

Twenty years of the CIO

**Labor's
Giant
Step**
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Flint '37 — "Gettysburg" of the CIO

Class collaboration and class struggle — two irreconcilably opposed theories and methods which have always contested with each other in the labor movement—strove for supremacy within the CIO from its start. This clash of theories and methods was especially bitter during the CIO's crucial first two years.

The top CIO leaders were class collaborationist to the bone. They sought "peaceful coexistence" between predatory capital and exploited labor — between robber and robbed. They believed they could persuade the employers that unions are a "benefit" to the capitalists themselves and thereby secure gains for the workers by the simple means of "reasonable discussion" across the conference table.

In addition, they denied the capitalist class nature of the government and the major political machines, Republican and Democratic, particularly the latter party. Lewis appears to have had an almost touching faith in the honesty of capitalist politicians and to have placed an inordinate dependence on Roosevelt to give the CIO strong backing in its developing steel and auto campaigns. Lewis held this view all the more strongly because the Democratic Party graciously accepted more than a million dollars from the United Mine Workers and Labor's Non-Partisan League to help finance Roosevelt's 1936 election campaign. There is no evidence that Roosevelt and the Democratic leaders had agreed to any quid pro quo—any return for value received. Lewis just assumed it. Didn't the capitalists always get substantial returns for their political contributions? Wasn't labor's money just as good?

Fortunately for the success of the CIO, the concepts of the top CIO leaders did not always prevail. The strident notes of the class struggle broke through the "class harmony" chorus and set the

dominant tone during the decisive days of the rise of the CIO. The bridge to victory proved to be not the conference board, nor the inside track to Roosevelt in the White House, but the picket line—above all, that "inside picket line," the sit-down.

Following formation of the LNPL to help re-elect Roosevelt, the CIO launched its big organizing drives in mass production industry. Lewis and his lieutenants had determined that the spearhead of the CIO offensive would be in steel. Lewis was particularly concerned with steel because of its importance for the miners union. He used the most eloquent of arguments—the offer of a \$700,000 campaign fund (\$500,000 from the miners and \$100,000 each from the Ladies Garment Workers and Amalgamated Clothing Workers unions) to swing the old Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers leaders into the CIO. On June 13, 1936, ten days after the Amalgamated Association had been absorbed, the CIO leaders officially announced the opening of the steel drive.

The drive was placed in the hands of a Steel Workers Organizing Committee composed completely of top officials of unions outside the steel industry, with the exception of Tighe and Joseph K. Gaither of the Amalgamated Association. Most of the steel committee were selected from Lewis's own officialdom in the United Mine Workers. Philip Murray, Lewis's first lieutenant in the UMW, was named SWOC director. There was not a real worker in the lot. The steel workers had a handpicked leadership imposed on them from the top. From the start, the voice of the ranks was stifled and their initiative choked off.

The steel organizing campaign, however, was conducted in style. Murray sent 433 full-time and part-time organizers into the steel areas. Thirty-five regional offices were opened and a paper, *Steel Labor*, was issued. As a special inducement, the SWOC asked no dues. It was not until April 1937, after the United States Steel Corporation contract was signed, that the SWOC began to collect \$1 a month dues; in June 1937, a \$3 initiation fee was added.

In December 1936, Lewis and Myron C. Taylor, then board chairman of U. S. Steel, engaged in secret "exploratory" discussions on the possibility of a union contract. Just what would have come of these discussions if they had proceeded without any outside intervening factor is hard to say. The CIO front suddenly and dramatically shifted from swank hotel suites and skyscraper offices to the grimmer battlefield of the massive industrial plants of General Motors. Without a by-your-leave to Lewis or anyone else, the GM workers challenged the auto industry's giant in an immediate show-down battle. The GM sit-down strike of the winter of 1936-1937

became the major point of CIO combat. Flint, Michigan, became the "Gettysburg" of the CIO.

The United Automobile Workers, which joined the CIO formally in July 1936, was the closest to a rank-and-file controlled organization in the new CIO. By their own efforts in battle against the AFL Executive Council, the autoworkers had established their own international union in 1935. At the UAW's second convention, the last week of April and beginning of May 1936, they completed the job by ousting William Green's handpicked President Dillon, and electing their own officers under their own constitution. The first fight at the convention occurred over Dillon's attempt to prevent the seating of the militant Toledo delegation, comprising 17 per cent of all delegates. It was these veterans of the Toledo Auto-Lite and Chevrolet strikes who set the pace.

This convention unanimously adopted a resolution calling for formation of a national labor party. Only a personal plea from Lewis to the convention, with an impassioned appeal by the newly elected UAW President Homer Martin, secured passage of a last-minute rider to the political resolution to support Roosevelt in the forthcoming national elections. Principles of union democracy were built into the constitution and practice of the UAW so firmly then, that more than two decades of bureaucratization have not eradicated them entirely. The convention rejected a resolution to bar "communists" and opened the union to all auto workers regardless of race, creed, religion, national origin or politics. It must be added that young militants of all radical tendencies, especially the Socialist Party (whose left wing then included the Trotskyists) and the Communist Party, played a most active and influential role in the convention.

There were several flashes of lightning before the GM storm. On November 13, 1936, a spontaneous sit-down strike halted operations of the Fisher Body No. 1 plant in Flint. The union won its point and the UAW started to sign up new members by the hundreds. Robert Travis, a member of the 1935 strike committee in Toledo Chevrolet, and Wyndham Mortimer, a Cleveland auto worker on the UAW board, were sent into Flint to aid the drive. Both of them were already under Stalinist influence, but they were still fresh from strike struggles and retained a good bit of their native militancy.

