

South End Press Classics

Manning Marable, Series Editor

South End Press is pleased to announce the inauguration of the South End Press Classics Series, edited by Manning Marable, Professor of History and Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies at Columbia University. The aim of this series is to make available in new editions works that have been instrumental in shaping political consciousness and activism in the United States and which retain contemporary relevance to the project of radical social, cultural, and political change.

Volume 1

Strike! Revised and Updated Edition
Jeremy Brecher

Forthcoming Titles in the South End Press Classics Series

Detroit: I Do Mind Dying, revised edition
Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin

How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America, revised edition
Manning Marable

Strike!

Revised and Updated Edition

Jeremy Brecher



**South End Press
Cambridge, MA**

differentials had been maintained. As Irving Bernstein noted, "There was little of tangible benefit to either the textile workers or U.T.W. ... In fact, the only recommendation that was immediate and tangible in effect was imposed on the union: to terminate the strike."⁸⁰ Nonetheless, the UTW strike committee hailed the board's recommendation as "an overwhelming victory" and on September 22 ordered the strikers back to work.⁸¹ Thus ended what labor economist Robert Brooks the next year described as "unquestionably the greatest single industrial conflict in the history of American organized labor."⁸²

President Roosevelt urged textile firms to rehire strikers without discrimination, but by October 23, the UTW reported, 339 mills had refused to do so, leaving thousands of workers unemployed. Martha Gellhorn, a novelist then working as a government investigator, wrote from North Carolina that textile workers "live in terror of being penalized for joining unions; and the employers live in a state of mingled rage and fear."⁸³

The textile workers felt an extreme disillusionment with both the government and the union. As Brooks concluded:

The thousands of militiamen, sheriffs, and armed strikebreakers which were thrown into strike territories and the numerous deaths at the hands of drunken deputies and nervous guardsmen linked the forces of law and order so clearly with the interests of the textile employers that northern newspaper reporters repeatedly referred to the situation as "the employers' offensive." The significance of this was not lost upon the strikers. In the space of a few weeks thousands of workers received a practical education in the philosophy of class relations which was clearly reflected in conversation, tactics, and general attitude.⁸⁴

Mill workers were likewise extremely bitter at the union and its officials for claiming a victory, calling off the strike, and putting their faith in government boards, when the employers had conceded nothing. Herbert Lahne, author of a study on the United Textile Workers Union, reported he found that "in many interviews ... with Southern cotton mill workers in 1938 this resentment was clearly expressed."⁸⁵

The UTW strike netted zero for the workers. - the employers did not concede a thing - The gov for all its intervention backed the mill owners

Sitdown

The bloody conflicts of 1934 certified the failure of the National Recovery Act's Section 7A. By the end of the year, workers who had previously looked to the NRA for a solution to their problems were referring to it as the National Run-Around. Local radicals—Communists in San Francisco, Musteites in Toledo, Trotskyists in Minneapolis—played important parts in the strikes of 1934. Significantly, in each case it was not their particular party line and party organization that was responsible for this, but the fact that their own militance coincided with that of the workers.

Observing the strikes of 1934, United Mine Workers head John L. Lewis, according to his biographer Saul Alinsky, "read the revolutionary handwriting on the walls of American industry"⁸⁶ and moved to establish the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) within the AFL to utilize the recently displayed working-class militance to establish unionism in the basic mass-production industries. New Dealers in Congress began pushing for a National Labor Relations Act to enforce the system of orderly collective bargaining in industry that the NRA had promised but had manifestly failed to establish. Meanwhile, the workers themselves, largely fed up with both the unions and the NRA, began to develop their own methods of struggle. The key weapon they created was the sitdown. The crucible in which it was forged was Akron, Ohio.

By the time of the Depression, Akron was the rubber center of America, home of the enormous Goodyear, Firestone, and Goodrich plants and more than twenty factories of lesser companies. At peak production, the Akron rubber industry employed nearly 40,000 workers, but by 1933 one-third to one-half of Akron's workers were unemployed, Firestone and half a dozen smaller rubber companies were closed down, and Goodyear was on a two-day week.⁸⁷

With the passage of the NRA in 1933, Akron's rubber workers poured into unions set up by local trade unionists. As journalist and novelist Ruth McKenney wrote in her over-dramatized but perceptive account of the Akron labor movement, *Industrial Valley*, "the first

my - Politics - The South - Dems were dependent - it would always be in the hands of the town

weeks of the new rubber union were something like a cross between a big picnic and a religious revival."⁸⁸ Forty to fifty thousand rubber workers, most of them in Akron, took out union cards in 1933. They expected the union, backed by the government, to save them:

Always the cry was "join up." But nobody said what came after you joined. The rubber workers believed blindly, passionately, fiercely, that the union would cure all their troubles, end the speed-up, make them rich with wages. They had no clear idea, and nobody told them, just how the union would accomplish these aims. Vaguely, they thought President Roosevelt might just order the rubber bosses to raise wages and quit the speed-up.⁸⁹

The next two years would see their disillusionment with that belief and their discovery of how to act on their own.

The AFL assigned an organizer, Coleman Claherty, to Akron. His first step was to try to separate the rubber workers, who had established locals representing all the workers in each plant, into various crafts. The workers joined the unions to which they were assigned but proceeded to ignore the divisions, coming to the meetings of their plant local anyway. Claherty's slogan was "Rome wasn't built in a day," and he did everything possible to "pack ice on the hot-heads" who were pushing in every union meeting for action. McKenney describes a Goodyear local meeting that Claherty addressed on the NRA:

"We want action," a big tirebuilder bawled, bored with the NRA.

"Sure you do," Claherty shot back, "and you're going to get it."

Claherty never liked the curious atmosphere of Akron union meetings. He tried to prevent the back talk. He deplored the universal notion of rubberworkers that a man had a right to get up and have his say, whenever he felt like it, at his own union meeting.

But the rubberworkers had carried over the technique of Baptist prayer sessions, where anybody was free to "testify" as the spirit moved him, to their union meetings. Tirebuilders rose in the Federal locals to "testify" about "why ain't this union gittin' anywheres," whenever the thought struck them.

"We shall demand that the rubber industry recognize our unions," Claherty thundered this Sunday.

"How you goin' to git 'em to dew that?" somebody yelled....

Explain
AFL craft model.
Depression Decade

"He asks a question like that," Claherty shot back, "when everybody in this room knows that President Roosevelt is for the unions."

It was a good answer. A lot of the men clapped and the mill-room man in the back of the hall seemed satisfied....

"It won't be long now," some of the men said "Roosevelt will fix those bastards pushing up our rate schedules."

"Every labor gain," he [Claherty] told his assistant ... "is a gradual one. You can't expect to get everything the first five years. The fellows expect the moon on a platter all in a month."⁹⁰

On June 19, 1934, tire builders at the General Tire and Rubber Company walked out when a foreman announced some wage rate changes—the first step in introducing the "Bedaux plan" to speed up production. The tire builders began cussing out the foreman. One of them yelled, "I ain't going to stand for it. Let's quit, boys," and the entire shift walked out. Outside the plant the men decided to have a meeting the next day and take a strike vote. At the meeting, the local union's executive committee recommended that the workers accept a wage increase the company had offered in response to the strike and go back to work. The committee was booed off the platform and physically attacked by the strikers. A local officer was hissed off the platform for saying the strike wasn't legal because the United Rubber Council executive board had to give permission to strike. "Who said they had to OK what we do? We ain't never heard anything about that before," a man yelled from the floor. The rubber workers voted to strike and established their own strike organization, selecting their own picket captains and organizing food committees. After a month, the company granted a number of the strikers' demands and they went back to work.⁹¹

By the end of 1934, the labor relations board of the NRA denounced the companies for refusing to bargain collectively and ordered representation elections in the Goodyear and Firestone plants. The government had ballots printed and polling places set up. The rubber workers fully expected the government to force the companies to recognize them. Then, two days before the election, the companies asked for and obtained an injunction against the election from a federal court, thus tying up the issue in the courts indefinitely. The rub-

ber workers were shocked and bitterly disappointed; their belief that the government would solve their problems was killed at a blow. As McKenney put it, "Rubberworkers spent three passionate weeks hoping that the government would cure the speed-up and low wages in Akron—and then the NRA and its NLRB went blooey as far as the man on the tire machine was concerned."⁹²

The final disillusionment with the union came in spring 1935. Workers were flooding out of the unions, and Claherty recognized that he had to give at least the appearance of doing something. On March 27, he announced a strike vote. By April 8, AFL president William Green was announcing to the press, "There is no hope of averting the strike."⁹³ The rubber workers were set to strike on April 15, and began feverish preparations. Then Claherty and the local presidents went to Washington and, at the last minute, signed a government-mediated agreement not to strike and to await court action on a representative election. As Goodyear announced, the agreement made "no change in employee relations since the provisions are in complete accord with the policies under which Goodyear has always operated."⁹⁴

The rubber workers considered the agreement a complete sell-out. They stood on street corners tearing up their union cards, thinking it futile even to vote against the settlement. As one put it, "You can't do nothin' about that. They run the union, and they run it for the bosses, not for us. I'm through. I'd see myself in hell before I ever belong to another dirty stinking union."⁹⁵ Union membership in Summit County—mostly rubber workers—dropped from 40,000 to 5,000, with most of those remaining only paper members.

At the same time as this collapse of confidence in trade unionism and the government, work conditions remained intolerable. As a rubber worker in Akron wrote to the local paper:

* Only our machines are alive. We must treat them with respect on they turn against us. Last week one of the boys who had been back only a month grew a little careless, or maybe the long layoff had made him dull or maybe he had grown so accustomed to the change from sleeping at night to working at night—and his mill swallowed his hand and part of his arm....

