

WHAT REAL SOLIDARITY CAN DO

The Great Flint Sit Down: Rank and File Brings GM to its to its Knees

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To hear the bigwigs of the UAW talk today you would think that the union descended from the skies, a gift bestowed upon we chosen workers. You would think that the union is the property of Leonard Woodcock and friends, existing apart from the dues paying membership. "We gave you this and we gave you that and you ought to be grateful for it" -- this is the message we get from the international down to its local lieutenants.

The real history of the UAW teaches us otherwise. The UAW was born out of the struggles of the auto workers themselves and the gains it has brought them have been paid in full with the sacrifices made by thousands of rank and file workers.

This is the second in a series of articles being published in the Organizer which will retell that story. It is an important story not only to auto workers but to all workers. The history of the UAW has been the history of two different philosophies of unionism that have contended for control of our unions throughout the history of the labor movement.

One outlook, class struggle unionism, bases itself on the idea that "the working class and the owning class have nothing in common," that the workers can only gain at the expense of the employers and vice-versa.

The other school of thought, which is the dominant one today and in most periods in the past, contends that the workers and the bosses must cooperate to advance their "mutual interests."

The UAW, perhaps better than any other union, illustrates in its history what both these philosophies mean in practice. It is our hope that this look at the past will help the rank and file movement to understand where and how our unions have gone wrong and point towards what kind of measures are necessary to transform them into genuine fighting organizations for the whole working class.

The first convention of the UAW was held on August 26-31, 1935. It was this convention which was to consolidate the victories of the auto workers at various isolated plants into a national organization of auto workers. It was this convention that was to give birth to what eventually became the CIO's largest and most powerful union.

The convention was called by the AFL which had decided to grant a limited charter to an auto workers industrial union. While the AFL had been staunchly opposed to industrial unions of any kind, they had yielded to the pressure of events.

The successful strikes at Toledo Auto Lite and Toledo Chevy transmission plant had demonstrated both the de-

sire of the auto workers for unionization along industrial lines and their determination to fight for it against all odds. And the repeated attempts of their rank and file leaders like Wyndham Mortimer to set up regional and national councils of organized auto workers convinced the AFL bigwigs that a national auto workers union was going to be built one way or another.

The AFL leaders decided that if it was going to be built anyway, it had better be built under their control. Thus they decided to grant the auto workers a limited charter.

The charter allowed the new union to organize only workers "directly engaged in the manufacture of parts and assembly of those parts into automobiles." But it could not organize either workers engaged in the manufacture of tools, dies or machinery for the auto industry nor could it organize those engaged in the manufacture of auto parts.

Such a charter, while it represented a step forward from the days of the atomized and isolated federal locals, still left significant sectors of the auto workers under craft jurisdictions. If this charter had succeeded in determining the character of the UAW it would have greatly weakened the auto workers and greatly strengthened the hands of the auto monopolies.

AT THE AFL CONVENTION

At the very beginning of the convention called to assemble the auto workers, the rank and file challenged these provisions. But Francis J. Dillon who was chairing the convention for the AFL refused to hear any challenge to the charter.

The main activity of the convention consisted in installing officers for the new union. At first, William Green, AFL President, proposed that the convention endorse his nomination of Dillon for President of the new union.

The assembled auto workers who had experienced Dillon's handling of the Federal locals, opposed him vigorously. When the proposal was put to a vote, Green (and Dillon) was defeated by a vote of 164 to 112.

A few days later, Green announced that since the convention had failed to endorse his candidate for President that he was going to appoint him President anyway. He reminded the delegates that their organization depended on the AFL for money and that they therefore had better be more responsive to the AFL's wishes. At that time he also appointed Homer Martin as Vice-President and Ed Hall as Secretary-Treasurer.

The delegates decided that they would appeal this decision to the AFL Executive Council then in session and finally to the convention in October if necessary. Their appeal was rebuffed at both the Executive Council and the Convention.

The AFL Convention however, was not a complete defeat for the auto workers and other partisans of industrial organization. At the convention John L. Lewis struck a blow for industrial unionism.