In the next several weeks there were successful sit-down occupations at the Bendix plant in South Bend, Midland Steel Products in Detroit, and a five-day sit-down at Kelsey-Hayes wheel plant in Detroit. Meanwhile, a strike flared at Fisher Body in Atlanta over the discharge of four men wearing union buttons. When the Atlanta workers appealed for an extension of the walkout, the CIO strate-

gists termed such a move "premature." Four weeks later, a strike erupted at the Kansas City Fisher plant. On December 21, Lewis and the UAW leaders wired Knudsen of General Motors for a collective bargaining conference. They were told to take it up with local plant managers.

Disgusted with stalling around, some 7,000 workers at Cleveland Fisher Body, organized by Mortimer, struck December 28, 1936. They announced they would not work until a national GM contract was signed. More than a thousand strikers occupied the plant. Two days later, on the morning after they had presented management with a contract demand, workers in Fisher Body Plant No. 2 in Flint saw inspectors who supported the union being transferred. They sat down. At Plant No. 1 that evening the night shift saw important dies being loaded onto trucks and boxcars for Grand Rapids and Pontiac. They, too, sat down. The production of bodies for all GM cars came to a halt.

Within three weeks 15 other GM units were closed by strikes, including the Fleetwood and Cadillac plants in Detroit and plants in Jamesville, Wisconsin; Norwood, Ohio; Atlanta; St. Louis; Kansas City and Toledo. At the most crucial stage of the struggle the Flint Chevrolet No. 4 plant, where motor assembly was centered, was seized and occupied by the strikers. By the end of the strike, some 140,000 of GM's 150,000 production workers either sat down or "hit the bricks," as traditional picketing in a strike was described.

Victory or defeat for the GM workers depended on a simple strategy: keeping their buttocks firmly planked on \$50 million worth of GM property until they got a signed contract. GM's strategy was to get the workers out of the plants by hook or crook so that the police, deputies and National Guard could disperse them by force and violence. All the maneuvers between Lewis and the UAW leaders on the one hand and Roosevelt, Frances Perkins, Michigan's Governor Frank Murphy and General Motors on the other, involved the sit-down issue essentially.

In his book *C.I.O.—Industrial Unionism in Action*, published late in 1937, the former Harvard economist, J. Raymond Walsh, who became CIO research and educational director, stated flatly that the CIO leaders had not called the GM strike. "The CIO high command, preoccupied with the drive in steel, tried in vain to prevent the strike; it was fed by deep springs of resentment among thousands of men against a corporation grossly derelict in its obligations," wrote Walsh. There was certainly no strike call and no broad strike strategy.

It was not until January 3, 1937, when the strike was already

spreading like a brush fire through the GM plants, that 200 UAW delegates convened in Flint, created a board of strategy headed by Kermit Johnson of Flint, and authorized it to call a formal corporation-wide strike. The next day GM was served with a set of eight demands, including union recognition and a signed contract; abolition of piecework; the 30-hour week and six-hour day; time and a half for overtime; minimum pay rates; reinstatement of discharged unionists; a seniority system; sole collective bargaining rights for the UAW; and union participation in regulating the pace of the belt lines.

Once the GM strike was under way, Lewis publicly voiced the CIO's approval. On December 31, 1936, he declared: "The CIO stands squarely behind these sit-downs." When GM's Knudsen demanded evacuation of the plants before considering collective bargaining, Lewis repeated the demand for a national contract embodying sole collective bargaining rights.

On January 2, GM secured the first of its injunctions. A Judge Black issued an order to vacate the plants and to desist from picketing company property. When the sheriff attempted to read the order, the sit-downers laughed him out of the plants. Thousands of other workers continued their mass picket lines on the outside. But the injunction was never enforced; it was disclosed that Judge Black was a GM stockholder, with 3,365 shares then valued at \$219,000.

On January 8 came the announcement of the formation of the Flint Alliance as "a voluntary movement of employes who wish to return to their work and are against the strike." This back-to-work movement, open to all citizens at large and not only GM workers, was headed by George E. Boysen, ex-mayor and former Buick paymaster.

A direct physical clash came on January 12. The company had shut off the heat that afternoon in an attempt to freeze out the sit-downers in Fisher Body Plant No. 2. Several hours later the Flint police announced there would be no more food allowed to enter the plant for the strikers. The cops blocked off the entrance and then knocked down a ladder to a window through which supplies were being shipped. A union sound truck with Walter Reuther's brother Victor at the microphone called on the police to end their blockade. The plea was ignored.

A body of pickets finally stormed the entrance, forcing the police aside and carrying coffee and bread in to the sit-downers. Around 9 P.M., half of Flint's police force suddenly fell with clubs on the pickets at the entrance. Some were scattered, others were driven into the plant. Tear gas was fired into the plant. Police sent volleys of buckshot through the windows. The strikers fought back with

everything from hurled nuts and bolts to soda pop bottles. A three-hour battle ensued. During the course of the struggle the strikers captured the sheriff's car and three police cruisers. When the police reformed ranks at midnight to make a new attack, the strikers brought into play their "secret weapon"—a plant fire hose that soaked the police with freezing water and finally drove them back to the other side of a bridge leading to the plant gates. Twenty-four strikers had been injured; 14 had gunshot wounds. The "Battle of the Running Bulls" was the last attempt to recapture any GM plant by force. GM announced it would not try to use strikebreakers, a move it could scarcely employ anyway so long as the plants were occupied by strikers.

