

The Great Sit-Down Strike

William Weinstone

The first major battle in the auto industry has just been fought and won. It was unquestionably a great strike, a truly militant battle, waged with a vigor and passion which will place this strike side by side with the greatest strikes in American labor history.

It was a significant struggle because it was the first time in a quarter of a century, the first time since the appearance of the auto industry, that one of the giants of the motor monopolies, the biggest of the three automobile companies, was challenged by organized labor. It was significant because the battle was spread over fourteen states, involved 150,000 workers, affected more than sixty plants, and was fought against a corporation worth one and a half billion dollars. It was significant also because it was the opening battle in the awaited struggle to organize the mass production industries and was fought by the newly organized International Union of United Automobile Workers, led by the Committee for Industrial Organization. And, finally, it was of the greatest importance because for the first time on a large scale American labor has employed a new weapon – the sit-down strike – and has wielded this weapon with startling success. That is why the strike aroused nationwide attention and was followed with the most intense interest and concern by millions of working people in all parts of the nation.

The struggle ended with a victory for the auto workers. In what does the victory of the auto workers consist?

It consists in the fact that the union was able completely to paralyze production for forty-four days, to prevent the reopening of the plants and as a result to wring from General Motors the recognition of the right to organize (a right which has been stubbornly and tenaciously denied by this open shop corporation), won formal recognition as the collective bargaining agency for its members in all the plants and as the sole collective bargaining agency in the plants shut down by the strikes. By this achievement the auto workers struck a powerful blow at the open-shop system in American industry. It also won wage increases for the General Motors workers and increased wages for the auto workers of other plants and it won an

agreement to open negotiations between the union and the corporation for the demands on wages, hours and working conditions.

The victory of the union consists furthermore in the fact that it was able to withstand and repel a series of violent efforts to dislodge the sit-down strikers, who left the plants as victors when their terms were met, who twice smashed the injunctions issued against them and finally caused them to be scrapped.

It consists finally in the fact that the policy of industrial unionism, of militant unionism and progressive leadership, based upon rank-and-file democracy, has proven to be the only correct form of organization which can effectively meet and defeat the corporations of big capital. A test has now been made on the field of battle of the craft union versus the industrial union form of organization for the mass production industries and in this test industrial unionism has been entirely and triumphantly upheld.

Let us consider the outcome of the struggle a little more closely.

The union fought for the right to organize the plants. This right was conceded by General Motors in words and denied in deeds by the discharge of workers for joining the union and dismissing of those wearing the union button. These were the issues which caused the strikes in Atlanta and Kansas City. General Motors has now agreed that the workers may organize and that they may wear their union buttons.

The union demanded a *national* conference for collective bargaining. General Motors refused this demand and referred the unions to the individual plant managers. As a result of the strike, such a conference was held and a written agreement between the union and the corporation was signed before the shop could be reopened. Now a conference begins to consider the demands of the union.

The union demanded recognition as the sole collective bargaining agency for all the workers. General Motors declared that it would grant no such recognition, holding that to be an inviolable and sacred principle of the corporation. General Motors has now agreed to deal with the union as the exclusive bargaining agency for a period of six months (the exact form of the agreement is only a face saver for General Motors).

General Motors in refusing the request for negotiations declared that it was paying the highest possible wage in the industry but as a

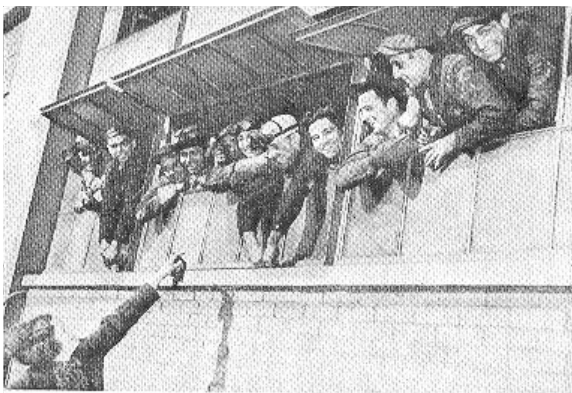
result of the strike, it has already declared a five-cent hourly increase in wages.

General Motors in its application for an injunction declared that the stay-in strikers were no' longer employees of the company but at the end of the strike, as a condition for resuming operations, General Motors has agreed to return all workers to their former positions without discrimination.

General Motors had said that it would not discuss any questions with the union until its plants were evacuated and its "unlawfully seized plants were restored", but General Motors finally backed away from this position, and entered into discussion with the union and entered into an agreement, and not until it was signed did the workers leave the plants.

That is why the outcome of the struggle has encouraged the workers everywhere and raised them to a high pitch of enthusiasm. That is why the auto strike is giving direct nourishment and impetus to the drive to organize .the unorganized workers in the country. That is why, as a result of the struggle, a new wave of strikes is beginning in auto, and other factories, and that is why the *Wall Street Journal* now cries out against the strike that "its effectiveness was obtained by illegal means".

Comrade William Z. Foster is indeed correct when he says that the "auto strike is fated to play a very important part in American labor history" and that "it is a sign of the new era that is dawning in the trade union movement in this country".



"For the first time on a large scale American labor... employed a new weapon – the sit-down strike."

How Was the Victory of the Union Achieved?

In the first place, the victory was won because the workers used and perfected the sit-down tactic of striking which we shall describe later along.

In the second place the victory was won because of the fighting determination and profound solidarity which prevailed among the auto workers. The General Motors workers in practically all the states affected by the strike, but particularly in Detroit, Cleveland, Toledo, Norwood, and above all in Flint, operated as a single unit, as an army which responded to every critical situation and to every danger. Toledo and Norwood workers came to Flint in the first days of the strike and greatly strengthened the fighting lines. General Motors, Dodge, Kelsey-Wheel, Midland, Chrysler and other workers from Detroit and also from other cities came spontaneously and repeatedly to the battlefield at Flint and were ready to move to Anderson and Saginaw to lend a hand in beating back armed thugs and vigilantes. Workers in Detroit and Toledo shut down the departments of their plants and left for the Flint battlefield. In Flint itself on a number of occasions, the workers on the outside, responding more to the prompting of class instincts than to organized calls, came to the plants, appearing practically from nowhere to protect the workers on the inside.