The mills stopped only long enough for us to pull him out, and then they resumed their steady turn. Two of the boys carried him to the hospital and the foreman called for a Squad man to take his place.

Unbelievably it is 3 am, and we hastily gulp tasteless sandwiches, working and eating at once. The soapstone which is flying around everywhere clogs our throats and tongues and nostrils so that they seem dry. If we drink much water, we become fat and bloated, so we chew great handfuls of licorice-flavored tobacco.

Someone has grown drowsy. "Ha, ha," we laugh. "Old Bill has forgotten to weigh his batch. That's a good one, ha, ha." Bill doesn't laugh. He knows that to do this once more will cost him his job. The foreman has warned him....

We used to work eight hours and feel fine when the quitting whistle blew. Now we work six hours and are dead-tired.

We can't be cheerful, remembering the hard days of the past three years, and knowing that the work may not last much longer. We've nothing to look forward to. We're factory hands.⁹⁶

Disillusioned with trade unionism and tormented by the speed-up, workers in Akron developed a new tactic—the sitdown—which they themselves could directly control without need for any outside leaders. When writer Louis Adamic visited Akron to find out how the sit-downs had begun, he was told that the first had occurred not in a rubber factory but at a baseball game. Players from two factories refused to play a scheduled game because the umpire, whom they disliked, was not a union man. They simply sat down on the diamond, while the crowd for a lark cheered the NRA and yelled for a union umpire, until the non-union umpire was replaced.⁹⁷

Not long after, a dispute developed between a dozen workers and a supervisor in a rubber factory in Akron. The workers were on the verge of giving in when the supervisor insulted them and one of them said, "Aw, to hell with 'im, let's sit down." The dozen workers turned off their machines and sat down. Within a few minutes the carefully organized flow of production through the plant began to jam up as department after department ground to a halt. Thousands of workers sat down, some because they wanted to, more because everything was stopping anyway. What had happened, workers

wanted to know? "There was a sitdown at such-and-such a department. A sitdown? Yeah, a sitdown; don't you know what a sitdown is, you dope? Like what happened at the ball game the other Sunday."⁹⁸

Adamic describes the response:

Sitting by their machines, cauldrons, boilers, and work benches, they talked. Some realized *for the first time* how important they were in the process of rubber production. Twelve men had practically stopped the works! Almost any dozen or score of them could do it! In some departments six could do it! The active rank-and-filers, scattered through the various sections of the plant, took the initiative in saying, "We've got to stick with 'em!" And they stuck with them, union and non-union men alike. Most of them were non-union. Some probably were vaguely afraid not to stick. Some were bewildered. Others amused. There was much laughter through the works. Oh boy, oh boy! Just like at the ball game, no kiddin'. There the crowd had stuck with the players and they got an umpire who was a member of a labor union. Here everybody stuck with the twelve guys who first sat down, and the factory management was beside itself. Superintendents, foremen, and straw bosses were dashing about.... This sudden suspension of production was costing the company many hundreds of dollars every minute.... In less than an hour the dispute was settled—full victory for the men!⁹⁹

Between 1933 and 1936 this tactic gradually became a tradition in Akron, with scores of sitdowns—the majority probably not instigated even by rank-and-file union organizers, and almost invariably backed by the workers in other departments. It became an accepted principle that when one group of workers stopped work, everyone else along the line sat down, too.

To explain this, Adamic listed the advantages of the sitdown strike "from the point of view not so much of the rank-and-file organizer or radical agitator as of the average workingman in a mass-production industry like rubber." To begin with, the sitdown is the opposite of sabotage, to which many workers were 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 in departments where benzene is used. There is no drinking. This discipline ... is instinctive.¹⁰⁰

Sitdowns were effective, short, and free of violence.

There are no strikebreakers 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.¹⁰¹

The initiative, conduct, and control of the sitdown came directly from the workers involved.

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-ins is that there are no leaders or officials to distrust. There can be no sell-out. Such standard procedure as strike sanction is hopelessly obsolete when workers drop their tools, stop their machines, and sit down beside them.

Finally, the sitdown countered the boredom, degradation, and isolation of the factory.

Work in most of the departments of a rubber factory or any other kind of mass-production factory is drudgery of the worst sort—me-

chanical 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 situation is dramatic, thrilling.

The average worker in a mass-production plant is full of grievances and complaints, some of them hardly realized, and any vent of them is welcomed.

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 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?"¹⁰²

Late in 1935, Goodyear announced that it was shifting from the six-hour to the eight-hour day, admitting that 1,200 workers would be laid off and that other companies would follow suit. The announcement created shock in Akron. Unemployment was still high and six hours under speed-up conditions were already so exhausting that rubber workers complained, "When I get home I'm so tired I can't even sleep with my wife."¹⁰³ As the companies began "adjusting" piece rates in preparation for introducing the eight-hour day, a wave of spontaneous work stoppages by non-union employees forced a slowing of production.

On January 29, 1936, the truck tire builders at Firestone sat down against a reduction in rates and the firing of a union committee member. The men had secretly planned the strike for 2 a.m. When the hour struck,

the tirebuilder at the end of the line walked three steps to the master safety switch and, drawing a deep breath, he pulled up the heavy wooden handle. With this signal, in perfect synchronization, with

the rhythm they had learned in a great mass-production industry, the tirebuilders stepped back from their machines.

Instantly, the noise stopped. The whole room lay in perfect silence. The tirebuilders stood in long lines, touching each other, perfectly motionless, deafened by the silence. A moment ago there had been the weaving hands, the revolving wheels, the clanking belt, the moving hooks, the flashing tire tools. Now there was absolute stillness, no motion anywhere, no sound....

"We done it! We stopped the belt! By God, we done it!" And men began to cheer hysterically, to shout and howl in the fresh silence. Men wrapped long sinewy arms around their neighbors' shoulders, screaming, "We done it! We done it!"¹⁰⁴

The workers in the truck tire department sent one committee around the plant to call out other departments, another to talk with the boss, and a third to police the shop. Within a day, the entire Plant No. 1 was struck; fifty-three hours later the workers at Plant No. 2 announced they had voted to sit down in sympathy. Management capitulated completely.

Two days later, pitmen at Goodyear sat down over a pay cut. They were persuaded to return to work by the company union; sat down again, were again cajoled back to work; sat down a third time, and then returned to work under threat of immediate replacement. A few days later, the tire department at Goodrich sat down over a rate reduction. The strike spread through the rest of the plant, stopping it completely within six hours, and management rapidly capitulated to the sitdowners. The sitdown had shaken each of the big three rubber companies within a ten-day period.

The crisis finally came February 14. A few days before, Goodyear had laid off 700 tire builders. The workers assumed that this was the signal for introducing the eight-hour day. At 3:10 a.m., 137 tire builders in Department 251-A of Goodyear's Plant No. 2—few if any of them members of the union—shut off the power and sat down. The great Goodyear strike was on.

Meanwhile, the rubber workers union had been regaining support. It had refused to accept Claherty as president, installed former rubber workers in office, and allied itself with the new CIO. With each sit-down, the union signed up the participants, and now workers

flooded back into the union halls. The initiative for the sitdowns, however, did not come from the union; indeed, as Irving Bernstein has noted, "The URW ... disliked the sitdown."¹⁰⁵ URW officials persuaded the Goodyear sitdowners to leave and marched them out of the plant. Goodyear offered to take the laid-off men back, but the rubber workers of the entire city were already up in arms, determined to make a stand against the eight-hour day. Fifteen hundred Goodyear workers met and voted unanimously to strike, but four days later the president of the local was still maintaining the strike was not a URW affair.

The workers made it their affair. They began mass picketing at each of the forty-five gates around Goodyear's eleven-mile perimeter, putting up 300 tar-paper shanties to keep warm. They elected picket captains who met regularly, coordinated strike action, and set the strike's demands. Inside Plant No. 1, hundreds of men and women staged a sitdown—until a union delegate marched them out. At the union hall, "committees sprang up almost by themselves" to take care of problems as they arose. A soup kitchen developed out of the sandwich-making and coffee-making crew, staffed by volunteers from the cooks' and waitresses' union. On the sixth day of the strike, the CIO sent in half a dozen of its top leaders, and the URW executive board finally sanctioned the strike.

Goodyear now tried to break the strike by force. The company secured an injunction against mass picketing, which the workers simply ignored. The sheriff put together a force of 150 deputies to open the plants, but 10,000 workers of all trades from all over the city gathered with lead pipes and baseball bats; a charge on the picket line was called off at the last possible second. Next, a Law and Order League, which claimed 5,200 vigilantes, was organized by a former Akron mayor with money from Goodyear. Word spread that an attack was planned for March 18. The union broadcast on the radio throughout that night, while workers gathered in homes across the city, ready to rush anywhere an attack was made. The Summit County Central Labor Council declared it would call a general strike in the event of a violent attack on the picket lines. In the face of such preparations, the vigilante movement was paralyzed.

President Roosevelt's ace labor mediator, Ed McGrady, proposed that the workers return to work and submit the issues to arbitration. To this and other proposed settlements, the workers at their mass meetings chanted, "No, no, a thousand times no. I'd rather die than say yes."¹⁰⁶

After more than a month, Goodyear capitulated on most of the demands, including layoffs by seniority, six-hour shifts in the tire division, and meetings of company officials and foremen with union representatives, although the company did not agree to a signed contract. The rubber workers returned to work largely victorious and proceeded to strengthen their position with the sitdown. In the three months after the strike, nineteen recorded sitdowns at Goodyear alone took place, with many "quickies" unrecorded.

Louis Adamic described the situation he found in Akron late in 1936:

A week seldom passed without one or more sitdowns.... A typical one took place on November 17, when I was in Akron, in the huge Goodyear No. 1 plant. After an inconclusive argument with the management over an adjustment in wage rates, ninety-eight workers in one of the departments sat down, stopping the work of seven thousand men for a day and a half, at the end of which period the company promised speedy action on the adjustment.