What force failed to do, GM sought to achieve through guile. The newly elected Democratic Governor Frank Murphy invited GM's Knudsen and UAW President Martin to Lansing on January 15. After a meeting, Murphy announced that a truce agreement had been reached for the sit-downers to leave five of the major struck plants on the weekend and then GM would start to negotiate on Monday. The Cadillac and Fleetwood workers in Detroit marched out of the plants with banners and brass bands. The next day, Sunday, January 17, the Flint workers were to leave their forts. Then the union learned that GM had wired Boysen of the Flint Alliance that "we stand ready always to discuss with your group" as well as with the legitimate union.

The truce blew up. Workers who were half way out of some plants rushed back in and took defensive posts. Others, preparing to leave, remained and locked the doors. Now the siege was on in earnest. Lewis announced: "G. M. was caught in a barefaced violation of the armistice and so the evacuation of the plants was stopped. The men are not going to leave them."

Lewis believed his ace-in-the-hole was Roosevelt. The union leader sought to get the President to come out firmly in support of the GM workers. On January 21, Lewis told a press conference: "The administration asked labor for help to repel this attack [on Roosevelt in the 1936 elections] and labor gave its help. The same economic royalists now have their fangs in labor. The workers of this country expect the administration to help the workers in every legal way and to support the workers in General Motors plants."

Roosevelt's reply the next day was a cold rebuke to Lewis: "Of course I think in the interests of peace that there come moments when statements, conversations, and headlines are not in order." A few days later Roosevelt sought to balance this off with criticism of GM Board Chairman Alfred P. Sloan, when the latter refused to

confer with Lewis in Secretary of Labor Perkins' office. Roosevelt said this was a "very unfortunate decision" and left it at that.

GM was not averse to intervention by Roosevelt, if no other course was open. The *Detroit News* had come out in the third week of the strike with a front-page editorial, "Let Roosevelt Do It." GM understood Roosevelt's role very well. His task was not aid to the workers, as Lewis assumed, but to get the company off the hook with the smallest possible concessions. These GM concessions would be represented as a "patriotic" response to the President's request, not as a surrender to union pressure.

On January 31, Madame Perkins threw the administration's weight on the side of GM by telling the press that she had proposed to Sloan the day before that the strikers were to quit the plants "as an expression by the union of good faith in General Motors" before any negotiations were to begin.

Subsequently, at the most critical point of the strike, Roosevelt phoned from the White House to Lewis in Detroit to try to persuade Lewis to agree to a one-month contract in return for getting the workers to leave the occupied plants. He raised the offer to two and then three months, but Lewis stood firm for a minimum of a six-month pact.

While the shadow play was being enacted by Lewis, Knudsen, Murphy, Perkins and Roosevelt between Washington, Detroit and Lansing, the live drama was unfolding in Flint. There 1,500 members of the National Guard, sent by Governor Murphy, set up an encampment in preparation for driving the strikers out of the plant if so ordered. The company next sought another injunction as the legal basis for compelling Murphy to use the troops to invade the plants and force the strikers out.

On Tuesday, February 2, GM found another compliant judge, Paul V. Gadola, who issued an injunction ordering the strikers to evacuate the two Fisher plants by 3 P.M., Wednesday. A critical challenge faced the Fisher Body sit-downers.

Anticipating the Fisher injunction, however, the strikers moved on February 1 to occupy a still more strategic plant, Chevrolet No. 4 where the Chevrolet motors were assembled — a real bottleneck. The leader of the Chevrolet unionists was Kermit Johnson, a militant left-wing Socialist. Chevrolet No. 4 had not been shut down, as it was not certain whether the union had sufficient strength in the plant. A bold stratagem was devised to capture the plant by reinforcements from the outside.

A diversion was created. Several thousand strikers marched to Chevrolet Plant No. 9 from the union headquarters. They were led

by Roy Reuther and Powers Hapgood. GM informers, as had been expected, had tipped off management about the march on No. 9. Armed Flint detectives and company guards had been installed in the plant. The workers inside began yelling "sit-down!" and a forty-minute battle was waged inside the plant. The Women's Emergency Brigade, organized and led by Genora Johnson (now Dollinger), fought heroically on the outside, smashing the windows to permit the tear gas to escape from the plant.

During this diversion, a group of Chevrolet No. 4 men, with some squads from Chevrolet No. 6, marched boldly into the No. 4 plant, shut down operations, barricaded doors and gates and set up patrols. Steel gondolas, weighing hundreds of pounds apiece, were piled against doors and windows from floor to ceiling. That night, troops with bayonets marched ominously outside — but Murphy did not dare give an order to attack.

The seizure and holding of Chevrolet Plant 4, which proved to be the key to victory, was an imaginative and bold stratagem carried out by workers with iron nerves. Kermit Johnson, chief author and organizer of this stratagem, worked in Plant 4 and had the inside knowledge necessary to conceive of the plan. In the February 11, 1959, issue of *The Searchlight*, official publication of UAW Chevrolet Local 659 in Flint, Johnson has given the most authentic account on record of this amazing struggle, which he and a few others of the strike strategy committee had worked out in a week of almost continuous meetings. Johnson writes:

"Plant 4 was huge and sprawling, a most difficult target, but extremely important to us because the corporation was running the plant, even though they had to stockpile motors, in anticipation of favorable court action. G. M. had already recovered from the first shock of being forced to surrender four of their largest body plants to sit-down strikers. They already had the legal machinery in motion that would, within a short time, expel by force if necessary the strikers from the plants. If that happened, we knew the strike would be broken, and the fight for a union in General Motors would be lost. Even the top leadership in the CIO, including John L. Lewis, were seriously worried about the G. M. situation. When Lewis' right-hand man, John Brophy, approved our plan of action, he did it with great reluctance and complete lack of confidence. He couldn't conceive of a successful strike in a plant that was less than one-fourth organized.