Special importance attaches to the great activity of the women workers who organized "women's emergency brigades" in Flint and who were assisted by women's brigades from other cities, who participated directly in the struggles, making up a vanguard of the fighting divisions which added great strength and solidarity to the workers' ranks and cemented their unity. One reason for this mobility and militancy is to be found in the fact that the auto industry is composed largely of young people and these people were on the side of the strike. Another and more basic reason for this militancy is the fact that the auto workers had made several attempts in the past to strike the plants and win the right to organize and were held in check, were deceived and betrayed by the A. F. of L. officialdom and by the President's agreement of 1934. The workers now gave vent to their accumulated hatred and expressed their determination that this time matters would be changed. All of which reveals the fact that in the last years, particularly since the crisis, the workers have grown in class consciousness, militancy and solidarity.

Third, the victory was won because of the firm and united leadership provided by the C.I.O., which brought to the struggle that degree of aid and unity so essential to large-scale battles and which has been lacking in the past in strikes where craft union divisions prevailed. The C.I.O. under the aggressive leadership of John L. Lewis made it possible to maneuver with success the ending of the glass strike at a timely moment so as to exert the greatest pressure upon General Motors. It also helped to work out the strategy of utilizing the competition between General Motors and Chrysler and Ford to the benefit of the strike. The C.I.O. unions sent organizers into the strike, sent delegations and speakers, helped in picketing as, for example, the steel workers in St. Louis and other cities, and gave moral and material aid to the auto union.

Fourth, the victory was won because the craft unions in sections of the labor movement outside of the C.I.O. gave their support notwithstanding the treachery and the sabotage of the Greens and the Freys, as, for example, the support rendered by the Detroit and Flint Federations of Labor, the Michigan State Federation of Labor, and for a time the Cleveland Federation, and numerous craft unions and unionists. This proves that among the A. F. of L. unions there is a strong discontent with the policies of the Executive Council and that it is possible to work hand in hand with the craft unionists against the Executive Council and secure the unity so essential at the present time in the important fights which the C.I.O. and also craft unions will develop in the near future.

Fifth, the victory was won because of the progressive leadership of the international union nationally and because of the progressive and militant leadership in the most important areas of the strike. The existence of numerous rank-and-file leaders especially within the plants gave a powerful backbone to the strike because here were people who did not falter or run before the first blows of the enemy. It was because the old Green-Dillon clique had been cleaned out or pushed into the background, especially at the most critical points of the struggle in Flint, Detroit and Cleveland, and a new, fresh, militant leadership had taken its place that the strike could be carried on with such vigor and success.

Sixth, the victory was won because the union carried out modern progressive mass methods of fighting. It engaged in demonstrations and mass picketing; made use of mass agitation through bulletins and special newspapers, made successful use of the sound car;

introduced mass singing of labor solidarity songs, and employed the labor theater as a medium of agitation and education (although on a limited scale); organized mass strike committees based on rank-and-file representation; formed relief committees and fought for state aid, and committees to ferret out spies, held frequent mass meetings and gave reports on all developments; carried on educational classes; established solidarity of men and women and unity of Negro and white; and enlisted and welcomed the support of all sections of the labor movement. The union appealed to and received the support of the middle class sections, pointing out the advantages to them of a victory of the workers and stressing the common interests of the workers and small business men in weakening the power of this gigantic trust. It is to be regretted that the union did not fight for and make better use of the radio as a means of agitation. Special emphasis must be laid upon the use of the sound car, which has proven an indispensable instrument in such fights and should be introduced everywhere. Care must be taken immediately to thwart any attempts to restrict its use by laws, attempts which are being made by stealth in auto and steel areas. These methods, as against the isolated, restricted, narrow and bureaucratic forms employed by the old Green-Dillon officials, have proved the only correct methods to be used in strikes which involve large masses of people.

And, seventh, the victory was won because the union did not hesitate to use political as well as economic weapons of struggle. It fought against and exposed the company-controlled sheriffs, prosecuting attorneys, judges, and police. It demanded the removal of the share-holding Judge Black and strike-breaking Chief of Police Wills of Flint, and laid a demand for the impeachment of the judge before the Michigan State Legislature and the governor. It demanded and secured the deputizing of union men as special police in Anderson. It called upon and secured the aid of the La Follette Committee on Civil Rights, which had the effect of tempering the ruthless violence of the company-dominated local authorities. It demanded full protection of the civil rights of the workers and the right of collective bargaining from the governors of the states, from the Department of Labor, and from the President of the United States, and in that way fought and to a certain extent succeeded in offsetting the one-sided use of the state power, which has always been employed as an agency of strikebreaking. It cooperated with civil rights conferences, drawing on all sections of the labor movement and middle class people.

The Michigan Conference for the protection of civil rights, as well as the American League Against War and Fascism, proved of inestimable value in promptly organizing local and national protests against company terrorism. In Cleveland the People's Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights also served a useful purpose toward the same end.

Special mention must be made of the role of the Flint workers and their leaders. Flint was the main battlefield because it is the heart of the General Motors industry and for that reason the struggle there was most acute. Special tribute must be paid to the workers and leaders of the sit-down strikers in the plants, the leaders and rank-and-file workers, and its chief organizer, who spread the struggle to the Chevrolet plant and held firmly to their positions in the Fisher Body plants to the very last day of the struggle, notwithstanding the violence, the provocations, and the attacks carried out against them. The Flint leaders ably prepared for the strike by the development of a shop steward system, carried out persistent recruiting, exposed and eliminated stool pigeons, and understood the importance of the strike of the bus drivers, which occurred several weeks before the auto fight, rendering them every aid and making the strike their own, and in that way organizing favorable sentiment in the city for unionism. In return they were well rewarded for their efforts by the assistance rendered them by this small but important body of workers. Had the old group of leaders that belonged to the Dillon clique and that worked hand in hand with the General Motors Corporation remained in control in the Flint situation, the outcome of the strike against General Motors would have been entirely different.