Officials of rubber companies, with whom I talked, were frantic in their attempts to stop the sitdowns. They blamed them on "troublemakers" and the union movement in general. They tried to terrorize union sympathizers. The Goodyear management, for instance, assigned two non-union inspectors to a department with instructions to disqualify tires produced by known union men. After pelting them with milk bottles for a while, the men sat down and refused to work till the inspectors were removed. The company rushed in forty factory guards with clubs, but a 65-year-old union gum-miner met the army at the entrance and told them to "beat it." They went—and the non-union inspectors were replaced.

Akron sitdowns were provoked by various other causes. In the early autumn of 1936, S.H. Dalrymple, president of the U.R.W.A., was beaten by thugs employed by a rubber factory, whereupon the factory workers sat down in protest, forcing the company to close for a day. When work was resumed the next night, a K.K.K. fiery cross blazed up within view of the plant. This caused the workers

to sit down again—and to dispatch a squad of “huskies” to extinguish the cross.¹⁰⁷

Such use of the sitdown gave rubber workers virtually a dual power over the production process in Akron.

Machine Operator No. 8004 worked in the camshaft department of the Chevrolet factory in Flint, Michigan. The men he worked with produced 118 shafts per shift, naturally producing a few more in the first half, when they were fresh, than in the second. One day in 1935, the management suddenly announced that they would have to increase production in the second half to the level of the first, turning out 124 instead of 118 each shift. The workers accepted the increase, but then organized informally to prevent any further speed-up. As one of them put it, “Any man who runs over 124 every night is only cutting his own throat.”¹⁰⁸ They also carefully planned not to produce more in the first half, lest management again use the differential against them. If workers ran past sixty-two shafts, they would hide the extras in the racks under the machines, covering them with rough stock. The pick-up man checked every hour to see how many shafts were completed and passed the information along, allowing the workers to keep a steady and equalized pace. If a worker turned out seventy shafts, he picked up only sixty-two of them.

Machine Operator No. 8004 fought the movement, telling his fellow workers to “knock the production out and forget about trying to set an amount for each man to run.”¹⁰⁹ He was almost beaten up for his pains. This case of workers controlling the speed of production is documented—unlike thousands of other such actions that have remained unrecorded—because Machine Operator 8004 was a labor spy whose periodic reports were later published by the Senate Civil Liberties Investigating Committee, popularly known as the La Follette Committee.

As a study of the auto industry in 1934 by the NRA Division of Research and Planning revealed prophetically, the grievance “mentioned most frequently ... and uppermost in the minds of those who testified is the stretch-out.” Everywhere workers indicated that they

were being forced to work harder and harder, to put out more and more products in the same amount of time and with less workers doing the job.... If there is any one cause for conflagration in the Automobile Industry, it is this one.”¹¹⁰

According to *Sitdown*, Sidney Fine’s scholarly study of the great General Motors sitdown strike of 1936-1937, the speed-up was resented not only because of the absolute rate of production, but also because the mass-production worker “was not free, as perhaps he had been on some previous job, to set the pace of his work and to determine the manner in which it was to be performed.”¹¹¹ A Buick worker complained: “You have to run to the toilet and run back If there wasn’t anybody there to relieve you, you had to run away and tie the line up, and if you tied the line up you got hell for it.”¹¹²

“You should see him come home at night, him and the rest of the men in the busses,” the wife of a General Motors worker complained, “so tired like they was dead, and irritable. My John’s not like that. He’s a good, kind man. But the children don’t dare go near him, he’s so nervous and his temper’s bad. And then at night in bed he shakes, his whole body, he shakes.”

“Yes,” replied another, “they’re not men any more if you know what I mean. They’re not men. My husband is only 30, but to look at him you’d think he was 50 and all played out.”¹¹³

“Where you used to be a man ... now you are less than their cheapest tool,” one worker complained, and another summed up, “I just don’t like to be drove.”¹¹⁴

The development of unionism in the auto industry followed closely that in rubber. Labor writer Herbert Harris estimated that 210,000 auto workers joined the AFL auto locals with the coming of the NRA.¹¹⁵ Since the employers refused to give any significant concessions, important auto locals voted to strike; a strike throughout the industry seemed inevitable. Workers flooded into the unions to take part in the strike—20,000 in Flint alone.¹¹⁶ The AFL leadership, however, wanted no part in a strike and managed to stall it.

Finally, William Collins, the leading AFL official in the auto industry, asked President Roosevelt to intervene. Roosevelt immediately demanded that the strike be postponed. Collins told union leaders,

"You have a wonderful man down there in Washington and he is trying hard to raise wages and working conditions."¹¹⁷ According to Henry Kraus, editor of the union paper in Flint, "The attitudes of the auto workers toward the President those days bordered on the mystical."¹¹⁸ Local representatives agreed to cancel the strike. Roosevelt then announced a settlement conceding nothing to the workers but an Automobile Labor Board to hear discrimination cases. The settlement legitimized company unions, and virtually exempted the auto industry from Section 7A.¹¹⁹

"We all feel tremendously happy over the outcome in Washington," a General Motors vice-president announced.¹²⁰ In the words of labor historian Sidney Fine, "The President made the victory of the automobile manufacturers complete on the issue of representation and collective bargaining."¹²¹ Leonard Woodcock (later president of the United Auto Workers) recalls that when the workers in Flint heard of the settlement, they felt "a deep sense of betrayal" and began to tear up union cards. By October 1934, dues-paying membership in Flint had plummeted to 528. In several subsequent local auto strikes, the AFL played a strikebreaking role, even marching its members with a police escort into a motor products plant struck by another union.

Those few workers, mostly young and militant, who remained in the auto union bitterly fought AFL control. They eventually took control of the union and aligned it with the newly emerging Committee for Industrial Organization, an alliance of unions formed in 1935 to organize the unorganized basic industries. The AFL, dominated by craft unionists, suspended the unions affiliated with the CIO, including the UAW, in 1936. The CIO began to function as an independent labor center. Two years later it took the name Congress of Industrial Organizations.

Like the rubber workers, the auto workers turned to the sitdown and other forms of job action against the speed-up. "Quickies" occurred sporadically, especially in auto body plants in Cleveland and Detroit, from 1933 through 1935. By late 1936, the highly visible sitdowns in Akron were being imitated by auto workers throughout the industry, especially since it was the "grooving-in" period during which new

models were introduced. Management as usual tried to increase speed and cut piece rates on new jobs, raising resentment to a peak. In Flint, the heart of the General Motors empire, seven work stoppages took place in the Fisher Body No. 1 plant in one week. One day the trim shop knocked off an hour early as a protest. Workers in another shop struck for an extra worker and got the line slowed from fifty to forty-five units. Another action won the restoration of a 20 percent wage cut. Henry Kraus described these workplace actions as "largely a spontaneous movement onto which the union had not yet securely attached itself."¹²² Bud Simons, a union leader in the Fisher plant, pleaded with Bob Travis, the UAW organizer in Flint, "Honest to God, Bob, you've got to let me pull a strike before one pops somewhere that we won't be able to control!"¹²³

The union tried to win the confidence of the workers by supporting the sitdowns and making itself the agency through which they could be spread. On November 12, 1936, for example, management reduced by one the number of "bow-men" who welded the angle irons across car roofs. The other bow-men were two brothers named Perkins and an Italian named Joe Urban; none of them was in the union, but they had been reading about a sitdown at Bendix. Adopting the idea, they simply stopped working. The foreman and superintendent rushed over and tried to talk them into returning to work, but the men just sat there arguing until twenty unfinished jobs had passed on the production line. The whole department followed the argument with intense excitement. The bow-men eventually agreed to go back to work until they could talk with the day shift about their grievance, but everyone left that night talking about the sitdown. The next day, when the Perkins brothers came to work, they were sent to the employment office and told that they were fired. They showed their firing slips to Bud Simons and he and the other union committee members ran through the "body-in-white" department where the main welding and soldering work was done, crying, "The Perkins boys were fired! Nobody starts working!" Henry Kraus detailed the microcosmic rebellion:

The whistle blew. Every man in the department stood at his station, a deep, significant tenseness in him. The foreman pushed the button

and the skeleton bodies, already partly assembled when they got to this point, began to rumble forward. But no one lifted a hand. All eyes were turned to Simons who stood out in the aisle by himself.

The bosses ran about like mad.

"Whatsamatter? Whatsamatter? Get to work!" they shouted.

But the men acted as though they never heard them. One or two of them couldn't stand the tension. Habit was deep in them and it was like physical agony for them to see the bodies pass untouched. They grabbed their tools and chased after them. "Rat! Rat!" the men growled without moving and the others came to their senses.

The superintendent stopped by the "bow-men."

"You're to blame for this!" he snarled.

"So what if we are?" little Joe Urban, the Italian cried, overflowing with pride. "You ain't running your line, are you?"

That was altogether too much. The superintendent grabbed Joe and started for the office with him. The two went down along the entire line, while the men stood rigid as though awaiting the word of command. It was like that because they were organized but their organization only went that far and no further. What now?

Simons, a torch-solderer, was almost at the end of the line. He too was momentarily held in vise by the superintendent's overt act of authority. The latter had dragged Joe Urban past him when he finally found presence of mind to call out:

"Hey, Teefee, where you going?"

It was spoken in just an ordinary conversational tone and the other was taken so aback he answered the really impertinent question.

"I'm taking him to the office to have a little talk with him." Then suddenly he realized and got mad. "Say, I think I'll take you along too!"

That was his mistake.

"No you won't!" Simons said calmly.

"Oh yes I will!" and he took hold of his shirt.

Simons yanked himself loose.

