

Or sometimes we would address the workers who had been brought to take the furniture: "We are talking to you, you men who have come here to throw out the furniture of unemployed workers. Who are you? You, too, are unemployed men who have had to take this job in order to eat. We don't blame you. You are one of us. We represent the Unemployed Council and last night we made a collection among the unemployed. We have enough money to pay you off. How much are you going to get for evicting an unemployed worker? Five dollars? Six dollars? We have the money for you. Come up here without the police and without the marshal and we will pay you off. Look at the marshal standing there. Is he working? Let him do the work."

And so we would harangue. We could see the men hesitating. We would continue: "We women are standing here with the furniture that is to be evicted. The water is hot in our kettles. The doors are locked. We're not letting you in."

Often, the hired men would come up anyway. Our doors were locked but they would break them in. We were behind those doors, with our kettles. They would grab a piece of furniture on one side and we would grab it on the other. And both would start pulling. Meanwhile we would say: "Here, here is the money. Leave the furniture."

Some would take the money and go. Sometimes we poured the hot water on the men. Sometimes they would hit us. And then we would run out onto the fire escape, grab the bullhorn, and shout to the crowd: "They're hitting us. They're big men and they're hitting us. But we're not going to let them move the furniture. They can't overcome us. We shall win."

Sometimes, they'd get so disgusted with all this fighting and hollering they'd take the furniture from the apartment but leave it on the landing. That was a victory. We'd stay there and wait for the husbands to return and then we'd put the furniture back into the apartment. We'd put a new lock on the door and the landlord would have to get a new eviction notice. He'd call the marshal and the whole thing would start all over again.

Our fight was successful. The rents came down, the evicted families returned to their apartments, the landlord would stop fighting us. Sometimes we failed and the furniture was carried into the street. Immediately we would cover it with a tarpaulin so it wouldn't get spoiled, and then we'd hold a mass meeting on the furniture, using it as a platform. We were only waiting for the police to leave. As soon as they were gone, the people standing around would pick up the furniture and carry it right back into the building. We'd break the lock, put back the furniture, install a new lock, and the landlord would have to go through the whole procedure another time.

Within two years we had rent control in the Bronx. That's the way it was in those days.

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In the mid-1930s, a wave of sit-down strikes spread across the country. Workers figured out that if they sat down and occupied the factories, they could not only stop production, they could prevent strikebreakers from coming in to replace them. Tens of thousands of workers in various industries joined the strike wave, usually demanding better working conditions and recognition of new industrial unions, like the United Auto Workers (UAW). One of the most important of these sit-downs took place in the auto factories of Flint, Michigan, in 1937. Workers in Flint held out for weeks and won a major victory against General Motors, which was forced to recognize the UAW as the sole bargaining representative of workers in its plants. Decades after the strike, the socialist Genora (Johnson) Dollinger described the sit-downs and their impact.

### Genora (Johnson) Dollinger, *Striking Flint: Genora (Johnson) Dollinger Remembers the 1936-37 GM Sit-Down Strike* (February 1995)<sup>13</sup>

Conditions in Flint before the strike were very, very depressing for working people. We had a large influx of workers come into the city from the deep South. They came north to find jobs, because there was no work back home. They came with their furniture strapped on old jalopies and they'd move into the cheapest housing that they could find. Usually these were just little one or two-room structures with no inside plumbing and no inside heating arrangements. They just had kerosene heaters to heat their wash water, their bath water, and their homes. You could smell kerosene all over their clothing. They were very poor.

One woman came from a small section of Flint around Fenton Road, where many of these poor southerners settled. She would walk the picket line in the snow in tennis shoes with no gloves. She was a wonderful person. She was there every day, and we'd have to make sure she got warmed up in the union headquarters before she went out on the picket line again.

Before the strike, the women didn't have the opportunity to participate in any activities. The small neighborhood churches were the only places they had to go to. They knew some of their neighbors and they would go to some of these little churches, but that's all. The men frequented the beer gardens and talked to other men about shop problems or whatever. They got to be shop buddies.