The famous "Women's Emergency Brigades" from Flint and other cities added great strength and solidarity to the workers' ranks.

The Attitude of the Government

Finally, but of first-rate importance among the reasons for the victory, must be considered the attitude of the government. By the government I mean in this case the attitude of the Governor of the State of Michigan and of President Roosevelt. The defeat of the reactionaries in the last election created more favorable conditions for the winning of the strike, for it gave encouragement to the workers and was the signal that the moment was ripe to start the battle. It brought into office in Lansing and Washington, administrations that were committed to the continuation of the democratic form of government and which had promised to assist the workers in obtaining improved standards of living and the right of collective bargaining. Had the Landon Republicans come into office they would have taken the usual hard-boiled Tory attitude on labor unionism and strikes.

Lenin has noted two methods of rule of the capitalist class. He says:

“The bourgeoisie in all countries in practice inevitably elaborates two systems of governing, two methods of struggle for its interests and for the defense of its domination, and these two methods now replace one another and interlace in different combinations. These are, first, the method of violence, the method of refusing all concessions to the labor movement, the method of supporting all ancient and dying institutions, the method of uncompromising rejection of reform.... The second method is the method of ‘liberalism’, of steps toward the development of political rights, of reforms, of concessions, etc.

“The bourgeoisie passes from one method to another not through the malicious design of individuals and not by accident, but by force of the basic contradictoriness of its own position.”

This is the type of government which rules today in Lansing and Washington. And the contradictoriness which Lenin notes in such a position was present even in the short period of the strike.

The policies of Murphy and Roosevelt were to seek a compromise in the struggle, to avoid a sharpening of the conflict, and to terminate it as early as possible, not only because of the militant mood of labor and the danger of the struggle passing over to other sections of the labor movement, but also because of the pressure of a section of the capitalist class which found the strike harmful to its interests. The government had to face the outcry of the reactionar-

ies, the big capitalist interests, that the sanctity of private property was being violated, and Governor Murphy was called upon to uphold the Constitution, “to defend private property”, to support the courts, and to use the National Guard to evacuate the plants. There was the ever-present danger that this pressure would succeed. At one time the National Guard established virtual martial law around the Chevrolet and Fisher No. 2 plants and virtually imprisoned the sit-down strikers there.

If the National Guard was not used it was due to the fact that both Governor Murphy and President Roosevelt faced a stiff resistance of the workers and because they realized that the use of violence with the danger of killing many workers would have aroused the working class of the entire country, would have meant a sharp break with their labor support, would have meant a shattering blow to the Democratic Party, and would have led to a tremendous development of the movement for the independent political action which asserted itself in the last election campaign although on a restricted scale.

Consider the forceful position taken by the union. The telegrams of the sit-down strikers addressed to Governor Murphy and President Roosevelt are classical not only because of the passion and self-sacrifice which they expressed, but also because they voiced the insistence of labor that history shall not repeat itself and the promises made in the last election broken. Let us quote from one of these telegrams to the Governor of Michigan:

“We feel it proper to recall to you the assurance you have many times given to the public that you would not permit force or violence to be used in ousting us from the plants. Unarmed as we are, the introduction of militia, sheriff or police with murderous weapons, will mean a blood bath of unarmed workers. The police of Flint belong to General Motors. The sheriff of Genesee County belongs to General Motors, and the judges of Genesee County belong to General Motors.... *It remains to be seen whether or not the governor of this state also belongs to General Motors.* We have decided to stay in the plants. We have no illusions what sacrifices this decision will entail. We fully expect that if violent efforts are used to put us out, many of us will be killed. We take this method to make it known to our wives, our children, and to the people of the state and country, that if this result follows from the attempts to

eject us, *you are the one who must be held responsible for our death.*" (Emphasis mine – W. W.)

It was because of this forceful position of labor, and it was because of the growing movement for independent political action, that any compromise was prevented that would injure the interests of the strike and the union.

Did the Union Win Its Full Objective?

Did the union win the full objective which it set for itself? No, the union did not win completely its major demand of becoming the sole collective bargaining agency nor was it able to achieve the negotiations of its economic demands while the strike was still in progress and the plants still shut down. It is not to be expected that in the first round of battle, all the demands can be won, because of the huge wealth of the corporation, its entrenched position in the local communities, its strong political power and the backing which it received from the steel and financial magnates, and on the other hand the youthfulness of the union. General Motors proved a ruthless enemy which did not hesitate to use every means, foul or fair, to achieve its end of breaking the strike.

It is clear that such a corporation can be fully defeated and brought to its knees only by bending the full energies of the union, only by demonstrating the greatest strength, and only by succeeding in organizing the largest numbers of workers into the union before the battle begins. The union did not prove strongly enough organized to reach this goal.

What are the facts about organization? At the outset of the strike the union succeeded in organizing a majority of workers within approximately twenty plants. It was where the plants were organized to any considerable extent that they were shut down by strikes. The facts are that not all the plants were well organized in Flint, Detroit, or in Michigan, generally, the most strategic centers of General Motors, and that such strongholds as Pontiac, Saginaw, and Grand Rapids, were practically unorganized. It is true that the union shut down the strategic Fisher Body plants in Flint and Cleveland and that this worked greatly to the advantage of the union in paralyzing the industry. The very audacity of the union in challenging a corporation which held undisputed sway encouraged the workers and brought many thousands into the union during the strike, but still this was not enough for an industry employing hun-

dreds of thousands and indirectly affecting the jobs of a million. The union attempted to widen the sphere of the strike but its forces were too weak to achieve success. The union was therefore confronted with the dilemma of having carried through a *general shut-down* without having carried through and declared a *general strike* in all the plants. While some 40,000 to 50,000 were affected directly by strikes, another 100,000 workers were thrown out of work. This gave General Motors the possibility of crying "that a minority was attempting to dictate to the majority", to make the struggle appear as a battle between union and non-union workers, to keep a large number of workers on the sidelines, and to create to a certain extent a popular mass cover for the usual strong-arm methods. This they did through such organizations as the Flint Alliance, through petition campaigns (obviously inspired by General Motors and carried through by coercion but nevertheless successful because of the lack of organization in such places), through organizing mass meetings of "loyal workers", and by staging what might be called a "pro-company rebellion", through sending delegations to the governor of the state, and in general creating the danger of a strong back-to-work movement. This enabled General Motors also to raise the cry that it was serving to protect the rights of non-union members.