He was angry at the way the Carpenter's President John Hutcheson was harassing a rubber worker who was speaking on the importance of industrial organization in his industry. Lewis walked over to Hutcheson and criticized him. Hutcheson responded by calling Lewis a "dirty bastard." Lewis cracked him on the jaw, sending him flying over a table.

COMMITTEE FOR INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATIONS FORMED

Shortly after the convention Lewis, together with Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, Charles P. Howard of the International Typographical Union and five others established the Committee for Industrial Organizations. This committee united those forces in favor of industrial organization within the AFL; it was later to break with the AFL to form the Congress of Industrial Organizations or the CIO.

It was the development of this committee and the support it provided the auto workers which finally forced the AFL to allow the auto workers to elect their leadership. The AFL Executive Council announced a new convention for April 1936 in South Bend, Indiana. At this convention they promised to allow the workers to elect their own officers.

The first accomplishment of the 1936 second convention of the UAW was the replacement of Francis Dillon. His actions since the first convention had demonstrated both why the autoworkers hated him and why the AFL liked him.

In a strike called by the independent Automotive Industrial Workers of America (AIWA) at the Motors Product Co. plant in Detroit in November 15, 1935, Dillon made a deal with the company. He agreed to order UAW members at the plant to cross the picket line if the company would bargain with them. The company temporarily agreed and so Dillon ordered his members to work. Even when Motors Product So. double crossed him, Dillon still refused to join with the AIWA.

Elected in Dillon's place was Homer Martin who was to continue to carry out Dillon's role even if he was not quite so open about his attachments to the AFL. Wyndham Mortimer was chosen as First Vice-President, Ed Hall Second Vice-President, Walter Wells Third Vice-President and George Addes as Secretary Treasurer. An Executive Board was also elected which included Walter Reuther, who gained entrance to the convention on false credentials -- a fact which he later admitted.

The delegates of the convention declared that anyone could join the UAW "regardless of race, creed, religion, national origin or political belief." Thus they expressed their agreement with the anti-redbaiting spirit of the times. A young rubber worker put it this way: "It doesn't make any difference if a man is a Communist, Socialist, Republican or Democrat, as long as he is loyal to the union."

The convention also declared in favor of a massive unionizing drive in order to break the open shop in the Auto industry.

It was Wyndham Mortimer, a communist, who was called upon to head up this drive. Mortimer decided that if the union was ever to break into the auto industry successfully it would have to organize General Motors.

General Motors Co. in 1936 was the largest manufacturing company in the world as well as the largest auto maker. It had over 110 plants in 14 states and 18 foreign countries. 70 of these plants were directly engaged in the auto business. It controlled 45% of the total auto market and in 1937 made a profit of \$196 million. General Motors, in fact, had made a profit in every year of the depression.

General Motors was also dedicated to the open shop. During its years of opposition to unions the corporation had built up a sizeable army of private spies. These spies would report to the management any worker who even looked at a union leaflet let alone kept one. Thousands of workers were fired daily who never knew the reason why.

ORGANIZING DRIVE AT FLINT

General Motors did, however, have a weak point. Mortimer discovered that GM had only two sets of dies for its entire production in the 1937 model year. One of the sets was located in the Fisher Body plant in Cleveland and the other in Fisher Body #1 in Flint.

Mortimer figured that if these two plants could be organized and a coordinated strike called that GM would be unable to sustain production in the rest of its empire. Thus the organization of these two plants was the key to breaking into the auto industry.

While Fisher Body in Cleveland already contained a nucleus of organization, Fisher Body in Flint was totally unorganized. Flint thus became the key to the whole strategy.

But organizing in Flint presented numerous obstacles. In the first place, Flint was a company town, owned and run by GM. Fully 80% of the workers in Flint worked for GM and both the Mayor and the Chief of Police had been former corporate officers and still held stock in the company.

Secondly, there were city ordinances which specifically forbade the distribution of any literature and leaflets. The use of any sound equipment was also forbidden by law. Thus the conventional ways of reaching the workers were illegal.