And suddenly at this simple act of insurgence Teefee realized his danger. He seemed to become acutely conscious of the long line of silent men and felt the threat of their potential strength. They had been transformed into something he had never known before and over which he no longer had any command. He let loose of Simons and started off again with Joe Urban, hastening his pace. Simons yelled: "Come on, fellows, don't let them fire little Joe!"

About a dozen boys shot out of line and started after Teefee. The superintendent dropped Joe like a hot poker and deer-footed it for the door. The men returned to their places and all stood waiting. Now what? The next move was the company's. The moment tingled with expectancy.

Teefee returned shortly, accompanied by Bill Lynch, the assistant plant manager. Lynch was a friendly sort of person and was liked by the men. He went straight to Simons.

"I hear we've got trouble here," he said in a chatty way. "What are we going to do about it?"

"I think we'll get a committee together and go in and see Parker," Simons replied.

Lynch agreed. So Simons began picking the solid men out as had been prearranged. The foreman tried to smuggle in a couple of company-minded individuals, so Simons chose a group of no less than eighteen to make sure that the scrappers would outnumber the others. Walt Moore went with him, but Joe Devitt remained behind to see that the bosses didn't try any monkeyshines. The others headed for the office where Evan Parker, the plant manager, greeted them as smooth as silk.

"You can smoke if you want to, boys," he said as he bid them to take the available chairs. "Well, what seems to be the trouble here? We ought to be able to settle this thing."

"Mr. Parker, it's the speed-up the boys are complaining about," Simons said, taking the lead. "It's absolutely beyond human endurance. And now we've organized ourselves into a union. It's the union you're talking to right now, Mr. Parker."

"Why that's perfectly all right, boys," Parker said affably. "Whatever a man does outside the plant is his own business."

The men were almost bowled over by this manner. They had never known Parker as anything but a tough cold tomato with an army sergeant's style. He was clearly trying to play to the weaker boys on the committee and began asking them leading questions. Simons or Walt Moore would try to break in and answer for them.

"Now I didn't ask you," Parker would say, "you can talk when it's your turn!" In this way he sought to split the committee up into so many individuals. Simons realized he had to put an end to that quickly.

"We might as well quit talking right now, Mr. Parker," he said, putting on a tough act. "Those men have got to go back and that's all there is to it!"

"That's what you say," Parker snapped back.

"No, that's what the men say. You can go out and see for yourself. Nobody is going to work until that happens."

Parker knew that was true. Joe Devitt and several other good men who had been left behind were seeing to that. The plant manager seemed to soften again. All right, he said, he'd agree to take the two men back if he found their attitude was okay.

"Who's to judge that?" Simons asked.

"I will, of course!"

"Uh-uh!" Simons smiled and shook his head.

The thing bogged down again. Finally Parker said the Perkins brothers could return unconditionally on Monday. This was Friday night and they'd already gone home so there was no point holding up thousands of men until they could be found and brought back. To make this arrangement final he agreed that the workers in the department would get paid for the time lost in the stoppage. But Simons held fast to the original demand. Who knew what might happen till Monday? The Perkins fellows would have to be back on the line that night or the entire incident might turn out a flop.

"They go back tonight," he insisted.

Parker was fit to be tied. What was this? Never before in his life had he seen anything like it!

"Those boys have left!" he shouted. "It might take hours to get them back. Are you going to keep the lines tied up all that time?"

"We'll see what the men say," Simons replied, realizing that a little rank and file backing would not be out of the way. The committee rose and started back for the shop.

As they entered a zealous foreman preceded them, hollering: "Everybody back to work!" The men dashed for their places.

Simons jumped onto a bench.

"Wait a minute!" he shouted. The men crowded around him. He waited till they were all there and then told them in full detail of the discussion in the office. Courage visibly mounted into the men's faces as they heard of the unwavering manner in which their committee had acted in the dread presence itself. "What are we going to do, fellows," Simons asked, "take the company's word and go back to work or wait till the Perkins boys are right here at their jobs?"

"Bring them back first!" Walt Moore and Joe Devitt began yelling and the whole crowd took up the cry.

Simons seized the psychological moment to make it official.

"As many's in favor of bringing the Perkins boys back before we go to work, say Aye!" There was a roar in answer. "Opposed, Nay!" Only a few timid voices sounded—those of the company men and the foremen who had been circulating among the workers trying to influence them to go back to work. Simons turned to them.

"There you are," he said.

One of the foremen had taken out pencil and paper and after the vote he went around recording names. "You want to go to work?" he asked each of the men. Finally he came to one chap who stuck his chin out and said loudly, "Emphatically not!" which made the rest of the boys laugh and settled the issue.

Mr. Parker got the news and decided to terminate the matter as swiftly as possible. He contacted the police and asked them to bring the Perkins boys in. One was at home but the other had gone out with his girl. The police short-waved his license number to all scout cars. The local radio station cut into its program several times to announce that the brothers were wanted back at the plant. Such fame would probably never again come to these humble workers. By chance the second boy caught the announcement over the radio in his car and came to the plant all bewildered. When told what had happened the unappreciative chap refused to go to work until he had driven his girl home and changed his clothes! And a thousand men waited another half hour while the meticulous fellow was getting out of his Sunday duds.

When the two brothers came back into the shop at last, accompanied by the committee, the workers let out a deafening cheer that could be heard in the most distant reaches of the quarter-mile-long plant. There had never been anything quite like this happen in Flint before. The workers didn't have to be told to know the immense significance of their victory. Simons called the Perkins boys up on the impromptu platform. They were too shy to even stammer their thanks.

"You glad to get back?" Simons coached them.

"You bet!"

"Who did it for you?"

"You boys did."

Simons then gave a little talk though carefully refraining from mentioning the union.

"Fellows," he said amid a sudden silence, "you've seen what you can get by sticking together. All I want you to do is remember that."¹²⁴

Largely in response to this victory, United Auto Workers' membership in Flint increased from 150 to 1,500 within two weeks. The union's objective was to win recognition as the collective bargaining representative for the auto workers. Discontent was seething in the auto plants and breaking out in strikes throughout the country. Since the auto companies were not willing to recognize the union voluntarily, the obvious approach for the union was to "attach itself" to this strike movement, lead it on a company-wide basis, and use it to negotiate for recognition. As one UAW National Council member had argued earlier, "the only means we have now is to strike.... We must prove to the automobile workers we can help them."¹²⁵

Although such "organizational strikes" became the basic tactic of the CIO unions in winning union recognition, the union leadership was ambivalent about an auto strike. According to J. Raymond Walsh, who was later the CIO research and education director, "The CIO high command, preoccupied with the drive in steel, tried in vain to prevent" a strike in the auto industry.¹²⁶ Leadership of the UAW believed a strike was necessary to gain union recognition, but wanted to postpone it until they were better organized—membership from April to December 1936 averaged only 27,000 for the entire industry—and resisted attempts to spread various strikes that broke out in November and December. This attitude was based on the fact that General Motors would be little hurt by strikes in peripheral plants, but if the Fisher Body plants in Cleveland and Flint could be closed, perhaps three-quarters of GM's production could be crippled.

Local leaders, in contrast, often reflected the turbulence of the workers in the shops. Adolph Germer, CIO representative for the auto industry, complained: "There is ... a strong undercurrent of revolt against the authority of the laws and rules of the organization.... It is not that the boys are defiant of the organization; I attribute it rather to their youth and dynamic natures. They want things done right now, and they are too impatient to wait for the orderly procedure involved in collective bargaining."¹²⁷

The union finally requested a collective bargaining conference with General Motors, the key company in the industry. It also announced the goals with which it hoped to gain leadership of the workers: an annual wage adequate to provide "health, decency, and comfort," elimination of speed-up, spreading work through shorter hours, seniority, an eight-hour day, overtime pay, safety measures, and "true collective bargaining."¹²⁸ It expected events to move toward a head sometime in January. Events, however, did not wait. Workers throughout the industry began striking on their own. "It seems to be a custom for anybody or any group to call a strike at will,"¹²⁹ Germer complained.

In Atlanta, on November 18, the local called a sitdown over piece rate reductions, to the consternation of UAW national officials. A week later, the UAW local at the Bendix Corporation in South Bend, Indiana, won a contract after a nine-day sitdown, and a sitdown at Midland Steel Frame Company in Detroit won a wage increase, seniority, and time-and-a-half for overtime. In early December, a sitdown at Kelsey-Hayes Wheel Company in Detroit forced union recognition. In Kansas City on December 16, workers sat down over the firing of a union member for jumping over the conveyor to go to the toilet. Detroit experienced a virtual sitdown wave in December 1936, with workers at the Gordon Baking Company, Alcoa, National Automotive Fibers, and Bohn Aluminum and Brass Company all sitting down.

Those union leaders who wanted a strike against General Motors were most worried about whether the Fisher plant in Cleveland would come out. Many union workers there had lost their jobs in the wake of previous strikes, and no more than 10 percent of the workers were in the union. But resentment was running high over grooving-in speed-up, and when management postponed a long-awaited meeting to discuss grievances on December 28, workers in the quarter panel department said, "to hell with this stalling," and pulled the power switch. Workers in the steel stock, metal assembly, and trim departments quit work, and soon 7,000 workers were sitting down.¹³⁰ The local leadership was "taken completely by surprise."¹³¹

movement of production
strikes, sit down

Meanwhile, events in Flint moved toward the decisive conflict. Two days after the Cleveland strike began, fifty workers sat down at the Fisher Body No. 2 plant in Flint to protest the transfer of three inspectors who had been ordered to quit the union and refused. Later that night, workers in Fisher plant No. 1 discovered that the company was loading dies—critical for the making of car bodies—onto railroad cars for shipment to plants elsewhere. (General Motors followed a policy described by its executive vice-president, William Knudson, as “diversification of plants where local union strength is dangerous”; half the machinery in the Toledo Chevrolet plant, for example, had been removed after a strike in 1935, leaving hundreds out of work.)