"I was remembering all these things and many others as I walked through the plant gate that afternoon, February 1, 1937. I was doing a lot of thinking. . . I thought about last night's final secret meeting,

held deep inside the South Fisher plant. What a farce that had been! I laughed to myself and felt like a conspirator when I recalled all the pretense we'd gone through to arrange a meeting for one despicable man, a stool pigeon. Thirty men had been secretly picked for that meeting by Bob Travis, Organizational Director, and his aide, Roy Reuther, including Ed Cronk and myself from Chevrolet. The four of us who alone knew the actual plans put on a real show that night selling the right guy the wrong bill of goods. It seemed like a dirty trick to dupe so many good men, but to make the big fish swallow the bait we had to have a lot of little fish nibbling. I was sure we had convinced the stool pigeon that today at 3:30 P.M. the men in plant 9 would stage a sit-down strike. I was sure because he asked so many pointed questions about strategy, and because others, taking a natural part in the discussion, helped to allay any suspicions he might have had.

"Now, at exactly 3:10 P.M. I was upstairs in the toilet at the west end of Plant 4. I had nothing to do but wait and hope that everything was moving according to schedule. At this very minute someone was rushing into the mass meeting downtown, yelling 'Trouble at Plant 9!' Bob Travis would be chairing the meeting and Roy Reuther would be clamoring for the floor to make a motion and an impassioned plea that the meeting be adjourned so that they could all go to Plant 9 and help their brothers in the fight against their common enemy. I could see them now, cheering wildly and singing 'Solidarity' as they thundered down the rickety stairs of the union hall. There wouldn't have to be a vote taken; they wouldn't even wait for it, because this was action and that's what they wanted. Who could blame them for having bitterness in their hearts after witnessing the police brutality that had taken place in the past few weeks. . .

"3:25 P.M. I was down on the main floor, and the minutes were going fast. I was walking slowly in the aisle trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, but I couldn't understand why Ed and his men weren't here; they were long overdue. The next few minutes seemed like hours, and as I ambled toward the door, my previous confidence was rapidly giving way to fear — fear that we'd lost our one big gamble. My thoughts were moving a mile a minute, and I was rehashing the same plan over and over, but this time all its weaknesses stood out like red lights. I had never realized before how many if's there were and how every if was so utterly dependent upon every other if. No wonder John Brophy had been skeptical. Why this was like a mathematical problem without a single known quantity, or like trying to — and then the door burst inward and there was Ed! Great big Ed, his hairy chest bare to his belly, carrying a little American

flag, and leading the most ferocious band of twenty men I have ever seen. He looked so funny with that tiny flag in comparison with his men who were armed to the teeth with lead hammers, pipes, and chunks of sheet metal three feet long. I felt like crying and laughing at the same time.

"When I asked where in hell the three hundred men were that he had guaranteed to bring with him, he seemed dumbfounded. I don't think he'd ever looked back from the time he had dropped his tools, picked up the flag, and started his line plunge to Plant 4. It didn't take a master mind to know that trying to strike a roaring plant of more than three thousand men and almost as many machines with just twenty men was absolutely impossible. We huddled together and made a quick decision to go back to plant 6 for reinforcements, and if that failed to get out of Chevrolet in a hurry. Luckily we encountered little opposition in Ed's plant, and in a short time we were back in Plant 4 with hundreds of determined men.

"Although we didn't know it then, a real war was going on in and around Plant 9, the decoy. Every city cop and plant police were clubbing the strikers and using tear gas to evacuate the plant. In retaliation the men and women from the hall were smashing windows and yelling encouragement from the outside.

"Back in Plant 4 a relatively peaceful operation was proceeding according to plan; a little late, but definitely moving now. Up and down the long aisles we marched, asking, pleading, and finally threatening the men who wouldn't get in line. For the first hour the men in Plant 4 were being bullied not only by us, but by management as well. Almost as fast as we could turn the machines off, the bosses following our wake would turn them on, and threaten the men with being fired. As the lines of marchers grew longer, the plant grew quieter, and finally after two hours every machine was silent.

"The men were standing around in small groups, sullenly eyeing members of supervision. No one knew who belonged to the union because no one had any visible identification. We had successfully taken the plant, but we knew that our gains had to be immediately consolidated or we'd face counteraction. We had a few men go through the plant and give a general order that all who didn't belong to the union should go upstairs to the dining room and sign up. While the vast majority were thus taken care of, a few hundred of us were left unhampered to round up the supervisors. It didn't take long to persuade them that leaving the plant under their own power was more dignified than being thrown out. Herding the foremen out of the plant, we sent them on their way with the same advice that most

of us had been given year after year during layoffs. 'We'll let you know when to come back.'"

The next day, when Judge Gadola issued his injunction setting a deadline for the following day, the strikers held meetings and voted to hold the plants at all costs. The Fisher No. 1 workers wired Governor Murphy: "Unarmed as we are, the introduction of the militia, sheriffs, or police with murderous weapons will mean a blood bath of unarmed workers. . . We have decided to stay in the plant. We have no illusions about the sacrifices which this decision will entail. We fully expect that if a violent effort is made to oust us many of us will be killed, and we take this means of making it known to our wives, to our children, to the people of the state of Michigan and the country that if this result follows from an attempt to eject us, you [Governor Murphy] are the one who must be held responsible for our deaths."

Early the next day, all the roads into Flint were jammed with cars loaded with unionists from Detroit, Lansing, Pontiac and Toledo. More than a thousand veterans of the Toledo Auto-Lite and Chevrolet strikes were on hand. Walter Reuther, then head of the Detroit West Side UAW local, brought in a contingent of 500. Rubber workers from Akron and coal miners from the Pittsburgh area joined the forces rallying to back the Flint strikers. No police were in sight. The workers directed traffic. Barred from Fisher No. 2 and Chevrolet No. 4 by troops with machine guns and 37-millimeter howitzers, the workers from other areas formed a huge cordon around Fisher No. 1.

