

The time was early evening of a bitterly cold winter day, December 30, 1936. The place was General Motors' key plant in Flint, Michigan. The event was an attempt by the autoworkers employed in the factory to shut it down. When the starting whistle blew to begin the evening shift, there was no roar of machinery. There was only silence. Then a third-floor window swung open. A worker leaned out and shouted, "She's ours!"

Thus began the great General Motors sit-down strike. For six weeks the attention of Americans was riveted on Flint. The sit-down strike was a lead story in newspapers, newsreels, and radio newscasts. One historian has called this strike the most significant conflict between U.S. labor and management in the twentieth century. What prompted the small and weak United Automobile Workers union (UAW) to challenge the giant and powerful General Motors Corporation (GM)?

Automobile manufacturing was the number one industry in the United States, and GM was the number one automaker. GM's 1936 sales of 1,500,000 Chevrolets, Pontiacs, Oldsmobiles, Buicks, LaSalles, and Cadillacs made it the largest manufacturer in the world. It was also the most profitable—\$284 million in pretax profits in 1936.

These profits were widely distributed to GM's *stockholders* (those who own shares of the company's stock). There were hundreds of thousands of them across the country. They were pleased with the performance of the company they owned. They opposed any changes that might threaten the production of so many golden eggs.

Unions were considered a disruptive new influence at GM. Plant managers were allowed to meet with employee representatives to discuss wages, hours, and working conditions at local plants. The company refused, however, to recognize a labor union formally or to enter into a written contract with one. To prevent the union from gaining worker support, GM hired private detectives to spy on union workers in its factories.

Although autoworkers received high hourly wages and other benefits, their work schedule was irregular. Automobile production was seasonal. During periods of low production fewer workers were needed. The fear of being laid off during these periods hung over the head of every worker. The plant foreman usually decided who would be kept and who would lose their jobs. He often showed favoritism. Length of service did not protect a worker against lay-off. The company could fire anyone it wished.

In 1936, 15 percent of GM's hourly workers had been laid off for part of the year. For those who were laid off, high hourly wages did not translate to high annual income. A study by the federal government in 1936 estimated that a family of four needed an annual income of \$1,435. Average earnings for those laid off that year were below \$1,150.

Workers not only felt insecure about keeping their jobs. They were also dissatisfied about the nature of their work. The major complaint was that the work schedule was exhausting: nine hours a day, five days a week. The wife of a Chevrolet plant worker put it this way: "My husband, he's a torch solderer. . . . You should see him come home at night, him and the rest of the men in the buses. So tired like they was dead, and irritable. . . . And then at night in bed, he shakes, his whole body, he shakes."

One cause of fatigue was the *speed-up* (increasing the pace set on the assembly line). As the workers stood in their places, tools in hand, the line monotonously moved one car after another past them. A foreman holding a stopwatch would sometimes yell at the workers to hurry. A Buick worker complained, "We didn't have time to go to the toilet. . . . You have to run to the toilet and run back." The faster the line moved, the higher the output. GM workers believed that the company was always trying to increase profits by getting more production with fewer workers. A Fisher Body plant worker protested bitterly: "You might call yourself a man if you was on the street; but as soon as you went through the door and punched your card, you was nothing more or less than a robot. . . . It takes your guts out, that line."

During the Great Depression, some workers began to turn to unionism as the best hope for improving their lot. Through unions they hoped to increase wages and benefits, improve job security, and slow down the pace of their work.

The autoworkers' union was not well established during the early thirties. By 1935 only 5.4 percent of the wage earners employed in the auto industry had joined the UAW.

Union leaders recognized that if the automobile workers were to be organized, the UAW would have to penetrate GM's Flint stronghold. If the union could prove its strength in Flint, autoworkers everywhere would be more willing to join the UAW. By the summer of 1936 the UAW had only 150 members in Flint. That drab industrial city was the home of GM's Fisher Body Number One, the largest automobile

body plant in the world. Chevrolet, Buick, and AC Spark Plug factories were also located there. More than one-half of the city's labor force was made up of GM autoworkers. Eighty percent of Flint's families were dependent upon the GM payroll.

In November 1936, the UAW leadership announced its goals for the autoworkers. These goals included elimination of speed-up, *seniority* based on length of service alone (last hired, first fired, when layoffs were necessary), an eight-hour day and forty-hour week, time-and-a-half pay for overtime, and improved safety measures. One goal, however, stood high above the others: recognition by GM of the UAW as the only labor union with which they would bargain. As 1936 drew to a close, GM leaders remained as opposed as ever to unions.

