship between labor and supervision was supposed to be. Nevertheless, the new union locals got busy electing officers, setting up grievance procedures, and signing up members. Now that the overriding fear of belonging to the union was gone, this last task was relatively easy. Inside the plants, wildcat strikes occurred on a daily basis in various departments until the union disavowed them, and there was also a new, and perhaps ironic, emphasis on ridding the organization of Communist influences. Most importantly, though, some truly dangerous and exploitative working conditions were banned, such as poor ventilation, hazardous machine work, and unpaid overtime. Additionally, wages rose in nearly every department.

FLINT AUDIO MEMORIES

Irving King describes the behavior of the workers after going back to work.
Leo Connelly remembers the outbreak of wildcat strikes.
Floyd Root remembers the chaotic relationship between supervision and union leadership after the strike.
Arthur Smith says that after the strike it wasn't hard to sign guys up.
Irving King talks about ridding the new union of Communists.
James Spohn recalls the improved conditions in the paint department immediately after the strike.
Leo Robinson says the strike gave him the chance to get on a desirable shift.
Andrew Olay remembers that there was a more democratic feeling in the plants after the strike.

The United Auto Worker's victory in the Flint Sit-Down Strike did not mean that the union had it easy from then on. The immediate results of the strike were mixed in some quarters, and further strikes were necessary before the fruits of victory could be fully enjoyed. Even in Flint, many individuals would remain ambivalent about the true value and historical importance of the strike. Nevertheless, the true legacy of the 1936-37 sit-down strike is that over the next forty years the UAW won for its membership some of the broadest and most significant benefits of any union in the country: full health coverage, generous pensions, and even 90% pay during lay-offs in some cases. While some may argue that this had the effect of weakening the automobile industry in America, a more persuasive argument would be that it created a model of industrial employment that has been emulated all over the world.

FLINT AUDIO MEMORIES

Robert Mamero says that the strike showed the company that men couldn't be treated like dogs.
Irene Mitchell says that young people today "don't know what the older people went through".
Mary Nightengale claims that the union "put the country on its feet".
Laura Hayward discusses all the benefits the union has brought.



Sit-Down Strikes and Labor's Right to Organize Detroit, 1937

Section D Lesson Six

Objectives:

The Students will:

- Understand the significance of the Sit Down Strikes in the ultimate success of the labor movement.
- Critically analyze primary source material
- Recognize different points of view in historical events
- Develop reasoned arguments on a public policy issue.
- Demonstrate the ability to summarize ideas into a brief statement.

D. Extending the Activity:

1. Assign students to review Detroit newspapers from March through June of 1937 to understand the extent of the sit-down strikes.
2. For homework, ask the students to write a 100-word commentary on any of the documents that would appear as a news report on the radio in 1937.

Assessing the Learning:

1. Class participation
2. Completed worksheet from each student

References and Resources:

Frank Murphy. The New Deal Years. Sidney Fine

Working Detroit. Steve Babson

Walter Reuther Papers, Henry Kraus Papers, Chrysler Sit-down Strike Photographic File: Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University

Frank Murphy Papers: Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan

The Detroit News and Detroit Free Press for 1937 contain daily coverage of the progress of the sit-down strikes from January to June 1937.



Battle of the Overpass at Ford's River Rouge Plant on May 26, 1937

Courtesy of Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University

Lesson 6

Sit-Down Strikes and Labor's Right to Organize Detroit, 1937

The success of the modern labor movement in the United States can be traced to the 1937 sit-down strikes. The right to organize had been granted by the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. It had to be won, however, by workers in a series of confrontations with corporations who were strongly opposed to labor unions. The primary tactic employed by workers was the sit-down strike.

The sit-down strike was a relatively new form of labor action. In a more traditional strike, workers walked off the job and usually picketed outside of the company. Often the goal of picketing was to prevent strikebreakers from entering the shop. In a sit-down strike, workers seized control of the facility. They evicted supervisory personnel and refused entry to outsiders.