But when the showdown came, the sheriff refused to try to enforce the injunction. He passed the buck to Governor Murphy. New Dealer Murphy stalled, fearful of committing political suicide if he used the troops against the workers. On February 8, the company tried to freeze the strikers out once more by turning off the heat. The strikers opened all windows and threatened to freeze the fire-fighting equipment in the plants, thus causing a violation of GM's fire insurance contracts and leaving its property unprotected by insurance. GM howled at Murphy to enforce the injunction and he, in turn, went literally screaming in rage to Lewis: "...you've got to do something about this, Mr. Lewis. I demand that you do something."

Lewis replied: "I did not ask these men to sit-down. I did not ask General Motors to turn off the heat. I did not have any part of either the sit-down strike or the attempt to freeze the men. Let General Motors talk to them."

This was the literal truth. The GM strike was an uprising of the rank and file. Its leadership was mainly local young workers with

radical social and political views. A short while later most of them, like those under Stalinist leadership who became the most servile supporters of Roosevelt, and the Reuther brothers who broke their Socialist Party connections, became more and more adapted to capitalist politics and class collaboration. But for that one brief period of the historic GM sit-down, they were still close enough to the militant ranks, still sufficiently imbued with socialist ideas and the traditions of the old IWW and socialist fighters, to rise with the masses. The men they were then would have spit upon the men they were to become.

Once more, after he had pleaded with Lewis to betray the strikers, Governor Murphy tried the threat of troops to frighten them. On the night of February 9 the National Guard in Flint, with 1,300 reinforcements, was alerted to seal off all highways and prevent reinforcements for the strikers. The sit-downers refused to budge; they made weapons of defense in assembly-line fashion and awaited the attack. Late that night, Murphy again went to Lewis and showed him an order he had signed for the troops to empty the plants by force the next day. Lewis told him: "Tomorrow morning, I shall personally enter General Motors plant Chevrolet No. 4. I shall order the men to disregard your order, to stand fast. I shall then walk up to the largest window in the plant, open it, divest myself of my outer raiment, remove my shirt, and bare my bosom. Then when you order your troops to fire, mine will be the first breast that those bullets will strike."

Murphy, his nerve broken, fled from the room. General Motors, fearful that any attack on the strikers in their determined mood would mean devastation of its plants and machinery, cracked. The muscular rumps of the GM workers pressed down on the chests of GM's corporate owners until they cried "Uncle!" On February 11, 1937, GM signed a six-month agreement. It provided that the company would not recognize or deal with any other organization in the 17 plants closed by the UAW, that all unionists and strikers would be rehired, that unionism could be discussed on company property during lunch and rest periods, and that negotiations would proceed at once on wages, hours, production speedup, and other issues.

It wasn't much of a deal by present standards. But it was an inspiring victory to all American labor in 1937. The floodgates of class struggle were opened. The cry "sit-down!" echoed from one corner of the land to the other. One month after the end of the GM strike, some 193,000 workers engaged in 247 sit-downs; nearly a half million took up this weapon before 1937 ended. The number of all strikes rose from 2,172 in 1936 to 4,740 in 1937, with 1,861,000 workers involved. That is the way the CIO was built and consolidated.

The Sit-Down Wave and Little Steel Defeat

Under proper conditions, the sit-down is the most effective strike tactic ever devised. Although used in this country as far back as 1892 and employed by the IWW before World War I, the sit-down became a veritable tidal wave during the first two years of the CIO. It swept all before it in the period following the conquest of GM.

The sit-down was, in fact, an international phenomenon of the mid-Thirties. It appeared simultaneously in a number of capitalist countries. In 1934, coal miners at Terbovlye, Yugoslavia, in Pecs, Hungary, and in Katowice, Poland, stayed down in the pits in desperate actions that won victories. Greek tobacco workers took over a factory that same year. Some 3,000 Spanish copper miners in 1935 remained in the Huelva pits for ten days. Coal miners in Wales, Scotland and France adopted the tactic successfully. In Pondicherry, India, textile workers applied it with complete effect. And in France during 1936, a million workers sat down at one time in the key industries.

Within a month of the GM settlement the sit-downs spread to every kind of industry and trade, from Chrysler auto workers in nine plants to 5-and-10¢ store saleswomen, Western Union messengers, restaurant and hotel employes, milliners, bindery workers, garbage collectors, glass blowers, and tire builders. They sat down in movie theatre projection booths, WPA projects, shirt factories, and on shipboard.

The workers showed marvelous ingenuity and expended great labor in conducting long sit-downs or "stay-ins," as they were also called. Their chief problems were food, bedding, sanitation, recreation, discipline, and defense. Elaborate organization and committees were required to keep everything running smoothly. Outside

committees and women's auxiliaries kept food supplies pouring in to the sit-downers. Bands, entertainers, radios, phonographs, checkers, and cards were obtained. Rigid rules against smoking and drinking were enforced. Cleanliness even went a nose ahead of godliness — the strikers kept the premises spotless always, while they sometimes missed Sabbath services. There is not a single reported case of dirt or damage as the result of a sit-down except in the tiny fraction of cases of police attack and invasion.

The very non-violence of the sit-downs infuriated the employers and their government agents. It was impossible for police or troops to provoke violence without clearly initiating it themselves. They had to attack and break into plants where there was obviously no disorder, because strikers were on the inside, strikebreakers on the outside. Thus, only 25 sit-down strikes were broken by police of the more than 1,000 sit-downs reported by the press in 1936 and 1937.