THE GREAT FLINT SIT-DOWN STRIKE

Travis continued the work that Mortimer had begun. By December 1936 the union in Flint had grown quite strong. Both Mortimer and Travis felt they would be ready to strike GM by January.

The workers in the Cleveland and Flint Fisher Body plants did not wait until January. On December 28th in Cleveland the workers in the quarter panel department yanked the power switch when the plant manager postponed a meeting with the union bargaining committee. The strike spread through the plant like wildfire. The entire plant was closed tight by one o'clock in the afternoon.

General Motors moved quickly to try and bargain locally in Cleveland. But the workers voted with the leadership of Mortimer that there would be no end to their sit-down except as a part of a national settlement.

General Motors, recognizing that they were vulnerable, began to move the dies from Fisher Body #1 in Flint two days later. The workers, realizing that those dies meant their jobs decided that the hour was right to strike a blow for freedom. At a lunch hour meeting at the union hall across the street from the plant the workers voted to "shut the goddamn plant." And that they did.

After the workers shut down the plant, barricaded the doors and welded steel plates across the windows, they assembled and elected in-plant leadership. Walter Moore a Communist, was elected 'Mayor' with a council of ten other workers. He appointed a 'police chief' and a 'sanitation engineer' to keep order in the plant and maintain cleanliness. Sports activities were organized as well as classes in creative writing, history of the labor movement, and parliamentary procedure. The workers ran the entire plant and made their key strategy decisions in mass meetings that were held daily.

Outside GM at first refused to negotiate. They went to Judge Black to get an injunction against the "illegal seizure" of their property. The union's response was that they had not seized anything. All they were doing was refusing to go home and in any case the company's property "was better cared for now than it has ever been."

Judge Black, of course, issued an injunction. But it was soon discovered that he owned \$219,000 worth of GM stock so that the injunction was thoroughly discredited.

The police then decided that they would remove the strikers. They chose as their first target Fisher Body #2 which had gone on strike a few days after #1. It

was a smaller plant and did not have as much valuable equipment. So the police decided they would raid it first.

Twice they tried to force their way into the plant. And each time they were met by a combination of water from fire hoses and hinges and bolts thrown from the windows of the plants. Both times they were driven back and forced to retreat. The whole confrontation has received the title "The Battle of the Running Bulls" after the cops who ran fleeing down the street.

A key role in the defense of the strikers was played by Genora Johnson the wife of a striking auto worker at Fisher Body #2. She organized a Women's Emergency Brigade armed, as she said, "with rolling pins, brooms, mops and anything we can get." They ringed Fisher #1 in case of an attack there.

GM then got a second injunction and called on Governor Frank Murphy to enforce it. Murphy, a New Dealer, did not have the heart to call out the national guard to face the united working class of Flint -- men and women, Black and white, standing together. He knew that it could lead to no solution as the workers had already proven their determination to hold their ground.

So General Motors shifted to more "peaceful" tactics. They turned off the heat at the Chevy plant which had also been captured by the strikers. But the workers responded by lighting the furnaces in the heat treat department and opening all the windows.

GM was forced to turn the heat back on because they realized that their sprinkler system would freeze and the pipes would burst. Then if there was a fire, they would be unable to collect on their insurance.

VICTORY IN A DECISIVE BATTLE

Finally, in February, GM caved in. On February 11 they agreed to negotiate with the Union and rehire all the strikers without discrimination. On March 12 1937 the first contract with General Motors was signed which provided for a grievance procedure, recognition of shop stewards, wage increases, layoffs and rehires by seniority. The union was recognized in 17 plants in the GM empire.

This was a great victory for the sitdowners at Flint, for the UAW and for the entire working class. It marked the first time the UAW had ever been recognized by General Motors, its first national agreement and the first decisive victory in mass production industry. It was the Flint Sit Down Strike that more than any other class battle put the UAW and the CIO firmly on the map.

In order to win the strike, the workers and their leaders had had to defeat the AFL's agent Dillon and bypass Homer Martin. They had to break the laws of Flint, Michigan and they had to defy an injunction. They had to unite Black and white, men and women on the basis of equality. The workers had to be willing to put their lives on the line.