The A. F. of L. officialdom did its bit in helping this movement of the corporation along, especially since these officials fell in with the tactics of the corporation which claimed that other workers were opposed to the union as the sole collective bargaining agency. But basically, the opposition to the strike and the counter-movement attempted by the corporation had its foundation in the company unions which were practically untouched in the preparations of the strike. This insufficiency of organization and weakness in failing to break into new territories at one stage of the struggle gave the offensive to the side of General Motors, which seriously threatened the outcome of the strike. It was at this moment that the Flint workers and their leader, Robert Travis, conceived and executed a brilliant move in achieving the sit-down in the Chevrolet Assembly Plant No. 4 which once again gave the initiative into the hands of the strikers and which virtually put an end to the back-to-work movement started by General Motors. It was at this moment, too, that the Flint workers stopped a bogging of the strike and a weakening of the ranks as a result of the defeat suffered at Anderson, where

the leadership was driven out by vigilantes and also because of a mistake made in calling off the Saginaw meeting.

The insufficiency of organization must be attributed to the fact that while the union had planned to attack General Motors and to develop a general strike, actually there was a more or less spontaneous outbreak of the struggle. The fight against General Motors began at Atlanta with the strike on November 18, followed several weeks later by the strike at Kansas City, and towards the last week in December there took place the sit-downs at Cleveland, followed the next day by sit-downs in Fisher No. 1 and No. 2 at Flint. A contributing factor here was the glass strike which threatened to shut down the auto industry and which made many feel that it was advisable to hit the blow before such a shut-down occurred. But there is no doubt that General Motors allowed the strike movement to develop in order to bring matters to a head, thinking that the union was entirely unprepared and would be defeated.

General Motors had expected to win. It thought that the armed force which it could put into action against the strikers through its complete control of the local authorities would enable it to end the strike in double quick time. Why then did the calculations of General Motors prove false? It was because General Motors did not reckon with the leadership of the C.I.O. and the militancy of the workers and because it was entirely unprepared for and unable to meet and overcome the new tactic of the workers – the sit-down strike.

Sit-Down Strike Tactics

The big corporations know how to deal with a walkout strike but General Motors did not know how to deal with the sit-down strike. The attempts to use the usual methods of securing an injunction, illegalizing the strike, and breaking up the picket lines by armed force, as they attempted to do in Flint and in the battle before Fisher No. 2 (now named the “Battle of Bulls Run”, because the police did the running on that day) failed miserably and only enhanced the prestige of the union while arousing the indignation of the masses. The attempt to cut off the heat and food proved likewise to be a boomerang. The General Motors workers and especially the Flint workers developed this weapon to the highest degree in the following ways:

First of all they strategically locked themselves in, making it difficult to dislodge them without the use of considerable force and numbers, while at the same time, by taking over the gates, they obtained the possibility of freely coming and going and thereby relieved the strain which they would otherwise have found a serious factor in their "voluntary imprisonment". Thus, by coming and going in shifts, they were able to hold out for a long time and thereby improved the methods of continually staying in the plants which was the practice in the Midland Steel, Kelsey-Hayes, American Aluminum and other Detroit auto strikes.

Second, they developed a complete and efficient organization within the plant, establishing a strike committee, and various sub-committees, and captains, including health and sanitation, patrol and policing, trial committee (kangaroo court), and by means of such organization exercised the greatest vigilance and control, developing fully both the strategy and the means of defense against any attacks. The workers virtually barricaded themselves within the plants and prepared themselves to use all devices available (but emphatically barred firearms) within the plant to hold their positions. In the Fisher No. 1 Plant in Flint, the sit-down strikers covered the windows with bullet-proof metal sheets through which fire hoses could be put out to meet any gas or firearm attack. They organized and drilled squads in the use of the water hoses for quick and efficient service. They organized a police patrol which made the rounds at given hours to detect any untoward movement of people in adjoining wings of the building occupied by the office help so as not to be caught by surprise attacks, etc.

Third, they combined the method of sitting down within the plant with a system of outside car picket patrol, which was supplemented by the union by daily outside meetings through a public address system, carried on by the use of sound cars. This was further supplemented by large-scale demonstrations arranged by the union to meet any critical situation, such as the threat of evacuation on the basis of the injunction. Such a combination of an inside strike with outside mass mobilization and support rendered the use of the sit-down most effective. It was because of this organized mass support that the corporation was frustrated in its efforts to dislodge them. For example on the day when the evacuation was expected, following the issuance of the injunction, about 3,000 workers formed a picket line before Fisher No. 1 at Flint, and many thou-

sands more were present and ready to pitch into the battle if the evacuation were attempted.

Fourth, they worked out the strategy of organizing a sit-down in the face of the massing of numerous company guards who were ready to use firearms to prevent the occurrence of a sit-down. This they did in connection with the sit-down in Chevrolet Plant No. 4. The move executed by the Flint strike leadership consisted in arranging a sit-down strike of the workers in Plant No. 9, sending outside union men and women to give them support, and in that way engaged the attention of the company thugs of Plant No. 9 and those of other plants, and while the battle raged here, organized a march from Plant No. 6 to Plant No. 4, which was the better organized and the most strategic plant because it produces motors for all Chevrolet cars, and effected the successful sit-down in this plant. Thus they combined a march from other plants as reinforcements for the main point of attack.