Sit-downs maintained high morale among strikers. Prolonged picketing outdoors in rain, cold, or snow can become a real ordeal. The sight of strikebreakers, escorted by armies of police, marching into a struck plant does no good to the spirit of strikers. As J. Raymond Walsh noted in his 1937 book on the CIO: "Nothing pleases a striker like the sight of smokeless chimneys. The sit-down does the job most easily and surely."

The sit-downs heightened the sense of comradeship and solidarity among the strikers. The strength of all became the strength of each. One GM striker expressed it to Lewis's biographer Alinsky: "It was like we was soldiers holding the fort. It was like war. The guys with me became my buddies. I remember as a kid in school readin' about Davey Crockett and the last stand at the Alamo. You know, mister, that's just how I felt. Yes sir, Chevy No. 4 was my Alamo."

But, unlike the Alamo, the sit-downs seldom ended in defeat. Almost all won partial or complete victories. It must be added that despite the Wagner Labor Relations Act of 1935, which supplanted the defunct section 7(a) of the NRA, more than 50 per cent of the sit-downs were for simple union recognition. (It should be noted in passing that former Secretary of Labor Perkins recalled in her book on Roosevelt that he had taken no part in formulating or pushing the Wagner Act through Congress, that he "was hardly consulted about it," and that "it did not particularly appeal to him when it was described to him.") The Wagner Act proved no more effective than section 7(a) in protecting the workers' right to organize and bargain collectively. It took a couple of million workers in the 1936-37 sit-down wave to actually seize that right by the seizure of hundreds upon hundreds of factories and other places of work.

The sit-down tide gradually ebbed after 1937. In some states, employer-dominated legislatures enacted laws with severe penalties for "trespass" on company property during strikes. A number of local and state courts found them "illegal." But they had almost ceased to occur by the time the United States Supreme Court issued unfavorable ruling on them in 1940.

Even before the courts had effectively intervened, however, the union leaders themselves had put the lid on sit-downs. The very success and effectiveness of this form of labor combat frightened the union officialdom. The sit-down gave tremendous power to the rank and file. In a few hours or days they were able to win from the bosses more than the union leaders could gain by years of "labor statesmanship" in "across the table" conferences.

AFL President William Green, of course, openly attacked the sit-downs. Directly after the CIO's GM victory, Green solemnly warned that the sit-down had "grave implications detrimental to labor's interests" and "must be disavowed by the thinking men and women of labor." He further claimed that "temporary advantages gained through sit-down strikes will inevitably lead to permanent injury." He added: "Both personally and officially, I disavow the sit-down strike as a part of the economic and organization policy of the AFL."

Of course, scores of AFL unions participated in the sit-down wave and, although primarily a CIO weapon, the sit-down won not a few victories for the AFL.

Lewis had commented on Green's remark: "He again sells his own breed down the river." "He 'bends the pregnant hinges of the knee that thrift may follow fawning,'" added the CIO chairman, in an effective if rather obscure quotation from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. But the CIO leaders were by no means enthusiasts about this method of struggle. They were merely swept along for a while in the spontaneous flood.

"Some CIO leaders confess to a private anxiety, and hope that the sit-down will give way to more familiar tactics," reported Walsh, an intimate of the CIO top leaders, in his *C.I.O.—Industrial Unionism in Action*.

It is important to note that the sit-down technique was confined almost exclusively to the new unions and to newly organized workers, especially those organizations where more democratic policies prevailed. Of the 484,711 sit-downers between September 1936 and June 1937, some 278,000 belonged to new unions and 182,000 to unions formed since the start of NRA in 1933. There were 247,095 auto sitters; 42,167 in rubber; 22,270 in textiles; and 12,996 in iron and

steel. But in old unionized industries there were hardly any — 300 in mining and none in the garment trades. In the old unions the bureaucracies had the workers more "harnessed" and "disciplined."

What most disturbed the CIO as well as the AFL leaders about the sit-downs was the revolutionary implication of the workers' seizure, even temporarily, of the means of production. The union officialdom, abject servants of the capitalist system, saw in the sit-downs a defiance of the dogma of the sacredness of private property and free enterprise. If workers could seize the plants to enforce their union economic demands, why could they not seize them as part of a more far-reaching social program? Why could they not eliminate the private owners altogether and organize production on the basis of social ownership?

Such revolutionary ideas are inherent in the very nature of the sit-down. The workers of America, by the enthusiasm they displayed in grasping this weapon, showed themselves far less inclined than their leaders to hold private property in the means of production as sacred. They quickly understood where the heart of the owners' power lay, and they put their hand on that heart when they took over his property. It is a lesson they will recall in future struggles where the issues appear to them as great and the stakes as high as in 1937.

By the end of 1937 the list of industrial corporations which had bowed to the CIO and signed union contracts read like a substantial list of "Who's Who in Big Business." The downfall of GM had a decisive effect on the negotiations secretly under way with U. S. Steel, which controlled about 40 per cent of the basic steel industry.

On March 2, 1937, Carnegie-Illinois, largest U. S. Steel subsidiary, received a SWOC delegation and signed a contract negotiated by Lewis. It granted recognition to the SWOC as the bargaining agency for its members, a ten per cent wage increase, the eight-hour day, 40-hour week, time and a half for overtime, vacations with pay, and seniority rights.

Reporters and commentators at the time credited Lewis with a "single-handed" victory. Lewis did take full advantage of favorable circumstances and skillfully "wrapped up" the deal with a corporation which at its founding in 1901 had adopted a special resolution never to recognize a union. But Lewis did not do the job "single-handed."

He had had the able aid of a "negotiating committee" of 140,000 GM sit-downers, particularly the brave auto workers of Flint who held the GM plants for 44 days. The defeat of mighty GM gave pause to Thomas Lamont of the House of Morgan, that controlled U. S. Steel, and to Myron Taylor, the steel company's head.

