

Louis Adamic Lists the Virtues and Advantages of the Sitdown Strike, 1936

A sitdown strike differs from ordinary strikes in that workers do not leave the premises after it is called. Instead, they stay by their equipment to make sure that management cannot operate it in their place. If unable to restart operations, the theory goes, employers would be more likely to meet labor's demands. The Industrial Workers of the World pioneered the use of sitdown strikes, but the tactic became increasingly popular in the late 1930s, especially after the United Auto Workers used the tactic to gain recognition from General Motors in early 1937.

Here labor journalist Louis Adamic writes about the advantages of the sitdown strike in the abstract. Even as early as December 1936 (when he wrote this piece), he had many examples from which to draw his conclusions, especially in the rubber industry. Sitdown strikes became much less common after the United States Supreme Court declared them illegal in 1939. They still happen on occasion during American labor disputes, but workers who use the tactic are likely to face arrest.

1. THE SITDOWN is the reverse of sabotage, to which many workers are opposed. It destroys nothing. Before shutting down a department in a rubber plant, for instance, the men take the compounded rubber from the mills, or they finish building or curing the tires then being built or cured, so that nothing is needlessly ruined. Taking the same precautions during the sitdown as they do during production, the men do not smoke

Excerpt from Louis Adamic, "Sitdown." Reprinted with permission from the December 6, 1936 issue of *The Nation*.

- in departments where benzine is used. There is no drinking. This discipline—of which more in a moment—is instinctive.
2. To say, as did a *New York Times* reporter, writing from Akron in January 1936, that the sitdown "resembles the old Oriental practice of passive resistance" is a bit far-fetched, but it probably is a sort of development of the old I.W.W. "folded-arm" strike and of "striking on the job"; only it is better than the latter, which required men to pretend they were working, and to accomplish as little as possible without being discharged, which was more fatiguing than to work according to one's capacity, as well as contrary to the natural inclinations of the best class of the workers.
3. The sitdown is the reverse of the ordinary strike. When a sitdown is called, a man does not walk out; he stays in, implying that he is willing to work if—
4. Workers' wives generally object to regular strikes, which often are long, sometimes violent and dangerous, and as likely as not end in sellouts and defeat. Sitdowns are quick, short, and free of violence. There are no strike-breakers in the majority of instances; the factory management does not dare to get tough and try to drive the sitting men out and replace them with other workers, for such violence would turn the public against the employers and the police, and might result in damage to costly machinery. In a sitdown there are no picket-lines outside the factories, where police and company guards have great advantage when a fight starts. The sitdown action occurs wholly inside the plant, where the workers, who know every detail of the interior, have obvious advantages. The sitters-down organize their own "Police squads," arming them—in rubber—with crowbars normally used to pry open molds in which tires are cured. These worker cops patrol the belt, watch for possible scabs and stand guard near the doors: In a few instances where city police and company cops entered a factory, they were bewildered, frightened, and driven out by the "sitting" workers with no difficulty whatever.
5. Most workers distrust—if not consciously, then unconsciously—union officials and strike leaders and committees, even when they themselves have elected them. The beauty of the sitdown or the stay-in is that there are no leaders or officials to dis-

trust. There can be no sellout. Such standard procedure as strike sanction is hopelessly obsolete when workers drop their tools, their machines, and sit down beside them. The initiative, conduct, and control of the sitdown come directly from the men involved.

6. The fact that the sitdown gives the worker in mass-production industries a vital sense of importance cannot be overemphasized. Two sitdowns which completely tied up plants employing close to ten thousand men were started by half a dozen men each. Imagine the feeling of power those men experienced! And the thousands of workers who sat down in their support shared that feeling in varying degrees, depending on their individual power of imagination. One husky gum-miner said to me, "Now we don't feel like taking the sass off any snot-nose college-boy foreman." Another man said, "Now we know our labor is more important than the money of the stockholders, than the gambling in Wall Street, than the doings of the managers and foremen." One man's grievance, if the majority of his fellow-workers in his department agreed that it was a just grievance, could tie up the whole plant. He became a strike leader; the other members of the working force in his department became members of the strike committee. *They* assumed full responsibility in the matter: formed their own patrols, they kept the machines from being pointlessly destroyed, and they met with the management and dictated their terms. *They* turned their individual self-control and restraint into group self-discipline—which probably was the best aspect of the sitdown. *They* settled the dispute, not some outsider.
7. Work in most of the departments of a rubber factory or any other kind of mass-production factory is drudgery of the worst sort—mechanical and uncreative, insistent and requiring no imagination; and any interruption is welcomed by workers, even if only subconsciously. The conscious part of their mind may worry about the loss of pay; their subconscious, however, does not care a-whit about that. The sitdown is dramatic, thrilling.
8. All these factors were important in the early sitdowns. They are still important. In addition, now there is in Akron the three-year-old tradition that when a sitdown begins anywhere along

the line of production everybody else was to sit down, too. And while we are explaining the men's solidarity in sitdowns, I must not forget also that the average worker in a mass-production plant is full of grievances and complaints, some of them hardly realized, and he knows or feels instinctively that when he and his fellow workers get ready to act, they will need the support of all the labor in the place and they will get it only if they back the men who have initiated the sitdown.

9. The sitdown is a purely democratic action, as democracy is understood in America within the capitalist system.
10. The sitdown is a social affair. Sitting workers talk. They get acquainted. And they like that. In a regular strike it is impossible to bring together under one roof more than one or two thousand people, and these only for a meeting, where they do not talk with one another but listen to speakers. A rubber sitdown holds under the same roof up to ten or twelve thousand idle men, free to talk among themselves, man to man. "Why, my God, man," one Goodyear gum-miner told me in November 1936, "during the sitdowns last spring I found out that the guy who works next to me is the same as I am, even if I was born in West Virginia and he is from Poland. His grievances are the same. Why shouldn't we stick?"