The workers were furious about the dies, and streamed over to the union hall across from the plant, where a meeting had been announced for lunchtime. Kraus, who was present, reports that “everybody’s mind seemed made up before even a word was spoken.”¹³² When an organizer asked what they wanted to do, they shouted, “Shut her down! Shut the goddamn plant!”¹³³ They raced back into the plant, and a few minutes later one of them opened a third-story window and shouted to Flint UAW organizer Bob Travis, “Hurray, Bob! She’s ours!”¹³⁴

The occupiers rapidly faced the problem of organizing themselves for life inside the plant. Their basic decision-making body was a daily meeting of all the strikers in the plant. “The entire life of the sitdown came into review here and most of its ideas and decisions originated on the spot,” Henry Kraus reported.¹³⁵ The chief administrative body was a committee of seventeen that reported to the strikers; available records indicate that virtually all its decisions were cleared with the general meeting of strikers. The strikers inside the plant, according to Sidney Fine, “displayed a fierce independence in their relationship with the UAW leadership on the outside.” For example, Travis, though personally respected by the strikers, had to ask their permission to send one of his staff into the plant to gather material for the press, and he was only allowed in on the condition that his notes were cleared by the strike executive. A sitdowner told a reporter that he and his companions would not leave the plant even under orders

from the union president or John L. Lewis, “unless we get what we want.”¹³⁶

Social groups of fifteen, usually men who worked together in the shop, set up house and lived together in their own corner of the plant, usually with close camaraderie. Each group had its own steward, and the stewards met together from time to time. The actual work of the strike was done by committees on food, recreation, information, education, postal services, sanitation, grievances, rumor control, coordination with the outside, and the like. Each worker served on at least one committee, and was responsible for six hours of strike duty a day. The sitdowners sent out their own representatives to recruit union members, coordinate relief, and create an “outside defense squad.”

Special attention was paid to the question of defense. A “special patrol” made hourly inspections of the entire plant day and night, looking for signs of company attack. Security groups were assigned to doorways and stairwells. Strikers set up “a regular production line”¹³⁷ to make blackjacks out of rubber hoses, braided leather, and lead, and covered the windows with metal sheets with holes for fire hoses. The men conducted regular drills with the hoses, and collected piles of bolts, nuts, and door hinges for ammunition.

Sanitation likewise was stressed. At 3 p.m., a crane whistle would blow and all the men would line up at one end of the plant. The first wave would pick up refuse, behind it the second would put things in order, and the third would sweep the floor. The commissary floor was cleaned once an hour. The men showered daily. These measures were aimed at preserving both morale and health. Likewise, the workers protected the machinery, in some cases even oiling it, organized fire protection, and inspected for fire hazards. Food was prepared on the outside by hundreds of volunteers and brought to the sitdowners by striking trolley coach employees.

Workers established courts to punish infractions of rules. The most serious “crimes” were failures to perform assigned duties by not showing up, sleeping on the job, or deserting one’s post. Others included failing to bus dirty dishes, littering, not participating in daily clean-up, smoking outside the plant cafeteria, failing to search every-

one entering and leaving buildings, bringing in liquor, and making noise in sleeping areas or the "Quiet Zone," where absolute silence was available twenty-four hours a day. Punishments were designed to fit the crime; for example, men who failed to take a daily shower were "sentenced" to scrub the bathhouse. The ultimate punishment, applied only after repeated infractions, was expulsion from the plant. The courts were generally conducted with a good deal of humor and treated as a source of entertainment. For example, a striker who entered a plant without proper credentials was sentenced to make a speech to the court as his punishment. Reporter Edwin Levinson observed that "there is more substantial humor in a single session of the Fisher strikers' kangaroo courts than in a season of Broadway musical comedies."¹³⁸

This kind of informal gaiety and creativity seemed to burgeon in the strike community. A favorite pastime was for the men to gather in a circle and call out the name of a member, who would then have to sing, whistle, dance, or tell a story. Each plant had its own band, composed of mandolins, guitars, banjos, and harmonicas. The strikers made up verse after verse about the strike to dozens of popular and country tunes. General meetings, by the strikers' decision, opened and closed with singing. The favorite was "Solidarity Forever."

"We are all one happy family now," a sitdowner wrote home. "We all feel fine and have plenty to eat. We have several good banjo players and singers. We sing and cheer the Fisher boys and they return it."¹³⁹ Another wrote, "I am having a great time, something new, something different, lots of grub and music."¹⁴⁰ "The atmosphere of cooperativeness," one psychologist declared, created "a veritable revolution of personality," indicated, for example, by workers more frequently saying "we" than "I."¹⁴¹ As a reporter in Paul Gallico's novelette on the sitdown suggested, "They had made a palace out of what had been their prison."¹⁴²

Outside the factories, a network of committees supported the strike, organizing defense, food, sound cars, picketing, transportation, strike relief, publicity, and entertainment. Women were particularly important in the outside organization. (The union leadership had decided that only men would occupy the plants, to the anger of some women

workers.) Wives' support was essential to strike morale, a fact recognized by the company, which sent representatives calling on them to pressure their husbands back to work. But strikers' wives and women workers poured into the commissary and worked on the various committees. Following a street dance on New Year's Eve, about fifty women decided to form a Women's Auxiliary and set up their own speakers' bureau, day care center for mothers on strike duty, first-aid station, and welfare committee. After battles began with the police, women established a Women's Emergency Brigade of 350 members, organized on military lines, ready to battle police. "We will form a line around the men, and if the police want to fire then they'll just have to fire into us," announced Genora Johnson, one of the founders of the brigade.¹⁴³

"A new type of woman was born in the strike," one of the women said. "Women who only yesterday were horrified at unionism, who felt inferior to the task of organizing, speaking, leading, have, as if overnight, become the spearhead in the battle of unionism."¹⁴⁴ Another recalled, "I found a common understanding and unselfishness I'd never known in my life. I'm living for the first time with a definite goal.... Just being a woman isn't enough anymore. I want to be a human being with the right to think for myself."¹⁴⁵

The union coordinated the strike and put forward union recognition as its central demand. What recognition meant was never clarified, but workers assumed it meant a powerful say for them in industrial decisions and they supported it enthusiastically. The strike spread rapidly from Flint and other initial centers throughout the General Motors system. Auto workers sat down at Guide Lamp in Anderson, Indiana, at Chevrolet and Fisher Body in Janesville, Wisconsin, and Cadillac in Detroit. Regular strikes developed at Norwood and Toledo, Ohio, and Ternstedt, Michigan. General Motors was forced to halt production at Pontiac, Oldsmobile, Delco-Remy, and numerous other plants.¹⁴⁶ GM's projected production for January of 224,000 cars and trucks was cut to 60,000. In the first ten days of February, it produced only 151 cars in the entire country.

General Motors refused to bargain until the plants were evacuated and started a counter-attack on three levels: legal action, organization

Community - success
Police - neutral

218
 Shows how but the
 sides were not used
 for community
 support

Center sponsored by
 employees

of an anti-strike movement, and direct violence against the strikers. The third day of the strike, GM lawyers requested and received an injunction from Judge Edward Black ordering strikers to evacuate the plants, cease picketing, and allow those wanting to work to enter. The sheriff read the injunction to the sitdowners, who jeered him menacingly until he fled. Then a quick-witted union lawyer checked and discovered that Judge Black owned 3,365 shares of General Motors stock valued at \$219,900. This exposed the judge as an interested party and made the injunction worthless, as well as showing the corporation's power over government.

The company's next move was to organize the Flint Alliance "for the Security of Our Jobs, Our Homes, and Our Community." It was headed by George Boysen, a past and future General Motors official, and as a state police investigator reported, it was "a product of General Motors brains." The alliance worked in close cooperation with John Barringer, the Flint city manager.¹⁴⁷ It began anti-strike publicity and started recruiting anti-union workers, businessmen, farmers, housewives, schoolchildren, and anyone else who would sign a card. The Flint Alliance sought a large enrollment, according to Boysen, for "its moral effect toward smothering the strike movement."¹⁴⁸

For almost two weeks, little violence occurred in Flint. But on January 11, supporters carrying dinner to the sitdowners in Fisher No. 2 were stopped at the gate by plant guards, whom the strikers had allowed to hold the ground floor of the factory. The pickets started taking food up a twenty-four-foot ladder, but the guards formed a flying wedge and seized the ladder. Suddenly police closed off all traffic approaches to the plant. An attempt was clearly under way either to starve out the sitdowners or evict them by force, and unless the workers took the gates it would succeed. Twenty sitdowners, armed with blackjacks, marched downstairs and demanded the key to the gate. "My orders are to give it to nobody," the company police officer in charge replied.¹⁴⁹ The sitdowners gave the guards to the count of ten, then charged the gate. The guards fled and locked themselves in the women's bathroom. The sitdowners put their shoulders to the wooden gates and splintered them, to the cheers of the pickets who had quickly gathered outside.

Then suddenly patrol cars drew up and city policemen began pouring out, throwing gas grenades at the pickets and into the plant. At this point, the earlier defensive preparations taken by the sitdowners came in handy; they opened firehoses on the officers and showered them with two-pound door hinges. Within five minutes, the police, drenched and battered, retreated from the vicinity. The police attacked again, but the outside pickets regrouped and drove them off. In retreat, the police began firing their guns, wounding thirteen.

The conflict was quickly dubbed the "Battle of the Running Bulls." It was considered a great victory for the strikers and a demonstration that they could hold out against police attack. In its wake, previously hostile workers flooded into the union. It also provoked Governor Frank Murphy to order the National Guard into Flint.