They were particularly anxious to avoid the GM experience because they had promise of a big pickup in profits from what was becoming the fastest developing market—war orders. British armor plate contracts were in the offing, if U. S. Steel could assure prompt deliveries. The House of Morgan also had reason to believe that Roosevelt was preparing to swing the country more and more in the direction of war preparations. Why risk the loss of British orders and the chance to bid on U. S. contracts by forcing a strike that might well end with the workers squeezing out even bigger concessions than Lewis was willing to accept?

The U. S. Steel contract inspired a rush of new members into the SWOC. Within a week, some 20,000 more workers got their union cards and 30 steel companies agreed to collective bargaining conferences. Within three months 140 companies representing 75 per cent of the industry, including 14 U. S. Steel subsidiaries, were under union contract.

There was a negative side to this development. The gains of the steelworkers appeared to come from the top. The steelworkers themselves did not have to go through a great struggle to get them and the CIO leadership, the SWOC leaders in particular, never made any attempt to impress on the steelworkers their immense debt to the GM sit-downers. Although the SWOC had more than 400,000 members by July 1937, they had no say whatsoever. Only in 1942, when SWOC Chairman Philip Murray felt he had all the union's machinery firmly in his own grip, was the United Steelworkers of America established with elected officers. This absolute control of the steel union from the top was to have repeated unfortunate consequences for the steelworkers. The first example of this came swiftly in Little Steel.

Five of U. S. Steel's leading competitors comprised the group known as Little Steel. They were Bethlehem Steel, Republic Steel, Youngstown Sheet and Tube, Inland Steel, and Weirton Steel. This group determined to fight to the death against recognition of the SWOC. The union's appeals to the law—the Wagner Act—only brought sneers from the hard-bitten owners of these corporations. Tom Girdler, head of Republic Steel, declared there was nothing in the law requiring an employer to sign a written contract. The companies, as was later revealed by the Senate Civil Liberties Committee headed by the younger Robert La Follette, had stocked millions of dollars worth of arms and ammunition for a war on unionism.

Every effort of Philip Murray and his assistants to secure union recognition was brushed aside. It was either accept a total and humiliating defeat without a struggle or strike. On May 26, 1937, a

strike call was issued to 75,500 workers of Bethlehem, Youngstown Sheet and Tube, Republic, and Inland, with Weirton reserved for a later attempt.

The initial walkouts were virtually 100 per cent effective. "Next day the steel towns breathed clean air for the first time in years. The mills were as empty as a Monday-morning church," wrote Walsh in his book.

The subsequent terrible defeat the CIO suffered in Little Steel can not in any wise be blamed on the workers. Their response to the strike call was magnificent. Their heroism and courage in the face of the murderous assaults of the company thugs, deputies, police, and National Guards have never been surpassed in the annals of American labor. There were 18 strikers slaughtered, scores wounded, hundreds arrested — some 200 union members and local leaders were jailed in the Youngstown, Ohio, area alone. Memorial Day 1937, when ten were massacred outside the Republic plant in South Chicago, stands as one of the darkest days the American workers have ever known.

The responsibility for the Little Steel defeat rests squarely on the top SWOC leaders. They did nothing to prepare the workers for effective defense against the strikebreaking forces of the local and state governments. These union leaders told the workers that all the "New Deal" public officials were "labor's friends" and that the strikers should "welcome" the National Guards, state troopers and police sent to keep "law and order" by Democratic governors and mayors who were among Roosevelt's key henchmen. Nothing proved more demoralizing and disorienting to the strikers than to be greeted with hot lead and cold steel by the armed strikebreaking forces who the union leaders said were being used to "protect" the strikers and "keep the mills closed."

In Pennsylvania, Governor Earle, who had been elected in 1934 as the first Democratic head of the state in 44 years, declared martial law at Johnstown when local police and vigilante terror failed to break the strike at Bethlehem's Cambria plant. The plant, which had been closed for a week, was reopened by the state troopers. The head of the troopers issued his own "injunction," limiting the number of pickets to six at the lower Franklin gate, the main entrance for the scabs. The commander of the troopers claimed that the road running directly past this gate must be kept open as a highway. The angry and frustrated strikers could watch from a distance as Earle's troopers herded an ever greater number of scabs into the plant. Eventually, the strike was broken and the union crushed.

In Ohio, Roosevelt's political colleague, Democratic Governor

Davey, sent the National Guard — the same Guard that had been fought to a standstill in the 1934 Toledo Auto-Lite strike— into the steel areas. The National Guard officers held a secret conference with the Republic Steel executives and then moved systematically from Youngstown to Warren, Niles, Dayton, Massillon, and Cleveland, smashing picket lines, arresting strikers, escorting scabs into struck mills.

In Youngstown, two strikers were killed by deputies who claimed that the strikers' wives had called them names. The National Guard finished the job. Every organizer was arrested. Hundreds of union men were held in "technical custody," jailed without charges or bail. Union headquarters were raided repeatedly. After the strikers—at the behest of the pro-Roosevelt Stalinists, in this instance—had welcomed the guardsmen as heroes, Governor Davey had announced that the "right to work is no less sacred than the right to strike." This meant keeping the plants open and protecting the scabs. Morale was gradually broken and the strike caved in.

A similar process took place in Canton. Governor Davey's guardsmen occupied an area several miles square around the plants and permitted no one to enter or leave without a military pass. All highways to the city were blocked off to prevent sympathizers from other towns coming to the aid of the Canton strikers. Hundreds of workers were arrested and held incommunicado. One worker was beaten to death—but two doctors were procured to testify that death was due to "heart-failure." Troopers driving children from a Canton playground nervously jabbed with bayonets three youngsters who jeered them. The cut children had to be treated at the medical corps room of the Canton armory.