We must properly evaluate this new tactic of the workers. The sit-down strike has arisen spontaneously from the ranks of the workers and is a new weapon forged to meet the problems of struggle against the big corporations. It is a tactic, however, which is already being employed in small as well as large factories, in industrial as well as other plants. It is becoming the principal form of strike struggle at the present time and for that reason must be paid the closest attention in order to impart to this method the greatest consciousness and efficiency. Experience shows what the great teachers of the working class movement, Marx and Lenin, have emphasized many times, that new forms of struggle will inevitably arise as special conditions change, "forms hitherto unseen by active people in the movement".

The sit-down strike is not the old syndicalist tactic of the folded-arms strike, nor the application of the theory of the militant minority (the idea that a small group of resolute people can impose its will upon large masses and by their sheer determination drag them along irrespective of their sentiments and convictions). While the number actually sitting within the plants was a minority of the workers of the factory, nonetheless, the sit-down strike was successful because these workers represented and were supported by a big majority of the workers of the shop. There is no doubt that the sit-down strikes of the French workers have had the most profound influence in introducing this instrument among the American work-

ers, but the changed conditions within the country have favored the use of the sit-down strike here.

What are these conditions? At first sight is the experiences of the workers in their struggle against the big industrialists in which they found themselves beset by brutal force, the breaking up of the picket lines and use of hired strike-breakers and other acts of violence. It must be remembered that in 1930, the picket line of Fisher Plant No. 1 in Flint was broken up and driven out of the city en masse by the chief of police. This lesson was not lost upon the Fisher Body workers.

Secondly, the last elections and the defeat of the economic royalists have given to the workers the feeling that the government was on their side, would protect them against the big corporations, and would not so readily come out against them as a strike-breaking agency. Thirdly is the growth in consciousness and understanding of the workers of their strategic importance in the mass production set-up, the inter-dependence of departments and plants, and thus their ability to match the strength of the corporation by their power to interrupt and stop the whole process of production by stopping the movement of the belt.

But the use of the sit-down, the "occupation" of the plant property, reveal that deeper forces have been at work in the course of the last years.

Let us consider the question of property and property rights. General Motors and the ruling class press everywhere set up a howl against the sit-downers, that they had taken over the factory, and were trespassing upon the rights of the owners. Mr. Sloan spoke about "holding the factory for ransom". And the pretentious quack scholar, John P. Frey of the American Federation of Labor, followed in his footsteps with talk about the occupation of the factories. Editorials were written about the sit-down becoming a daily habit in the life of the people. "How would you like it if a stranger came into your house and squatted in your dining room and refused to leave." Such was the theme of the editorials and new articles turned out in reams by the capitalist writers. This was intended to shake the morale of the workers, to scare the small property owners and turn them against the strike, and to bring pressure upon the authorities – "sworn to uphold property rights and the constitution". But matters did not turn out that way. The workers did not sit down in the factories in order to take them over and dispossess General

Motors. They did not carry out “expropriation”, but instead carefully guarded the property and in fact prided themselves that they took care of the property and machines “far better than the plant guards”. They declared their readiness to leave the plants if they were given the assurances and were guaranteed that the plants would not be put into operation until a settlement was reached. The workers did not at all feel themselves strangers in another man’s home. As the *Flint Auto Worker* pointed out, the workers of the plant were part and parcel of the factory. They spent more days, weeks and years in them than did the owners, many of whom have never seen the factory and have not spent a single day within its walls. And thus the workers were not motivated by revolutionary aims in occupying the plants but were limiting themselves to a form of pressure to achieve their immediate economic ends.

They were encroaching upon the rights of the capitalists – *capitalist rights* – the right of unlimited exploitation and ruthless oppression, and were asserting *labor’s rights*, the right to a decent livelihood under human conditions, of work. But does this not happen in a walk-out strike, when workers cease to labor and stop the working of the machinery (the property of the capitalists), stop the hiring of scabs and interfere with the “sacred right” of the capitalists to make profits, just as long as they ignore the needs of the working people? And has this not always been the cry of the capitalists against strikes? Only here, to be sure, we have a more advanced form of this “interference” with the sacred and let it be said tyrannical property rights.

Nonetheless, in this action, we see the maturing of the idea among the workers that the factories are not merely the sole property of the owners to do with and to handle as they see fit, but that there are human rights to be safeguarded and that these rights must take precedence over property rights. Here we see the greater consciousness of the position of the workers as wage slaves. Here we see the emergence of the working class as a class. Here we see the sharp alignment of the classes within the country – a development which is finding and will find its expression on the political field. *An epochal change is taking place in the mentality of the working class. The years of the depression and crisis have shattered the old relationships, have lowered the prestige of the ruling class and have raised the independence and self-assertedness of labor.* It is this new strength of the working class which General Motors and their

henchmen encountered in Flint and other General Motors strongholds; and it is this strength which they tried to break through the organization of the Flint Alliance, a combination of foremen, superintendents and local business men, dependent upon General Motors. It was because of this strength that the local authorities began to deputize loyal citizens and threatened to go down to the plants to “shoot it out”. Had it not been for the cool-headedness of the union leadership, a local civil war could have been precipitated by the guardians of law and order.

The big corporations in meeting with sit-down strikes will undoubtedly repeat the tactics of General Motors. The cry against alleged expropriation will continue. This attitude of the corporations will make the strike struggles extremely acute. For that reason, in sit-down strikes, the union must see to it that the aims of the strike are clearly set forth to the whole population, that it imparts to the middle class – the merchants and professional people – clear knowledge of the purpose of the strike and in that way align the middle elements on the side of the union and the strike, and that the union leadership hold firmly to their rights and do not waver before the propaganda onslaughts of the corporation.

Special Advantages of the Sit-Down

Wherein are the special advantages of the sit-down tactic? Observation of a number of strikes leads me to think that the following are among the most important reasons for the introduction of this tactic:

Sit-down strikes give to the workers a greater feeling of strength and security because the strikers are inside the plants, in the solid confines of the factory, at the machines which are the sources of their livelihood, instead of away from the plant, moving around in “empty space”, on the sidewalks surrounding the factories.