When you worked in the factory in those days, no one cared what your name was. You became "Whitey" if you happened to be blonde. Or you might be

"Blacky" if you had black hair. If you asked, "Well, who is he?" you'd get, "I don't know, he works in department so-and-so, Plant 4, on the line half way down." It was just "Blacky" or "Shorty" or some nickname. They were wage slaves with a complete loss of identity and rights inside the plant.

At first, when these workers were approached to join the union, they were afraid they might lose this job that was so very valuable to them. At that time, men working in the auto plants were getting around forty-five cents an hour. The younger girls that worked in the A.C. Sparkplug division of General Motors, were being paid twelve-and-a-half cents an hour to make minor car instruments. That was the only plant that employed women. . . .

They used to say, "Once you pass the gates of General Motors, forget about the United States Constitution." Workers had no rights when they entered that plant. If a foreman didn't like the way you parted your hair—or whatever he didn't like about you—you may have looked at him the wrong way, or said something that rubbed him the wrong way—he could fire you. No recourse, no nothing. And practically all foremen expected workers to bring them turkeys on Thanksgiving and gifts for Christmas and repair their motor cars and even paint their houses. The workers were kept intimidated because if they didn't comply with what the foreman told them to do, they would lose their jobs and their families would starve. You can see what a feeling of slavery and domination workers felt inside the GM plants.

Not only that, but when workers started talking about organizing, management hired lip-readers to watch the men talk to each other, even when they were right close to each other, so they could tell if they were talking union. One of our friends who was a member of the Socialist Party wore the first UAW button into the Chevrolet plant. He was fired immediately. He didn't even get to his job. They spotted the button and that was it. If you went into a beer garden or other place like that and began to talk about unions, very often you didn't get home without getting an awful beating by GM-hired thugs.

That was the condition inside the plants. Combined with the bad conditions on the outside: poor living conditions, lack of proper food, lack of proper medical attention and everything else, the auto workers came to the conclusion that there was no way they could ever escape any of this injustice without joining a union. But they didn't all decide at one time. . . .

A considerable amount of preparatory work was done before the strike. That preparatory work was done by radical parties. We had several very active organizations in Flint and Detroit: the Communist Party, the Proletarian Party, the Socialist Labor Party, the Socialist Party and the International Workers of the World (IWW). And, with the exception of the Communist Party, we all had our headquarters in the Pengelly Building, a very old building that became the major

strike headquarters of the whole United Automobile Workers Union of Flint. Even as the strike was going on, we still had our rooms on the second floor, while the main activities in the auditorium were on the third floor.

Two years before the strike broke out, the Socialist Party in Flint organized the League for Industrial Democracy (LID). We held meetings in garages and in basements, secret meetings, so the people wouldn't get caught and beaten up.

As we got bigger, the Socialist Party started sending us their speakers from New York. Many of them were from the Brookwood Labor College. We put out leaflets and sold tickets for these meetings, which were held in the basement of the biggest Methodist church and in the Masonic Temple.

We held lectures in socialism mainly, plus labor history and current events, focusing on what was happening politically. Those were very popular meetings. We would get three and four hundred people at some of our meetings.

This was all before the strike, in preparation for when the struggle actually broke out, when the workers couldn't take any more and rebelled. A core of socialists understood that this would eventually happen. . . .

The first sit-down was on December 30 in the small Fisher Body Plant 2 over a particularly big grievance that had occurred. The workers were at the point where they had just had enough, and under a militant leadership, they sat down. When the UAW leaders in the big Fisher Body Plant 1 heard about the sit-down in Fisher 2, they sat down, also. That took real guts, and it took political leadership. The leaders of the political parties knew what they had to do because they'd studied labor history and the ruthlessness of the corporations. . . .

After the first sit-down started, I went down to see what I could do to help. I was either on the picket lines or up at the Pengelly Building all the time, but some of the strike leaders didn't know who I was and didn't know that I had been teaching classes in unionism and so on. So they said, "Go to the kitchen. We need a lot of help out there." They didn't know what else to tell a woman to do. I said, "You've got a lot of little, skinny men around here who can't stand to be out on the cold picket lines for very long. They can peel potatoes as well as women can." I turned down the idea of kitchen duty.