The hopes of UAW leaders were raised by the landslide re-election of Franklin Roosevelt in 1936. The president was considered a friend of organized labor. "You voted New Deal at the polls and defeated the Auto Barons—Now get a New Deal in the shop," a UAW official told the autoworkers.

Recent changes in federal law further increased the optimism of labor leaders. In 1935, Congress passed, and the president signed into law, the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), sometimes referred to as the Wagner Act after its chief sponsor Senator Robert Wagner of New York. The Wagner Act required employers to bargain with their workers. It also prohibited employers from using "unfair labor practices," including firing union members and interfering with union organizing efforts. The new law also set up the National Labor Relations Board. Among other things, it held elections among the workers of a company to find out if they wished to be represented by a particular union.

Renewed efforts in the last months of 1936 to organize the autoworkers of Flint were unsuccessful. By late December only 10 percent of the city's GM workers had joined the UAW. Union leaders were convinced that if an election under the NLRA were held, the UAW would lose it. It seemed that a dramatic display of union strength would be required to get the majority of workers to embrace the UAW. The majority of the workers were not necessarily opposed to the UAW. They were waiting to see how the union would fare in a struggle with the giants of the industry.

Even if the UAW could have won an election under the NLRA, GM would not have accepted the results. The company expected the

Supreme Court to declare the Wagner Act unconstitutional. I had 137 decided not to obey it in the meantime.

The stage was set for a strike. But what kind of strike? Normally, when workers went on strike, they walked off their jobs. Carrying signs, they usually marched in picket lines around the outside of the building where they worked. In the past, this kind of strike had often been smashed by police breaking through the line of pickets.

UAW leaders decided upon a special kind of strike in Flint—a sit-down. Instead of walking off their jobs, strikers would remain at their machines overnight and refuse to operate them. An attempt by police to break the strike might lead the strikers to damage expensive company machinery. Also, in a sit-down strike, it would be very difficult for strikebreakers to replace the strikers at their jobs.

A union leader at Flint's Fisher One was asked if his workers were ready for a sit-down strike. "Ready? They're like a pregnant woman in her tenth month!" On December 30, 1936, it happened. Workers at Fisher Body One and nearby Fisher Two sat down inside the plants. David was trying out a new weapon against Goliath. The fate of the UAW rested upon the outcome of the contest.

A strike in one key automobile plant could paralyze other factories that depended on its product. During the first few weeks of the sit-down strike in Flint, parts shortages caused closings of 50 other plants. Production of Chevrolets and Buicks was grinding to a halt just as the new year began. Across the country the total number of idled GM workers soon reached 136,000. Nonstrikers complained about being deprived of work by the striking minority.

Although the strike had spread to other places, the spotlight remained on Flint, the principal seat of GM's power. A proud GM worker wrote to his wife: "We have the key plant of the General Motors and the eyes of the world are looking at us. We shure done a thing that GM said never could be done."

Sit-down strikers conducted themselves with military discipline inside the struck plants. Strike committees drafted and enforced strict rules of conduct. Dining halls were established in the plant cafeterias. Sleeping quarters were improvised from car seats. For recreation there were lectures and games of ping-pong and volleyball. Some strikers went roller skating between the long lines of idle machinery. A feeling of solidarity grew among the strikers inside the plants. Morale was high.

GM insisted that the sit-downers were illegally trespassing on

company property. The company refused to bargain with the strikers until the plants were evacuated. General Motors' president, Alfred Sloan, said the UAW was seeking a labor dictatorship. His company would not accept any union as the sole bargaining agent for its employees.

Tension mounted in Flint. On January 11, 1937, it exploded into violence. General Motors cut off heat to the Fisher Two plant. The temperature outside was 16 degrees. At dinner time, company guards refused to let the dinner meal be delivered to the strikers. In response, UAW leaders decided to bring in union members from other cities to take over the main gate of the plant. At 8:30 P.M. a squad of men, armed with billy clubs, approached the company guards blocking the gate. The guards fled. Their commander telephoned Flint police headquarters for help. Riot-equipped police officers were dispatched to the scene.

The police stormed the plant entrance. Tear gas crashed through the closed windows. The strikers fought back with bottles, bolts, steel car-door hinges, and torrents of water from the plant's fire hoses. The police were turned away. By the end of the battle, 13 strikers suffered gunshot wounds. Eleven policemen were also injured. Most of them had gashed heads. Heat and food were restored after the violent incident.