The Flint sit-down strike against General Motors early in 1937 encouraged other workers to adopt the same tactic. Sit-down strikes spread throughout the country. Detroit, however, was the center of labor activity.

In the winter and spring of 1937, Detroit became a hotbed of labor unrest. Workers in over one hundred Detroit companies



National Guard Troops and UAW Picketers during the General Motors Sit-Down Strike, 1937

Courtesy of Walter P. Reuther, Wayne State University



Wives of employees parading during the UAW's campaign to organize workers at Ford, 1941

Courtesy of Walter P. Reuther, Wayne State University

“sat down” in order to secure the right to organize unions. There were many more all across the country.

The unprecedented labor action terrified many Americans. Today, it is easy to minimize their concerns. However, we should not forget that the world was a dangerous place in 1937. It was the era of Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin. Threats from the Communist left and Fascist right were very real. It appeared to a large number of citizens that the sit-down strikes were the beginning of a revolution aimed at destroying the American system.

Given the atmosphere, government authorities were in a very difficult position. Clearly, the sit-down strikes were an illegal seizure of private property. However, any attempt to evict strikers would lead to considerable violence. In addition, workers had legitimate complaints. To them, unions and collective bargaining seemed the only answer.

In Michigan, Governor Frank Murphy was at the center of the controversy. A strong supporter of labor, Murphy was nonetheless responsible for enforcing the laws. The sit-downs created difficult personal and political dilemmas for Governor Murphy.

Sit-Down Strikes and Labor's Right to Organize Detroit, 1937

Section D Lesson Six

Themes and Benchmarks:

Historical Perspective

SOC.I.1.HS.1
SOC.I.2.HS.1
SOC.I.2.HS.3
SOC.I.3.HS.1
SOC.I.3.HS.2
SOC.I.4.HS.2

Geographic Perspective

SOC.II.5.HS.2

Civic Perspective

SOC.III.2.HS.1
SOC.III.2.HS.2
SOC.III.3.HS.1
SOC.III.3.HS.2

Economic Perspective

SOC.IV.2.HS.2
SOC.IV.4.HS.3
SOC.IV.4.HS.4

Inquiry

SOC.V.1.HS.3
SOC.V.2.HS.2

Citizen Involvement

SOC.VII.1.HS.1

Materials

- Reading: “Sit-Down Strikes and Labor’s Right to Organize Detroit, 1937”
- Document: “National Labor Relations Act”
- Letter: Chrysler Workers Letter
- Letter: K.T. Keller’s Letter
- Poster: “March 23rd rally at Cadillac Square”
- Worksheet: “The Detroit Sit-Down Strikes”
- Telegram: Detroit Chamber of Commerce

Preview of Main Ideas:

The right to organize had been granted by the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. The right to organize was won by workers in a series of confrontations known as sit-down strikes. Through this lesson, students will gain a better understanding of this process.

Teaching Activity:

A. Opening the Activity:

1. Divide the class into groups with 3-4 students.
2. Distribute and Read: “Sit-Down Strikes and Labor’s Right to Organize Detroit, 1937.”

B. Developing the Activity:

1. Distribute one document set to each group and a worksheet to each student.
2. Tell students that these documents relate to a critical series of labor activities centered in Detroit in 1937.
3. As a group they are to review each document and complete the worksheet provided. While each student should complete their own worksheet, they should be encouraged to work together.

Note: The primary purpose of this part of the exercise is for students to familiarize themselves with the documents.

C. Concluding the Activity:

1. Review the worksheet. The primary purpose of question 1 is to ensure a basic understanding of the documents.
2. Discuss their responses to question 2. The purpose of this question is to help students critically analyze information. Except for the excerpt from the NLRA, each of these documents is written from a very definite point of view and intended to persuade. Students should be particularly careful of the writer’s motives in reading this type of material.
3. Discussion questions:

Discuss the tactic of the sit-down strike. What advantages did it have over traditional strikes.

The primary objective of the sit-downs was to win union recognition and compel companies to accept collective bargaining. Describe collective bargaining.

Why did workers feel this was so important?