Sit-down strikes give to the workers greater sureness that there are no scabs within the plants and no production is being carried on and makes it difficult to run in scabs. For example, in the walkout strike, the great problem is that of picketing. Mass picketing – throwing of large masses around the factory gates – is of the utmost importance if scabs are to be kept out but even then the problem is extremely difficult in view of the size of the factory and the numerous entrances. Take the Fisher Body No. 1 plant at Flint, This takes up an area of one-half mile around and requires large masses con-

centrated at a great number of points throughout the day and night. With the sit-down strike the problem of picketing is reduced for, with the workers sitting in, a relatively smaller picket patrol (this is absolutely essential so that the workers inside know what is going on outside) is sufficient to guard against the infiltration of scabs.

The sit-down strike furthermore makes it difficult to resume operations even partially where scabs have gotten in because by holding down one section of the plant it is hard to begin operations.

The sit-down strike affords strikers greater possibility of defending themselves against the violence of the police and company men because they are inside the plants and are able to bar the way of the attackers and also are able to organize means of defense and when an attack does occur, the public understands clearly who are the attackers.

The sit-down strike makes for a greater discipline, group consciousness and comradeship among the strikers because of the very position in which they find themselves and thereby enhances the militancy and fighting spirit of the workers.

Finally, the sit-down strike arouses the widest sympathy and support among the working population because of the courage of the workers in taking "possession" of the factory and because of the self-sacrifice and hardship which such action entails. This is particularly the case of industrial communities where the factory is the center of everything.

Of course, the sit-down strike creates its own set of difficulties and problems. The question of sleeping within the plant, of contacts with the families, of feeding the workers, of holding the workers within the plants, of keeping out company men, of guarding against provocations, of the danger of the stoppage of heat and food, of organizing sets of inside and outside strike committees, the timely switching from an inside to an outside strike when the lines do not hold, etc., all require careful study in order to readjust the methods of strike organization to the problems of the sit-down.

The use of the sit-down method of strike does not do away with the general tactics and strategy in the operation of strike struggles, that of the necessity for adequate *mass* preparation of the strikes, of the building up of the union as the basis of the strike, or of achieving the largest amount of mass support among the workers of the plant – all features of good strike organization which have generally

been employed in the walkout tactic. I have in mind, of course, the features of an organized strike.

The sit-down tactic caught the corporations unprepared but already they are developing counter methods to defeat it. These methods include the enlargement of company police, the organization of special groups of "loyal workers" forcibly to eject sit-down strikers, to organize their plants in such a way as to make an approach to the factory more difficult and thereby isolate and starve out the workers.

The sit-down strike is not an exclusive method of strike. It does not replace the walkout strike tactic. Both will be used but *we must state that the sit-down tactic is now part of the arsenal of weapons which unionism is using, will use and can use in the struggle against the exploiters.*



Militant support pours in from Dodge, Kelsey-Wheel, Midland, Chrysler and from other cities.

Tasks Now Facing the Union

The position of the United Automobile Workers has been greatly strengthened as a result of the strike, but it has still before it the task of the negotiation of an agreement on the question of wages, hours and working conditions. It has won an agreement but the agreement has only the value of the organized strength behind it. General Motors will contest every inch of the ground in order to prevent the union from capitalizing on its enhanced prestige and to

prevent it from becoming the only union in the industry. It will therefore require the utmost vigilance on the part of the union and continuous activity in order that it may win a satisfactory settlement of its demands. Strong-arm methods used in Anderson and other places show that General Motors is not yet going to abandon the field to the union.

The most important thing is to consolidate the newly gained membership and to entrench itself firmly within the plants. Consolidation means above all the establishment of an efficient shop steward system. Through the establishment of a department shop steward system the union will have the forces to carry on recruitment, to defend the conditions of the workers in the shop, to take care of the grievances, and to bar the way to the company men who will seek to create confusion and steer the workers away from the union. The establishment of a strong shop steward system requires the carrying through of elections, department by department, plant by plant, instructing the shop stewards in their tasks, and above all, securing shop stewards who have proven themselves to be militant and active men, who have demonstrated their loyalty and reliability in the course of the strike. In the election of shop stewards, nonunion members as well as union members should have the right to participate, and in that way the shop stewards will truly represent all the workers of the department.

The necessity for a vigorous recruiting campaign is obvious, particularly in those strategic places in which General Motors held out against the union. It is also essential because General Motors will carry through maneuvers to build up a competing union. The ineffectiveness of the company union will undoubtedly compel General Motors to seek to build up an independent organization which will remain a creature of the company. Here the American Federation of Labor will be more than ready to help out the corporation and to provide an apparent independent front for a company union set-up. Already in Cleveland, there are signs that the American Federation of Labor intends to move in and use whatever membership the company union elements can provide it in order to establish a rival organization. It will be necessary to expose this move and to show up the American Federation of Labor as coming in only with the object of dividing the ranks of the workers and destroying the effectiveness of the International Auto Workers Union. But at the same time, the union must be prepared where its own ranks are

too weak within certain departments to send forces into such a set-up with the object of wresting away the leadership of such independent union and in that way disrupting the tactics of the company.

The consolidation and development of the union requires, furthermore, the continuation of the labor papers that have been issued by the union during the strike and the establishment of papers of the union where none have existed, and the building up of sports groups, athletic teams, glee clubs, dramatic groups, educational classes, the enlargement of the women's auxiliary – all of which will powerfully reinforce the union's strength.

Nor can the union ignore the challenge which has been issued to it by the local authorities who have shown themselves to be tools of the company. And in such places as Flint and other industrial communities controlled by General Motors as well as in Detroit, the union must consider the question of electing union men into political office, to oust the General Motors politicians, and to build up local labor parties in order to achieve that aim.