The outbreak of violence brought Michigan's new governor, Frank Murphy, to Flint. Throughout his career, Murphy had demonstrated a genuine sympathy for the afflicted and the unfortunate. Born and raised in Michigan, Murphy had graduated from the University of Michigan with a law degree. In a paper for a course he took at the university Murphy had written: "If I can only feel, when my day is done, that I have accomplished something toward uplifting the poor, uneducated, unfortunate, ten hour a day, laborer from the political chaos he now exists in, I will be satisfied that I have been worthwhile."

Frank Murphy's secret ambition was to become president of the United States. During the early 1930s, he had been mayor of Detroit and then governor-general of the Philippine Islands. When he won the 1936 race for governor of Michigan, one newspaper noted that Murphy would be a presidential possibility in 1940. The thought had already occurred to the newly elected governor.

Unlike many public officials of his time, Murphy sympathized with workers. He believed that workers had the right to join unions and to strike. He favored *arbitration* (settlement of conflicts by an impartial

third party) rather than force as a way to settle labor disputes. He was determined to avoid violence during strikes. The government, he believed, must not take sides during a strike. According to Murphy, police ought to keep peace without favoring either strikers or their employers.

Murphy received strong support for his election from labor unions. While campaigning he declared, "I am heart and soul in the labor movement." Upon his election, he received a congratulatory message from the president of the American Federation of Labor. Murphy responded, "My administration in Lansing will mark a new day for labor in Michigan."

The new governor arrived in Flint the day after violence had broken out. Murphy ordered National Guard troops and state police into the city. "Peace and order will prevail," the governor vowed.

By the end of the day, 1,289 guardsmen, most of them in their late teens and early twenties, had arrived. Their number would double by the end of the month. The troops blockaded the area near the struck plants. They made no attempt to eject the strikers or deny them access to food.

In the past, strikers throughout the United States had reason to fear the arrival of troops. They had been used to break strikes, often violently. In Flint, however, strikers cheered the arrival of soldiers because they trusted the man who sent them. "Under no circumstances," Murphy declared, "would the troops take sides."

Critics of the governor charged that it was his obligation to take sides. The governor, they claimed, ought to employ the power of the state to restore GM property to its rightful owners. Some said Murphy's neutrality was really a prostrike policy.

Murphy wanted to break the stalemate by negotiation between the UAW and GM. His first efforts to bring about a negotiated settlement broke down. A major obstacle was the stance of GM's President Sloan. He refused to bargain with "a group that holds our plants for ransom without regard to law or justice."

The strikers were unlawfully occupying GM property. Governor Murphy was urged to enforce the law and eject the strikers by force. An attempt by troops to drive out the sit-downers would produce certain bloodshed. On February 2, the pressure mounted on Murphy to evict the strikers forcibly. A Flint judge issued an *injunction* (court order) requiring evacuation of the Fisher Body plants within 24 hours.

After the judge's order was read to the strikers at Fisher Two, they sent the following telegram to the governor:

We have decided to stay in the plant. We have no illusions about the sacrifices which this decision will entail. We fully expect that if a violent effort is made to oust us many of us will be killed and we take this means of making it known to our wives, our children, and to the people of the state of Michigan and of the country that if this result follows from the attempt to eject us you are the one who must be held responsible for our deaths.

The responsibility to act was thrust upon the governor by the injunction. Would he order an assault on the occupied plants? "I'm not going down in history as Bloody Murphy," the governor declared. "It would be inconsistent with everything I have ever stood for in my entire life." Murphy refused to use bullets and bayonets to drive the strikers from the plants.

Instead, the governor brought GM and UAW leaders to Detroit for negotiations. Murphy personally served as mediator. Like a jack-rabbit, he jumped back and forth between the two parties carrying proposals and counterproposals. After a final grueling 16-hour session, the deadlock was broken. The 40-day sit-down strike came to an end. GM had lost production of 280,000 cars, valued at \$175 million.

As part of the settlement, the UAW agreed to evacuate the plants. In exchange, GM recognized the UAW and agreed to bargain exclusively with it. The union had won a major victory. The settlement opened the floodgates of union membership. UAW membership swelled rapidly. In the wake of the sit-down strike, the UAW was recognized by Chrysler, Ford, and the smaller automobile manufacturers.

Governor Murphy, more than anyone else, affected the outcome of the strike. He had insisted that welfare payments be made to the strikers' families. He had dispatched troops to Flint, not to break the strike, but to prevent violence. He had delayed enforcement of a court order that could have broken the strike. He had personally kept the strike talks going day and night until a settlement was reached.