Keller points out that workers would be forced to join the union (a closed shop).

What are your feelings about closed shops?

Communists were a part of union organizing efforts. Does this change your view of unionization?

Some companies were in collaboration with Fascist-type organizations to help break up unions. They also developed an elaborate security system to spy on workers as a way to break up union organization.

Does this change your attitude towards unionization efforts?

K.T. Keller's letter

This appeared as a full-page advertisement in the Detroit News, March 13, 1937

TO THE DISTRIBUTORS AND DEALER'S OF THE CHRYSLER CORPORATION:

During the afternoon of Monday, March 8, the C.I.O. Union, directed by persons who were not in our employ, with employees belonging to the Union, seized eight of this Corporation's principal plants in the Detroit area, including its general offices, and are still holding them. Our executives, plant managers and their staffs are being kept out by force.

The agents of the Union took over the plant gates and barricaded them.

They refused to let either the factory employees or office employees leave or enter the plant without their permission. In many cases, they took the company badges of the employees away from them. They did not permit employees to leave the plant unless they signed Union cards.

A military organization manned by this Union's agents was set up in the plants, and the company's plant protection men were ordered out of some buildings, leaving the Corporation's property wholly in possession of these Union agents.

Our mail trucks, carrying company mail from the post office to its offices, were stopped by Unions' agents and delivery of mail obstructed.

The company consequently has been unable to carry on its business in its own offices. The company has set up offices elsewhere in Detroit. Its files and office records in the plants are in the possession of this Union.

As is well known, there was no dispute over wages and working conditions of over 60,000 employees. Our rates of wages are substantially in excess of 90 cents an hour, and the weekly, monthly and annual earnings of our employees have been not only the highest in the history of the company but among the highest of all American industry.

This company has conducted its industrial relations by and in accordance with general acknowledged standards of fairness and equity, with the purpose of giving our employees the highest possible earnings and the best working conditions the prosperity of the business can afford. We've constantly negotiated with these people over a period of more than three years and at their request entered into further negotiations with them on Wednesday, March 3. While these negotiations were going on, the agents of this Union seized the plants.

This Union is demanding a closed shop. They have stated that their demands mean one of three things: either an employee signs up with the Union; or you will be ostracized and subjected to intolerable intimidation and coercion both in the shop and at home; or Union men will refuse to work with him. Under these conditions, however designated, it is impossible for us to make products of Chrysler quality and Chrysler price.

As citizens of your communities, as well as representatives of the Chrysler Corporation, it is important that you understand these plain facts. In our close relations with you, we believe that we should tell you frankly what our situation is, and we ask you for your understanding and cooperation. We are advising you of it so you may conduct your affairs accordingly. We ask you to be patient with us in our attempt to do our office work in temporary offices without the records and files necessary for carrying on business in the normal way.

You recognize that the capture of our plants in time of peace and what is going on in the plants today is a form of revolution which concerns not only Chrysler Corporation but concerns you and everybody.

March 12, 1937

K.T. KELLER
President, Chrysler Corporation

Courtesy of the Detroit News

D6

Chrysler Workers Letter

March 20, 1937

The following letter signed by the chairman of each strike committee has been set to Gov. Murphy by sit-down strikers in Chrysler plants:

Hon. Frank Murphy
Governor of Michigan

We sit-down strikers in the Chrysler plants want to state our case directly to you. We want to state it as strongly and as vigorously as possible. And we want you to know that what we have to say is supported by more than 50,000 other Chrysler workers, more than 100,000 automobile workers in Detroit, 200,000 in Michigan, and 300,000 in the United States.

First, governor, we stand foursquare behind our leaders who declined to attend your conference Wednesday. If they had any part in proposing the sort of boards your conference proposed, they would have betrayed us. We have had boards before. They don't work. And we automobile workers who work in the shops know better than anyone else that they don't work. We know the only thing that does work is collective bargaining. Our employers have refused to recognize the principles of collective bargaining, so we have resorted to the only weapon we have to make them abide by the law...