Instead, I organized a children's picket line. I got Bristol board and paints, and I was painting signs for this children's picket line. One of my socialist comrades came up and said, "Hey, Genora, what are you doing here?" I said, "I'm doing your job." Since he was a professional sign painter, I turned the sign-painting project over to him and that was the beginning of the sign-painting department.

We could only do the children's picket line once because it was too dangerous, but we got an awful lot of favorable publicity from it, much of it international. The picture of my two-year-old son, Jarvis, holding a picket sign saying, "My daddy strikes for us little tykes," went all over the nation, and people sent me arti-

cles from French newspapers and from Germany and from other European countries. I thought it was remarkable that the news traveled so far. . . .

The company decided they had to break the strike. On January 11, they attacked the smaller Fisher Body Plant 2. I happened to be on the picket line that day, and I was amazed to see what was happening. The plant guards prevented the men from getting any food for about 24 hours. It was very cold, and they turned off the heat in the building. The men inside were very angry.

Then the company police and the city police started shooting. At first they were shooting tear gas inside the plant, but that was too difficult, so they decided to tear-gas and shoot this huge mass of picketers that had formed in front of the plant. The police were using rifles, buckshot, fire-bombs, and tear-gas canisters. It was a shock to a lot of people. We had thought that General Motors would try to freeze us out or do something in the plants, but never open fire on us right in the middle of the city.

The union picketers took their own cars and barricaded off a section so that the police couldn't get us from both ends. Then, over the radio came the equivalent of saying that there was a revolution starting in Flint. With all the propaganda saying, "The communists are coming into the city to take over the union," people gathered in vast numbers on both sides of this battle. When the police misfired, tear-gas and bullets went over our heads into the crowds which had come out to watch. It was very frightening. People would run away and dart into restaurants up the street.

The battle continued for quite some time. Workers overturned police cars to make barricades. They ran to pick up the fire bombs thrown at them and hurl them back at the police. It was very, very cold. The men in the plant were using fire hoses against the police, and when the water ran down, it would quickly ice over.

I saw one of our Socialist Party members, Fred Stevens, jump over a gutter where there was icy water flowing down. A little stream of blood spurted down his leg into the water. I couldn't get my wits together for a moment.

The men wanted to get me out of the way. You know that old "protect the women and children" business. If there are any women or children around, usher them right out, protect them. I told them, "Get away from me. I've got as many weapons as you have." I was the only woman who stayed.

The battle went on for hours. Throughout the whole time, the sound car was giving instructions and trying to bolster the courage of the men inside the plant as well as the picketers on the outside. Victor Reuther spoke for a while and then other men substituted for him, giving him relief. But there were only the voices of men. At one point, Victor came over and told us that the batteries in the sound car were running down.

Lights went on in my head. I thought, "I've never used a loudspeaker to address

a large crowd of people, but I've got to tell them that there are women down here." So I asked him, "Victor, can I take the loudspeaker?" He said, "We've got nothing to lose."

The first thing I did was attack the police. I called to them, "Cowards! Cowards! Shooting into the bellies of unarmed men and firing at the mothers of children." Then everything became quiet. There was silence on both sides of the line. I thought, "The women can break this up." So I appealed to the women in the crowd, "Break through those police lines and come down here and stand beside your husbands and your brothers and your uncles and your sweethearts."

In the dusk, I could barely see one woman struggling to come forward. A cop had grabbed her by the back of her coat. She just pulled out of that coat and started walking down to the battle zone. As soon as that happened there were other women and men who followed. The police wouldn't shoot people in the back as they were coming down, so that was the end of the battle. When those spectators came into the center of the battle and the police retreated, there was a big roar of victory. That battle became known as the Battle of Bulls Run because we made the cops run. . . .

Following the strike, the auto worker became a different human being. The women that had participated actively became a different type of woman, a different type from any we had ever known anywhere in the labor movement and certainly not in the city of Flint. They carried themselves with a different walk, their heads were high, and they had confidence in themselves. They were not only mentally different, but physically different. If you saw one of those women in the beginning and then saw her just a short period after going through this experience, learning and feeling that she had things she could fit together in her life, it would be an entirely different woman.

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