At Massillon, Ohio, a group of special deputies, armed with tear gas shotguns supplied by Republic Steel, opened fire at night into pickets changing details at SWOC headquarters. Two strikers fell fatally wounded, 13 were treated for wounds at the hospital. The deputies invaded the union hall, confiscated the records and broke up the furniture. A midnight man hunt began, with 150 dragged from their homes to jail. All picketing and meetings were then banned. The strike was broken.

The most evil day of the strike was May 30. A Memorial Day meeting had been called by the union in South Chicago. The meeting decided to hold a protest parade past the struck Republic plant. About 1,500, including women and children, were in the line of march. Union leaders, including Stalinists, told them that Roosevelt, the Wagner Act and Chicago's own "New Deal" Democratic Mayor Kelly had "guaranteed" the right to peaceful picketing.

As the marchers, in holiday mood, crossed a large trash-strewn field in the direction of the Republic plant, they saw a solid line of 200 police drawn across their path. A group of about 300 advanced to the police line and a leader began to talk to the police. Suddenly, the police opened fire with tear gas shells. Then, as the marchers broke and began to run in retreat, the police opened fire with their revolvers, sending hundreds of bullets into the panic-stricken crowd. The police then charged with swinging clubs and blazing guns, beating down or shooting every laggard. In a couple of minutes, ten lay dead or fatally wounded — every one shot in the back. Another 40 bore gunshot wounds — in the back. One hundred and one others were injured by clubs, including an eight-year-old child.

A Paramount News cameraman recorded the event. It was such a ghastly sight that the film company refused to exhibit the newsreel for fear of "inciting riots." It was subsequently shown in secret to the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee in the Senate and this showing was described in a contemporary press account. After telling how dazed individuals were shown caught in the midst of the charging police, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* of June 16, 1937, said:

"In a manner which is appallingly businesslike, groups of policemen close in on these isolated individuals, and go to work on them with their clubs. In several instances, from two to four policemen are seen beating one man. One strikes him horizontally across the face, using his club as he would a baseball bat. Another crashes it down on top of his head and still another is whipping him across the back. . .

"A man shot through the back is paralyzed from the waist. Two policemen try to make him stand up, to get him into a patrol wagon, but when they let go of him his legs crumple, and he falls with his face in the dirt, almost under the rear step of the wagon. He moves his head and arms, but his legs are limp. He raises his head like a turtle, and claws the ground. . .

"There is continuous talking, but it is difficult to distinguish anything, with one exception — out of the babble there rises this clear and distinct ejaculation:

"'God Almighty!'

"A policeman, somewhat disheveled, his coat wide open, a scowl on his face, approaches another who is standing in front of the camera. He is sweaty and tired. He says something indistinguishable. Then his face breaks into a sudden grin, he makes a motion of dusting off his hands, and strides away. The film ends."

Lewis and Murray looked to Roosevelt to save the Little Steel strike. On June 30, with the blood of many scores of steel strikers

still fresh on the streets of a half dozen towns and cities, Roosevelt spurned the plea of the union leaders, grandiloquently quoting Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: "A plague on both your houses!"

Lewis, who had remained silent at the President's treacherous actions during the GM strike, could no longer contain himself. In a September 3 (Labor Day) coast-to-coast radio broadcast, Lewis scored the Roosevelt administration:

"Shortly after Kelly's police force in Chicago had indulged their bloody orgy, Kelly came to Washington looking for political patronage. That patronage was forthcoming, and Kelly must believe that the killing of the strikers is no liability in partisan politics... Labor next year cannot avoid the necessity of a political assay of the work and deeds of its so-called... beneficiaries. It must determine who are its friends in the arena of politics and elsewhere..."

"Those who chant their praises of democracy but who lost no chance to drive their knives into labor's defenseless back must feel the weight of labor's woes even as its open adversaries must ever feel the thrust of labor's power.

"Labor, like Israel, has many sorrows. Its women weep for their fallen and they lament for the future of the children of the race. It ill behooves one who has supped at labor's table and who has been sheltered in labor's house to curse with equal fervor and fine impartiality both labor and its adversaries when they become locked in deadly embrace."

This scathing indictment of Roosevelt was not followed by a political break. Lewis was still to continue, for a time, his support of the Democratic machine and the "New Deal" administration. The other CIO leaders—Murray, Dubinsky, Hillman, etc.—did not even give support to Lewis's verbal attack on Roosevelt. Murray, whose strike "strategy" had been merely dependence on Roosevelt and "New Dealers" like Davey, Earle and Kelly, said not a word.

Later the story was to be circulated that the Little Steel strike had been a "mistake," that Murray had been induced to call the strike because of "misleading" and "over-enthusiastic" reports from local organizers and leaders in the Little Steel areas. The strike was lost only because of "misleading" and "over-enthusiastic" belief in Roosevelt and the other Democratic capitalist "friends of labor." Had the SWOC leaders prepared the workers for a real battle, with dependence only on their own organized strength, there would have been a different story to tell, as the Toledo, Minneapolis, San Francisco, and Flint strikes had already proved.

The Little Steel defeat was the first serious setback for the CIO. It slowed up but did not halt the CIO's drive. The eight unions with

900,000 members that had formed the CIO in November 1935, grew to 32 international unions with a membership of 3,718,000 in September 1937. The AFL Executive Council in September announced a total AFL membership of 3,600,000 — less than that of the CIO. However, the AFL leaders claimed 1,000,000 new members, demonstrating that the impetus given to organized labor by the CIO's campaign had benefited the AFL as well.