We have suffered for years in the shops of the Chrysler Corporation. We haven't been paid wages enough to support our families in decency and health.

We have seen each year an increase in the speed of the line. And still the foreman and gang leaders stand over us and demand more and more production.

Last summer hundreds of us fell like flies on the job because the heat and speed of work were more than we could stand. It wasn't until we threatened to strike that the management slowed down the line.

Last fall thousands of us were discharged in violation of our seniority standing. We had to threaten a strike to get re-hired.

While we were exercising our right to organize, we were opposed by one of the most vicious and unspeakable spy systems ever employed in industry. Chrysler Corp. retained an agency that hired criminals and ex-convicts to do their filthy work. This is a matter of public record. We were subject to intimidation by foremen and petty bosses. Our members were fired for no other reason than that they had joined a union. These things that they did to us were lawless.

Then when we had built our union in spite of these obstacles, the Chrysler Corp. refused to recognize us. And this refusal, governor, was a lawless act...

We don't intend to leave these plants without a satisfactory settlement. You can do one of two things. You can use your influence to see that our grievances are adjusted. Or you can use the state's troops to try to force us out. The first way will lead to industrial peace and the elimination of the causes for strikes. The second way will lead to bloodshed and violence and more strikes. We're resolved to protect our rights to our jobs with our lives. The choice is flatly up to you.

Respectfully,

Sit down strikers in the Chrysler plants.

*Courtesy of the Henry Kraus Papers,
Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University*

Poster: March 23rd Rally at Cadillac Square

D6

STOP POLICE STRIKEBREAKING BRUTALITY!

Commissioner Pickert and Mayor Couzens are going to have to learn that the legitimate labor movement of the city is a force with rights they cannot violate.

Automobile Workers are determined that strikers in small plants shall not be the victims of police brutality.

Detroit workers are not going to be slugged and black-jacked out of their civil rights.

Protect the Right to Strike!

Cadillac Square

5 O'clock

TUESDAY

March 23rd

All Out, Show Labor's Strength

*Int. Union United Automobile Workers of America.
Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights*



*Courtesy of the Henry Kraus Papers,
Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University*

National Labor Relations Act

The National Labor Relations Act, July 5, 1935. (Wagner Act)
(Excerpts)

SECTION 7

Employees shall have the right of self organization, to form, joined, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in concerted activities, for the purpose of collective bargaining are other mutual aid or protection.

SECTION 8

It shall be an unfair labor practice for an employer –

- (1) To interfere with, restrained, or the worst employees in the exercise of the rights guaranteed in section 7.
- (2) To dominate or interfere with the formation or administration of any labor organization or contribute financial or other support to it...
- (5) To refuse to bargain collectively with representatives of his employees...



Battle of the Overpass at Ford's River Rouge Plant on May 26, 1937

Courtesy of Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University

The Detroit Sit-Down Strikes

WORKSHEET: LESSON 1

Name _____

D6

1. Assume you are writing a chapter in a high school history book on the labor movement in the United States. The data elements you have been given are to be included as documents in that chapter. Write a title and brief introduction or caption for each data element.

a. Title:

Caption:

b. Title:

Caption:

c. Title:

Caption:

d. Title:

Caption:

e. Title:

Caption:

2. Except for the NLRA excerpt, these documents were written by people with a specific political objective. They were not neutral. They either strongly supported or strongly opposed the labor movement. It is, therefore, particularly important to critically review what was written. With this in mind, identify three phrases from the documents that may be an exaggeration, prejudicial or otherwise misleading.

a:

b:

c:

The Detroit Sit-Down Strikes

WORKSHEET: LESSON 2

Name _____

As Governor of Michigan, Frank Murphy was faced with the challenge of how to deal with the sit down strikes. The two basic choices were:

- a. use force to evict the workers, or
- b. allow the workers to occupy the facilities and encourage workers and management to resolve their differences through negotiation.

Using the data elements provided and your own ideas, prepare a list of reasons supporting each of these options.

Evict workers

Allow workers to occupy facilities

Telegram: Detroit Chamber of Commerce