The General Motors strike has set the ball rolling. Other plants are stepping into line. Strikes are growing in the independent as well as in the plants of the other big corporations. The question of an agreement with Chrysler is now being placed upon the order of the day. The question of the organization of Ford is not a far distant question. The union should discuss the lessons from the General Motors struggle in order to fully prepare itself to tackle these points.

Activities of the Communists in the Auto Strike

Among the auto workers there are former miners and others who have had many years of labor experience. Their experience made for added solidarity and discipline. In this strike and the union there were also radical-minded workers and among this group, in the first place, must be mentioned the work of the Communist members of the union as well as the work of the Communist Party itself.

What were the activities of the Communists? The Communists and the Communist Party gave the most loyal backing and support to the strike, to the aims, policies and activities of the union and the C.I.O. The Communists worked ardently and earnestly in helping to build up the union and tried in every way possible to properly prepare the strike so that it would rest upon a strong foundation. In the strike itself the Communists sought to imbue the strikers and the

workers generally with the greatest discipline, organization and perseverance. *There is no doubt that where the Communists were active and took an outstanding part, particularly at the most decisive points of the struggle, there the strike was strongest, and this made for the success of the whole battle.* The Communist workers combated any tendency to waver in the face of the sharp blows of the enemy and helped to keep the ranks as firm as possible.

The Party members, not only in the areas of the strike but in various parts of the country, gave moral and material aid, helped to collect food and funds, arranged solidarity meetings, helped the union in the distribution of its material, and gave practical assistance in other ways. The Communist Party early recognized and sought to impress upon everyone the decisive importance of Flint as the main battleground of the struggle, and in that way aided in keeping the eyes of the entire country upon Flint so as to render that front the greatest assistance.

The *Daily Worker* contained many columns of news about the strike, editorials and articles, which pointed out the problems of the strike struggle, which tried to foresee and warn against the many dangers that lurked ahead in the battle. It issued a special supplement of 25,000 copies each and a total of 150,000 copies, which was undoubtedly of aid to the strike, and in such places as Cleveland, the Communists in the strike issued a special shop paper which dealt with the problems of the strike at the Fisher Body plant.

The existence of groups of Communists within the shops was undoubtedly of great help because thereby a core of experienced people were in the shops to help in the solution of the new problems connected with the sit-down. The shop form of organization, the shop groups (units), has more than justified itself. Where the Party organization paid attention to these units, there the efforts of many years of work were fully rewarded. The shop unit form of organization and the attention to the shops are of even greater importance today with the development of the sit-down strike methods.

There were some who raised objections to the distribution of the *Daily Worker* in the shops among the strikers, but quite generally the workers welcomed the paper and did not interfere with the right of the Communist Party to distribute its material. The "Red scare" which was raised at times although timidly and mostly by company men did not take effect because the workers had learned that where such scares are created against Communists and where

discrimination occurs against the activities of one section of the labor movement, there the company succeeds in dividing the ranks, there the strike becomes weakened and there it is easiest for company men to get the upper hand. Where democratic policies prevail and the opinion of all groups is allowed, there the consciousness of the workers is highest and the greatest unity and militancy obtain. *The more united the struggle, the better the fight and the greater the success.*

Can it be said that everything was done by the Communists and the Communist Party that was possible to help the strike? No, this cannot be said. Not all Party organizations or all Party members participated in assisting the strike struggle, a fault which shows that the Party is not yet sufficiently mobilized for joining in the economic fights and that sectarian tendencies which keep Party members away from this most vital task are still prevalent. But this is also related to the insufficient connection and leadership of the county and state committees with the branches and membership. The lack of Party organization in such places as Pontiac, Anderson and Saginaw made it impossible for the Party to render assistance at these places, a situation which must be corrected in the near future.

The rise of a new labor movement in the auto centers, the growth of strike struggles, place before the Party more acutely than ever before the necessity for making the factories and trade unions the center of its attention, in order that it might be of greatest assistance. The distribution of the *Daily Worker* and *Sunday Worker*, of literature, must center chiefly around the shops and the unions, for the workers are now ready and willing to hear all points of view with respect to the problems and tasks of the labor movement. The organization of a speakers' bureau and the enlargement of the work of agitation and education are also badly needed, so as to impart to the working class movement a knowledge of the workings of the labor movement and of the social and political problems confronting it, and in that way aid in planting the flag of trade unionism firmly over the giant factories of the country and to enlarge and strengthen the social and class vision of the workers.

It is especially urgent to put on a real recruiting drive, to win to the Party the ranks of active people, and in that way enable the Party to root itself in the shops, to enlarge its contacts, and to strengthen itself as an organization which is influential among the mass of auto workers. But of great urgency is the necessity of showing to

the workers the face of the Party, to show the workers what the Party is doing so that it may have a full appreciation of the importance of the activities of Communists in the working class struggle. This was by no means done to any sufficient extent during the strike.

So much for the activities of the Communist Party and the Communists in the struggle.

It is also interesting to discuss the activity of other working class groups, particularly that of the Socialist Party. Members of the Socialist Party carried on creditable activity during the strike and their activities were of help to the union. Several members of the Socialist Party performed outstanding work. These were Socialists who were not infected with the poison of Trotskyism or influenced to any large extent by the sectarianism of the "militant Socialists", but followed a true course of mass struggle. In the strike the Communists cooperated with these Socialist Party members (although not on the basis of any formal pact) and such cooperation proved fruitful.