Murphy was a New Deal governor *par excellence*. In Detroit he had been one of the most liberal mayors in the country, providing exceptional public assistance to the unemployed and preventing the police from suppressing radicals. He was elected governor with overwhelming labor support, and had insisted on making welfare relief available to strikers. He was also on close terms with such auto magnates as Walter Chrysler and Lawrence Fisher of Fisher Body, whose plants were the chief target in Flint. Although it was not known at the time, Murphy was also the owner of 1,650 shares of General Motors stock worth \$104,875.¹⁵⁰

Murphy did not intend to use the National Guard to drive the sitdowners out by force. He was fully supported in this decision by General Motors, whose officials told Murphy privately that they did not want the strikers "evicted by force."¹⁵¹ Knudson stated publicly that GM wanted the strike settled by negotiation rather than violence. Murphy, who believed the sitdown illegal but feared bloodshed in evicting the strikers, used the National Guard to prevent vigilante attacks while holding the threat of a starve-out over the workers' heads. Murphy even succeeded in arranging a truce in which the union would evacuate the plants in exchange for a company pledge not to remove machinery or open the plants for fifteen days. This would have given away the strikers' strongest point, their possession of the

plants, but it was scotched when the union labeled GM's plans to negotiate with the Flint Alliance a double-cross and called off the truce.

Failing to evacuate the plants by other means, GM applied for a new injunction from a different judge. Meanwhile pressure built up as strikers were attacked by police in Detroit, vigilantes in Saginaw, and both in Anderson, Indiana.

At this point, the local leaders in Flint devised a bold initiative to shift the balance of forces by seizing the giant Chevrolet No. 4 plant. The problem was that union strength at Chevrolet No. 4 was limited and the plant was heavily protected by company guards. At a meeting of carefully selected Chevrolet workers, which deliberately included suspected company spies, Bob Travis announced a sitdown at Chevrolet No. 9 at 3:20 the next day, February 1. Key leaders at No. 9 were told that they need only hold the plant for half an hour, as the real target was No. 6. As expected, company guards had been tipped off by the company spies and shifted from the No. 4 to the No. 9 area. At 3:20, workers sat down at No. 9, company guards rushed in, and the diversionary battle began. Meanwhile, a handful of workers in Chevrolet No. 4 who knew the plan marched around the factory shouting, "Shut 'er down!"¹⁵² but were too few even to be heard. Those in on the plan in No. 6, meanwhile, led a small group over to No. 4. They were still too few to close down the huge plant, however, and it seemed as if the plan had failed. But when they returned to No. 6, they found the whole plant on strike, and the workers marched en masse back to No. 4 to shut it down. About half the No. 4 workers joined the sitdown, the rest dropping their lunches in gondolas for the sitdowners as they left.

The capture of Chevrolet No. 4 changed the balance of forces. It demonstrated that the workers, far from being exhausted, were still able to expand their grip on the industry. As a result, General Motors agreed to negotiate without evacuation of the plants. The law-and-order forces tried one more offensive, however. Judge Gadola issued a new injunction ordering evacuation of the plants and an end to picketing within twenty-four hours. When the workers ignored it, he issued a writ of attachment and claimed authority to have the National Guard enforce it without approval of the governor. In the final crisis,

thousands of workers poured into Flint from hundreds of miles around. Auto plants in Detroit and Toledo were shut down by the exodus of workers to Flint. To avoid the appearance of provocation, the mobilization was declared Women's Day and women's brigades came in from Lansing, Pontiac, Toledo, and Detroit. The crowd of perhaps 10,000 virtually occupied Flint, parading through the heart of the city, then surrounding the threatened Fisher No. 1 plant, armed with thirty-inch wooden braces provided from the factory.

Learning that the National Guard would not evict the sitdowners, City Manager Barringer ordered all city police on duty and decided to organize a 500-man "army of our own." "We are going down there shooting," he announced. "The strikers have taken over this town and we are going to take it back."¹⁵³

The tenor of events is suggested by a plan worked out without union knowledge by the Union War Vets, who had taken responsibility for guarding strike leaders outside the plants. Had leaders been arrested under the Gadola writ, the veterans "would muster an armed force among their own number and in defense of the U.S. Constitution, of 'real Patriotism,' and the union, would take over the city hall, the courthouse and police headquarters, capture and imprison all officials and release the union men."¹⁵⁴

The rug was pulled from under Barringer's "army" when a GM official asked him to demobilize, saying, "The last thing we want is rioting in the streets,"¹⁵⁵ a result the workers' mass mobilization would have made inevitable.

On February 11, General Motors agreed to recognize and bargain with the union in the struck plants and promised not to deal with any other organization in them for six months. As Sidney Fine wrote, "What the U.A.W., like other unions at the time, understood by the term recognition has always been rather nebulous, but the union believed, and it had reason to, that it had been accorded a status of legitimacy in G.M. plants that it had never before enjoyed. It was confident that it would be able to consolidate its position in the 17 plants during the six-month period because it had no rivals to contend with."¹⁵⁶

Recognition
defined

Power, Property, And Control!

But if the agreement established the *union* firmly enough, it did little for the concrete grievances of the workers. When Bud Simons, head of the strike committee in Fisher No. 1, was awakened and told the terms of the settlement, he remarked, "That won't do for the men to hear. That ain't what we're striking for."¹⁵⁷ When the union presented the settlement to the sitdowners, they asked, "How about the speed of the line? How about the bosses—would they be as tough as ever?"¹⁵⁸

The workers' forebodings were borne out by the negotiations that followed the evacuation of the plants. In the words of Irving Bernstein, "The corporation's policy was to contain the union, to yield no more than economic power compelled and, above all, to preserve managerial discretion in the productive process, particularly over the speed of the line."¹⁵⁹ The fundamental demand of the strike from the point of view of the workers had been "mutual determination" of the speed of production, but under the collective bargaining agreement signed March 12, local management was to have "full authority" in determining these matters. If a worker objected, "the job was to be restudied and an adjustment was to be made if the timing was found to be unfair."¹⁶⁰ Further, instead of having a shop steward for every twenty-five workers, directly representing those they worked with, the union agreed to deal with management through plant committees of no more than nine members per plant. Finally, the union agreed to become the agency for limiting workers' direct action against speed-up and other grievances, pledging that "there shall be no suspensions or stoppages of work until every effort has been exhausted to adjust them through the regular grievance procedure, and in no case without the approval of the international officers of the union."¹⁶¹

Such agreements were not enough to control workers who had just discovered their own power. Workers assumed victory in the strike "would produce some radical change in the structure of status and power in G.M. plants," and they "were reluctant to accept the customary discipline exercised by management." They "ran wild in many plants for months."¹⁶² As one worker later recalled, "every time a dispute came up the fellows would have a tendency to sit down

Did the agreement meet worker expectations?

and just stop working."¹⁶³ According to Knudson, there were 170 sit-downs in GM plants between March and June 1937.¹⁶⁴

For example, on March 18, 200 women sat down in a sewing room in Flint Fisher Body No. 1 in a dispute over methods of payment. An hour later, 280 sat down in sympathy with them in another sewing room. Next, sixty men sat down in the shipping department. Soon the entire plant was forced to shut down. "Since the strike was clearly in violation of the agreement ... in which the union promised to protect the company against sitdowns during the life of the agreement, union officials hurried to Flint to settle the matter."¹⁶⁵

Two weeks later, 935 men struck in the final Chevrolet assembly plant. Then the parts and service plant struck in sympathy, closing Fisher Body No. 2. Finally, workers in all departments of the Chevrolet complex walked out in sympathy. Meanwhile, the Fisher Body Plant and the Yellow Truck and Coach Plant in Pontiac were closed by workers protesting discharge of fellow workers. In all, 30,000 workers were involved in the wildcats at this time.

These actions indicated that the workers had developed the ability to coordinate action between plants and even between cities without the union. Union officials told Governor Murphy that they were "mystified" by the sitdowns and that "their representatives in the plants told them they had been 'pushed into' the new sitdowns without union authorization."¹⁶⁶

Equally important, the workers won control over the rate of production, despite the union contract that conceded this authority to management. "Production in the Chevrolet Motor plants has been slowed down to nearly 50 per cent of former output during the last several weeks by concerted action of the union workers, with key men on the mother line stopping work at intervals to slow down production," *The New York Times* reported April 2.¹⁶⁷

Despite the failure of the union to win control over production rates, a Fisher No. 1 worker who had opposed the big strike wrote:

The inhuman high speed is no more. We now have a voice, and have slowed up the speed of the line. And [we] are now treated as human beings, and not as part of the machinery. The high pressure is

taken off.... It proves clearly that united we stand, divided or alone we fall.¹⁶⁸

The top leadership of the union considered these wildcat work stoppages a serious threat to union authority. A *New York Times* article entitled "Unauthorized Sit-Downs Fought by C.I.O. Unions" described the steps they took against them:

(1) As soon as an unauthorized strike occurs or impends, international officers or representatives of the U.A.W. are rushed to the scene to end or prevent it, get the men back to work and bring about an orderly adjustment of the grievances.

(2) Strict orders have been issued to all organizers and representatives that they will be dismissed if they authorize any stoppages of work without the consent of the international officers, and that local unions will not receive any money or financial support from the international union for any unauthorized stoppage of, or interference with, production.

(3) The shop stewards are being "educated" in the procedure for settling grievances set up in the General Motors contract, and a system is being worked out which the union believes will convince the rank and file that strikes are unnecessary.