When the dispute finally ended, reactions were mixed. Labor leaders applauded Murphy for his handling of the strike. "A great achievement of a great American," was the praise offered by President Roosevelt. Many others were sharply critical of the governor for failure to enforce the law and protect GM property. Critics emphasized that the sit-downers had broken the law by committing criminal trespass. A member of Congress accused Murphy of having "sowed the seeds of armed rebellion and anarchy."

Soon after the settlement of the GM sit-down strike, a rash of sit-

down strikes spread across the country, especially in Michigan. Workers of every stripe—garbage collectors, waitresses, hospital workers, dime store clerks—sat down on their jobs. There were 477 sit-down strikes during 1937. A group of civic leaders in Boston wired the Senate in March 1937:

It is rapidly growing beyond control . . . if minority groups can seize premises illegally, hold them indefinitely, refuse admittance to owners and managers, resist by violence and threaten bloodshed all attempts to dislodge them, and intimidate properly constituted authority to the point of impotence, then freedom and liberty are at an end, government becomes a mockery, suspended by anarchy, mob rule, and ruthless dictatorship.

In 1939, the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed the sit-down strike as a violation of property rights. The citizens of Michigan rendered a verdict of their own a year earlier. Frank Murphy was defeated for reelection as governor. The sit-downs had been a major cause for his defeat. According to one newspaper, the voters carried "pictures of 1937 in the back of their heads when they went to the polls." Frank Murphy's hopes of becoming president had been dealt a shattering blow. He was never to hold elective office again. President Roosevelt, however, appointed Murphy attorney general of the United States and later justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

The major sources for this story were:

- Fine, Sidney. *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
 Fine, Sidney. *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-37*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969.
 Sear, Stephen W. "Shut the Goddam Plant!" *American Heritage* 33(3) (April-May 1982):49-64.

ACTIVITIES FOR "UNITED WE SIT"

Write all answers on a separate sheet of paper.

Historical Understanding

Answer briefly:

1. During the 1930s what was the leading industry in the United States and which corporation was the largest manufacturer in that industry?

2. In a labor dispute, what is *arbitration*?
3. What were two goals of the UAW in the 1930s?
4. What were the major provisions of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935?

Reviewing the Facts of the Case

Answer briefly:

1. What was GM's policy toward labor unions during the 1930s?
2. Identify two complaints autoworkers had about their jobs.
3. Why did the UAW choose Flint as the location for the sit-down strike?
4. Why was the sit-down type of strike chosen as a tactic by the UAW?
5. In what ways did Governor Murphy influence the outcome of the GM sit-down strike?
6. What effects did the GM sit-down strike have upon (a) the organized labor movement and (b) Frank Murphy's political career?

Analyzing Ethical Issues

Examining the value of property. Property is a value concerning what people should be allowed to own and how they should be allowed to use it. Identify two incidents in the story that involve the value of property. For example:

The UAW demanded a greater share of GM profits.

Expressing Your Reasoning

1. Should Governor Murphy have forcibly ejected the sit-down strikers from the plants they occupied in Flint? Why or why not?
2. In deciding whether to use force to evict the sit-down strikers, which of the facts below do you think should have been most important to the governor? Which should have been the least important to him? Explain your choices.

- a. Removal of the strikers would have caused bloodshed.
 - b. Most General Motors executives had opposed Murphy's election, and the UAW had supported his candidacy.
 - c. A governor's oath of office includes a duty to enforce the laws of the state.
 - d. Murphy wanted to become president of the United States.
 - e. GM had refused to bargain collectively with the UAW.
 - f. The premises occupied by the strikers belonged to GM.
 - g. Murphy owned GM stock valued at \$105,000.
 - h. A poll showed that 65 percent of Michigan citizens thought the government should use force to remove sit-down strikers.
3. Uncertainty of employment was one of the concerns of GM workers. Because auto production was seasonal and unpredictable, workers were in danger of being laid off their jobs. To protect themselves, the workers wanted GM to accept a seniority system. Under such a system workers would be laid off based on their length of service alone; last hired, first fired. Would it be fair for GM to follow a seniority system in determining the order of layoff? Write a paragraph expressing your position. Before writing consider whether marital status, number of dependents, or quality of work should be taken into account in deciding which employees should be kept on the job at a time of cutbacks.
 4. During the sit-down strike in Flint, Governor Murphy ordered that public relief be paid by the state government to nonstrikers and strikers alike. Do you think he was right to grant welfare payments to the families of striking workers? State a reason for your position.
 5. *Seeking Additional Information.* In making decisions about such questions as those above, we often feel we need more information before we are satisfied with our judgments. Choose one of the above questions about which you would want more information than is presented in the story. What additional information would you like? Why would that information help you make a more satisfactory decision?