But the same cannot be said of the line of policy pursued by the Socialist Party through the columns of its leading organ, the *Socialist Call*. While devoting considerable space to the strike its policies were by no means free from sectarianism. Take for example the article of Frank Trager in the *Socialist Call* of February 6. Here he states that the offensive which took place in Flint during that week "was under the spirited leadership of the Socialist leaders". This statement is not only guilty of unjustified boasting but, what is worse, separates the leadership of Flint from the general leadership of the union and the C.I.O., and also dismisses the leadership of militants who occupied the most strategic points in Flint and who are by no means Socialists. But the harmful sectarianism is to be found in another part of his article in which he states that the offensive took place because "the Flint auto workers discarded the futile strategy of long conferences and round table negotiations". The inference here is that the leadership of the union was wasting its time in useless negotiations (while the workers were favoring action) and thanks to the Socialist Party they finally received it. This is a complete distortion of the situation and what is more, reveals a lack of understanding of the tactics of strike leadership. This apparent emphasis upon "action" and scorn for "talk" appear indeed very revolutionary and are the latest fad of some leaders of the Socialist Party. But any knowledge of the situation shows that the action in Flint

in taking Chevrolet's Plant No. 4 became ripe only with the rise in union membership during the strike and also followed on the heels of the discrediting of the General Motors officials due to their very failure to enter into negotiations in Washington, followed the rebuke which Secretary Perkins administered to Mr. Sloan, which raised the morale of the workers and sharpened their militancy and determination without which it would have been difficult to have carried through such a sharp battle and such tactics as were involved in the sit-down in Chevrolet No. 4. Thus we see the worthlessness and lack of reality contained in such high sounding statements reported above. In general it must be said that the negotiations carried on by the union leadership and the C.I.O., in contrast to the negotiations of the old Green and Dillion group, set a new mark in the practice of labor leaders in making use of negotiations and conferences not to injure but to aid the work of the men and women on the picket lines.

Nor can we dismiss the comment made by Norman Thomas in his column of January 30 on the question of the sit-down. On the one hand, he endorses the sit-down strike as a weapon which has obvious advantages for the workers "beautifully demonstrated in Flint where the spirit and discipline of the workers have been remarkable". On the other hand, he remarks that because "the sit-down strike properly used is a powerful weapon for the workers - it does not follow that it has no dangers", and says, "if it is used for the advantage of some small group rather than for the advantage of the whole body of workers, if it is used without discipline; if it is used so as to create public hostility, then the sit-down strike is not an advantage".

It must be remembered that this was written at the very moment when the General Motors Corporation was publishing full-page ads and the entire press of the country was crying out that a small group was keeping large masses out of work, at a moment also when the capitalists were trying to give the impression that the public was aligned against the sit-down strike method. Of what use is moralizing on the sit-down and discussion of its disadvantages at such a moment? Such a moment requires unqualified, unconditional support, and emphasis upon the importance of the new weapon, so that the workers may master and hold firmly to it, for any wavering or doubt as to its usefulness would only have assisted in weakening the resistance to the intended evacuation. What conclusions did Norman

Thomas draw from these remarks? He drew the moral “that the all important thing is not the particular kind of strike but the kind of union which the workers build”. Here is the essence of the underestimation and wavering upon the question of the sit-down which the above remarks revealed, for in fact the particular *kind of union* that was being built depended upon the very success of the *kind of strike* which was being used, and contrary to Thomas the all important thing was the most effective use of the “particular kind of strike” which the workers were carrying through.

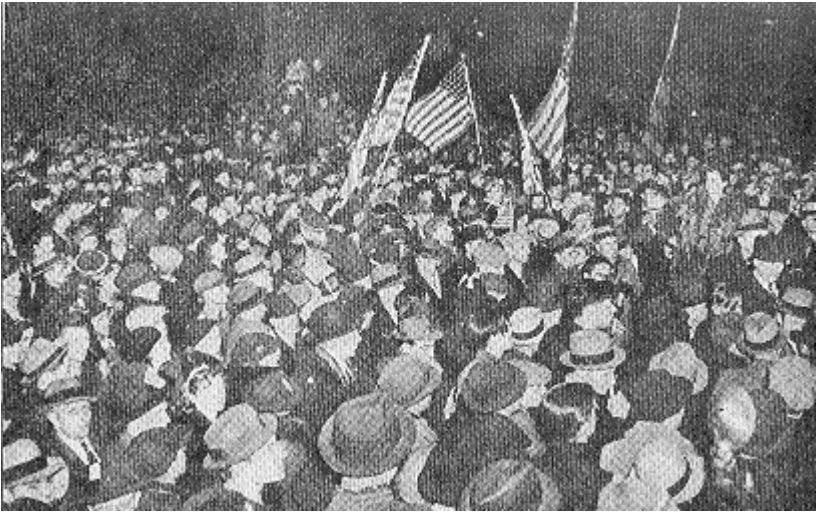
This statement of Thomas is typical of the course recently followed by the leadership of the Socialists of evading a concrete answer to concrete questions and seeking refuge in balanced statements which are both here and there, and in “revolutionary” phrasemongering – a phrasemongering which conceals true revolutionary deeds.

And lastly, a few remarks upon the disruptive activity of a little sect of Trotskyist followers in Detroit known as the Revolutionary Workers Group – a split-off and variant of the main Trotskyist body. This group at the height of the struggles, at the very moment that the vigilantes were seeking a pretext to attack and when the workers had organized a formidable demonstration of their strength, issued a leaflet the substance of which was to warn the workers “against the C.I.O. disarming them and to call for the formation of ‘workers’ guard”. Such propaganda, which was emphatically condemned and repudiated by the workers and by the Communist Party, was just the very thing which the company needed to reinforce its campaign of violence. Such activities and propaganda have not the slightest semblance of any revolutionary activities, although the name of the group has a revolutionary title, and has far more in common with the type of work which enemies of the labor movement would conduct – the work of little reactionaries and disrupters parading as a section of the labor movement.

* * * * *

In conclusion, the strike of the automobile workers reveals the new forces that are at work within the country, forces which are driving toward an extension and strengthening of the labor movement and which are welding also the unity of the working class and of all progressive-minded people, a process which is giving rise to the growth of a real people’s movement – a real people’s united front – a movement which will embrace also the most aggressive

revolutionary-minded section of the working class – the Communists and the Communist Party. The full effects of the great and dramatic auto strike of 1937 will be felt in the coming struggles ahead of us. It will prove to be a landmark in American labor history.



“Victory was won because the union carried out modern progressive mass methods of fighting... demonstrations... mass agitation... successful use of the sound car.”