(4) In certain instances there has been a "purge" of officers, organizers and representatives who have appeared to be "hot-heads" or "trouble-makers" by dismissing, transferring or demoting them.¹⁶⁹

John L. Lewis and UAW leaders blamed wildcats that idled tens of thousands in early April on Communist agitation, and *The New York Times* reported Lewis might soon "send some 'flying squadrons' of 'strong-arm men' from his own United Mine Workers to Flint ... to keep the trouble-makers in line."¹⁷⁰ But William Weinstone, Michigan secretary of the Communist Party, hotly denied the charges that Communists were responsible. He denounced "helter-skelter use of the sit-down."¹⁷¹ He added, "I have personally visited Flint today ... and have not found a single Communist party member who countenanced or supported in the slightest the recent sit-down."¹⁷²

The Communist Party's general attitude toward the sitdown closely followed that of the CIO. At a party strategy meeting an Ak-

ron Communist leader argued: "The sitdown is an extremely effective organizational weapon. But credit must go to Comrade Williamson for warning us against the danger of these surprise actions. The sitdowns came because the companies refused to bargain collectively with the union. Now we must work for regular relations between the union and the employers—and strict observance of union procedure on the part of the workers."¹⁷³

The lengths to which union opposition to wildcat sitdowns went is illustrated by an incident in November 1937. Four workers were fired from a Fisher Body plant and several hundred of their fellow workers struck and occupied the plant in protest. United Auto Workers leaders denounced the strike but were unable to persuade the workers to leave, and therefore resorted to stratagem. They persuaded the workers to divide into two shifts and take turns occupying the plant, concentrated their supporters in one of these shifts, and marched the workers out of the plant, turning possession back to the company guards. When the other shift of strikers arrived to take their turn, they found themselves locked out.

It is not surprising that a *New York Times* reporter found the continuing sitdowns resulted in part from "dissatisfaction on the part of the workers with the union itself" and that workers were "as willing in some cases to defy their own leaders as their bosses."¹⁷⁴ Rank-and-file workers had not reckoned on the union becoming the agency for enforcing work discipline in the shops. Yet this had always been the essential policy of the CIO unions, however much they might utilize sitdowns as an organizing tactic.

CIO director John Brophy made this clear in a carefully worded statement issued before the General Motors strike: "In the formative and promotional stages of unionism in a certain type of industry, the sitdown strike has real value. After the workers are organized and labor relations are regularized through collective bargaining, then we do urge that the means provided within the wage contract for adjusting grievances be used by the workers."¹⁷⁵

Len De Caux, editor of the CIO Union News Service, elaborated:

The first experience of the C.I.O. with sitdowns was in discouraging them. This was in the Akron rubber industry, after the Goodyear

strike. C.I.O. representatives cautioned ... the new unionists against sitdowns on the grounds that they should use such channels for negotiating grievances as the agreement provided....

When collective bargaining is fully accepted, union recognition accorded and an agreement reached, C.I.O. unionists accept full responsibility for carrying out their side of it in a disciplined fashion, and oppose sitdowns or any other strike action while it is in force.¹⁷⁶

John L. Lewis was even more blunt: "A C.I.O. contract is adequate protection against sit-downs, lie-downs, or any other kind of strike."¹⁷⁷ Held up as a model was the CIO's largest union, the United Mine Workers, whose "agreement with coal companies now includes guarantees that there shall be no cessation of work during the term of the contract, and [whose] constitution includes definite penalties, including fines, discharges and even a blacklist for anyone calling or participating in an unauthorized strike."¹⁷⁸

"The new unions, it is held in C.I.O. quarters, must educate and discipline their members or invite a situation of chaos and anarchy which could very well be utilized by either Leftists or Rightists in seizing political power," the *Times* concluded ominously.¹⁷⁹

Despite the efforts of the union and management, however, the wildcats in the auto industry continued—and continue to this day.

In the wake of the General Motors strike, people throughout the country began sitting down. Even excluding the innumerable quickies of less than a day, the Bureau of Labor Statistics recorded sit-downs involving nearly 400,000 workers in 1937.¹⁸⁰ It would be impossible to summarize them all here, but we can learn something of their range and pattern by examining a number of those that occurred in the peak of the wave during and just after the General Motors sitdown.

The most immediate spread was in the auto industry. The union began negotiations with Chrysler, and the company offered to accept the General Motors agreement. According to *The New York Times*:

Is the speed of work shall am issue? Depression Decade
Is the people are less as
227 less than
an
leave?

[T]he union committee started the discussion on the issue of seniority, but said that the rank-and-file demanded that sole bargaining be put first on the agenda.

Then the various union locals held meetings and passed resolutions ordering the union committee to present an ultimatum demanding a yes-or-no answer from the company on sole bargaining by the following Monday.

When the company replied in the negative, according to the union, the men themselves sat down without being ordered out by their leaders.¹⁸¹

The company secured an injunction ordering the 6,000 sitdowners to leave, but as the evacuation hour came near, huge crowds of pickets gathered—10,000 at the main Dodge plant in Hamtramck; 10,000 at the Chrysler Jefferson plant; smaller numbers at other Chrysler, Dodge, Plymouth, and DeSoto plants; 30,000 to 50,000 in all—demonstrating the consequences of an attempted eviction. "It is generally feared," the *Times* reported, that an attempt to evict the strikers with special deputies would lead to an "inevitable large amount of bloodshed and the state of armed insurrection."¹⁸²

Governor Murphy warned that the state might have to use force to restore respect for the courts and other public authority, to protect personal and property rights, and to uphold the structure of organized society, emphasizing that the state must prevent "needless interruption to industry, commerce and transportation."¹⁸³ Murphy established a law-and-order committee, but when top UAW officials refused to serve on it, "strikers inside the plant could be seen waving their home-made blackjacks in jubilation. Inside the gate about 150 women who had been serving meals in the company cafeteria engaged in a snake-dance, beating knives and forks against metal serving trays."¹⁸⁴

Shop committees in the occupied plants voted not to leave the plants until they had won sole bargaining rights. Nonetheless, on March 24, John L. Lewis, representing the CIO, agreed to evacuate the plants on the basis of the General Motors settlement, which Chrysler had accepted even before the strike began. Many strikers considered the settlement a surrender, but they reluctantly left the plants.

The Chrysler strike was merely the largest of dozens of simultaneous sitdowns in the Detroit area. About 20,000 additional auto workers were out as a result of a sitdown at the Hudson Motor Company.¹⁸⁵ Wildcat sitdowns in General Motors plants occurred by the score during this period, many of them involving tens of thousands of workers at a time. By April 1, there were more than 120,000 auto workers on strike in Michigan. Workers occupied the Newton Packing Company in late February and, after eleven days, turned off refrigeration of \$170,000 worth of meat, stating they were "through fooling."¹⁸⁶ In early March, clerks sat down in the Crowley-Milner and Frank and Sedar department stores. Thirty-five women workers seized the Durable Laundry, as the proprietor fired a gun over organizers' heads "to scare them away."¹⁸⁷ The same day, Detroit's four leading hotels were all closed by sitdowns and lockouts, the auto workers providing a mass picket line in one case. Women barricaded themselves in three tobacco plants for several weeks; in one case, residents of the neighborhood battled their police guard with rock-filled snowballs. Eight lumber yards were occupied by their workers. Other sitdown strikes occurred at the Yale and Towne lock company and the Square D electrical manufacturers.

Unable to challenge the giant Chrysler strike, police moved forcefully against the lesser sitdowns. Early in the afternoon of March 20, police evicted strikers from the Newton Packing Company. Three hours later, 150 police attacked sitdowners at a tobacco plant: "Hysterical cries echoed through the building as, by ones and twos, the 86 women strikers, ranging from defiant girls to bewildered workers with gray hair, were herded into patrol wagons and sped away, while shattering glass and the yells of the street throng added to the din."¹⁸⁸

Such action could clearly be an entering wedge against the auto workers, and the UAW responded by calling a mass protest rally in Cadillac Square. The union also threatened to call a strike of 180,000 auto workers in the Detroit area (excluding those at GM for whom they had just signed a contract) and hinted that it would ask for a city-wide general strike unless forcible evictions of sitdowners in small stores and plants were halted. In the judgment of Russell B.

Porter of *The New York Times*, "It is wholly possible that the automobile workers' union might get the support of the city's entire labor movement, now boiling over with fever for union organization ... for a city-wide general strike."¹⁸⁹ Telegrams went out to UAW locals in Detroit to stand by in preparation to strike, but the city quickly halted its drive against the more than twenty remaining sitdowns.

From March 7 to March 21, Chicago experienced nearly sixty sitdowns. Motormen on the sixty-mile freight subway under Chicago shut off controls and sat down when the employer decided to ship a greater proportion of goods above ground and laid off thirty-five tunnel workers. The motormen were joined by 400 freight handlers and other employees who barricaded their warehouses. On March 12, sitdowns hit the Loop, with more than 9,000 men and women striking—including waitresses, candy makers, cab drivers, clerks, peanut baggers, stenographers, tailors, truckers, and factory hands. Eighteen hundred workers, including three hundred office workers, sat down at the Chicago Mail Order Company and won a 10 percent pay increase; 450 employees at three de Met's tea rooms sat down as "the girls laughed and talked at the tables they had served" until they went home that night with a 25 percent pay increase¹⁹⁰; and next day sitdowns hit nine more Chicago firms.

The range of industries and locations hit by sitdowns was virtually unlimited. Electrical workers and furniture workers sat down in St. Louis. Workers at a shirt company sat down in Pulaski, Tennessee. In Philadelphia, workers sat down at the Venus Silk Hosiery Company and the National Container Company. Leather workers in Garard, Ohio, sat down, as did broom manufacturing workers in Pueblo, Colorado. Workers sat down at a fishing tackle company in Akron, Ohio. Oil workers sat down in eight gasoline plants in Seminole, Oklahoma.

Sitdowns were particularly widespread among store employees, so easily replaced in ordinary strikes. Women sat down in two Woolworth stores in New York. Pickets outside one store broke through private guards, opened windows from a ledge fifteen feet above ground, and passed through cots, blankets, oranges, and food packets to the strikers, who ate with china and silver from the lunch counter.

Similar sitdowns occurred in five F. & W. Grant stores; in one, strikers staged an impromptu St. Patrick's Day celebration and a mock marriage to pass the time. Having no chairs to sit down on, 150 salesgirls and 25 stock boys in Pittsburgh staged a "folded-arms strike" in four C.G. Murphy five-and-ten stores for shorter hours and a raise; they also complained that "we have to pay for our uniforms and washing them and have to sweep the floor."¹⁹¹ Twelve stores in Providence, Rhode Island, locked out their employees to prevent an impending sitdown, at which point the unions called a general strike of retail trades.

Nor was the sitdown restricted to private employees. In Amsterdam, New York, municipal ash and garbage men sat down on their trucks in the city Department of Public Works garage when their demands for a wage increase were refused; when the mayor hired a private trucking firm, the strikers persuaded the men not to work as strikebreakers. A similar strike occurred in Bridgeport, Connecticut, when sixty trash collectors sat down, demanding immediate reinstatement of a fellow employee and the firing of the foreman who had dismissed him. In New York, seventy maintenance workers, half white, half black, barricaded themselves in the kitchen and laundry of the Hospital for Joint Diseases; services were continued for patients, but not for doctors, nurses, and visitors. A series of similar sitdowns occurred in the Brooklyn Jewish Hospital.

Forty grave-diggers and helpers prevented burials in a North Arlington, New Jersey, cemetery by sitting down in the toolhouse to secure a raise for the helpers. Seventeen blind workers sat down to demand a minimum wage at a workshop run by the New York Guild for the Jewish Blind, and were supported by a sympathy sitdown of eighty-three blind workers at a workshop of the New York Association for the Blind. Draftsmen and engineers in Brooklyn sat down against a wage cut in the office of the Park Department. Works Progress Administration workers in California sat down in the employment office as flying squadrons spread a strike through the Bay Area.

An important aspect of the sitdown was the extent to which it was used to challenge management decisions. We have already seen vari-

ous examples of this, such as the Chicago freight subway workers' challenge to the decision to move more freight above ground. On March 11, workers at the Champion Shoe Company sat down when they found the company had secretly transferred fifty machines to a new plant. Two hundred and fifty workers, more than half of them women, occupied a Philadelphia hosiery mill that management intended to close and prepared to block efforts to move the machinery.

A hundred and fifteen workers at the Yahr Lange Drug Company in Milwaukee, who had resisted efforts to unionize them, sat down in protest against a company policy of firing workers as soon as their age and length of service justified a raise. Their sole demand was removal of Fred Yahr as general manager of the company. "The girls sat around and played bridge and smoked, and the men gathered in knots awaiting the results. The telephone was not answered, and customers were not served. Salesmen on the road were notified of the strike by wire and responded that they were sitting down in their cars until it was settled." After a long conference with the workers, management announced that Yahr had resigned. The strikers, in effect, had "fired the boss."¹⁹²

Far from being limited to employer-worker relationships, sitdowns were used to challenge a wide range of social grievances. In Detroit, for example, thirty-five women barricaded themselves in a welfare office demanding that the supervisor be removed and that a committee meet with the new supervisor to determine qualifications of families for relief. Thirteen young men sat down in an employment agency where they had paid a fee for jobs that had then not materialized. In New York, representatives of fifteen families who lost their homes and belongings in a tenement fire sat down at the Emergency Relief Bureau, demanding complete medical care for those injured in the fire and sufficient money for rehabilitation, instead of token sums the bureau had offered. A few days later, forty-five people sat in at another relief office, demanding aid for two families and a general 40 percent increase for all families on home relief. In Columbus, Ohio, thirty unemployed men and women sat down in the governor's office, demanding \$50 million for poor relief. And in St. Paul, Minnesota, 200 people staged a sitdown in the Senate chamber, demanding

action on a \$17 million relief plan. In the Bronx, two dozen women sat down in an effort to prevent the eviction of two neighbors by twenty-five policemen.

Prisoners in the state prison in Joliet, Illinois, sat down to protest working in the prison yard on Saturday afternoon, usually a time of rest, as did prisoners in Philadelphia against a cut in prison wages. Children sat down in a Pittsburgh movie theater when the manager told them to leave before the feature film, as did children in Mexia, Texas, when a theater's program was cut. At Mineville, New York, 150 high school students struck because the contracts of the principal and two teachers had not been renewed. Women students at the Asheville Normal and Teachers College in North Carolina sat down to protest parietal rules. In Bloomington, Illinois, wives went on a sit-down strike, refusing to prepare meals, wash dishes, or answer door bells until they received more compensation from their husbands. In Michigan, thirty members of a National Guard company that had served in Flint during the GM sitdown staged a sitdown of their own in March because they had not been paid.

The sitdown idea spread so rapidly because it dramatized a simple, powerful fact: that no social institution can run without the cooperation of those whose activity makes it up. Once the power of the sitdown was demonstrated, others could apply it to their own situation. On the shop floor, it could be used to gain power over the actual running of production. In large industries, it could be used for massive power struggles like the GM strike. In small shops, it could force quick concessions. Those affected by public institutions—schools, jails, welfare departments, and the like—could use similar tactics to disrupt their functioning and force concessions. The power and spread of the sitdowns electrified the country. In March 1937 alone, 170 industrial sitdowns with 167,210 participants were reported. No doubt a great many more went unrecorded.¹⁹³

The sitdowns provided ordinary workers an enormous power that depended on nobody but their fellow workers. As Louis Adamic wrote of the non-union sitdowns in Akron:

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 management and dictated their terms. *They* turned their individual self-control and restraint into group self-discipline.... *They* settled the dispute, not some outsider.¹⁹⁴

In the face of the sitdown wave, a great many employers decided to deal with unions voluntarily, and by World War II unions were recognized by practically all large industrial companies. Most significant was the largest corporation of them all, U.S. Steel, which reversed its bitter tradition of anti-unionism to recognize the CIO's Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC). As Irving Bernstein wrote, it made sense for the corporation to engage in collective bargaining "on a consolidated basis with experienced and responsible union officials like Lewis and Murray rather than with disparate local groups led by men with no background in bargaining." U.S. Steel head Myron Taylor "had good reason to trust Lewis and Murray," whom he had bargained with already in the coal industry.¹⁹⁵

The new contract cost U.S. Steel little—a wage increase it recouped twice over in a price increase, limitation on hours, which was already required to bid on government contracts, and some deference to seniority in laying off workers. In return, the contract provided that "differences ... should be taken up without cessation of work, with the final decision, if an agreement was not reached, to rest with an impartial umpire named by the company and union."¹⁹⁶

The SWOC was in a strong position to enforce this strike ban: its officials were appointed by the CIO, not elected by the steelworkers; all initiation fees and dues went through the central office; and locals were forbidden to sign an agreement or call a strike without its approval. As Myron Taylor wrote a year after the contract went into effect, "The union has scrupulously followed the terms of its agreement."¹⁹⁷

In early 1937, Louis Adamic had a revealing interview with the head of a small steel company that had voluntarily recognized the CIO soon after U.S. Steel, suggesting how union recognition looked to an employer faced with rising labor militancy. The employer described how he had been visited by a CIO organizer who "began to sell me on the idea of letting the CIO start a union in our plant." The organizer started to tell him "all about the petty troubles and pains-in-the-neck we'd had in the mill the past few weeks, which ... amounted to a lot of trouble and expense," which "were bound to increase as the years went by":

Why? Because, he said, in shops where the union was fought and men belonged to it secretly all sorts of damned things happened all the time, which led to fear, nervousness, and jitters among the men, to secret sabotage and loafing on the job.... [H]e proceeded to tell me, too, that if we let the union come in, it would form a grievance committee consisting of workers in the mill; all the union men in the shop would be required, and others allowed, to take their grievances to the committee, which would assemble all the kicks and complaints and what-nots, then take them up with us—the management ... say once a week; and many, perhaps most, of the grievances would be smoothed out by the committee itself without bothering us with them.... We signed an agreement for a year, the union was formed, about half the men joined, a grievance committee was organized and sure enough, the thing began to work out.... It seemed to act as a sort of collective vent....

The men bring their grievances to committee members, then argue about them, then the first thing they know, in many instances, the grievances disappear.

The employer's only complaint was that grievance committee members "are new, green, inexperienced fellows, apt to get excited

about nothing at all. As yet they can't quite handle authority and responsibility. They 'get tough' with us over little matters."¹⁹⁸

Workers had used the sitdown to establish a direct counter-power to management—freedom to set the pace of work, to tell the foreman where to get off, to share the work equitably, to determine their share of the product, and the like. They saw trade unionism as a way to guarantee this power. The new CIO unions—like any organization trying to win a following—presented themselves as the fulfillment of the workers' desires. The objective of the CIO organizing campaigns was that magical phrase "union recognition"—magical because it could mean different things to different people.

The CIO indicated to workers that union recognition meant shorter hours, higher wages, better working conditions, vacations with pay, seniority, job security, an end to speed-up, and—in the words of John L. Lewis—"industrial democracy." Furthermore—and here the CIO won over the great number made cynical about unionism by their experience with the AFL—it proclaimed that the union meant all the workers would be organized together to fight the employers. It was this image that allowed the CIO to appear as the champion of the great sitdown wave, even as it was systematically opposing and crushing sitdown movements.

Meanwhile, to management, the CIO was able to sell itself with equal honesty as a mechanism for disciplining the workforce, managing workers' discontent, and protecting "against sit-downs, liedowns, or any other kind of strike"—a claim whose validity it was able to demonstrate in practice. With the help of the government, which created a rigid institutional structure for collective bargaining through the Wagner Act and its National Labor Relations Board, the CIO was able to channel the sitdown movement back into forms of organization far less challenging to the power of the corporate managers.