

75 years since the Flint sit-down strike

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Today marks the 75th anniversary of a momentous chapter in the history of the American and international working class—the beginning of the Flint sit-down strike.

On December 30, 1936, several hundred auto workers, members of the newly formed United Auto Workers union, occupied General Motors Fisher Body No.1 plant in Flint, Michigan to demand recognition of the UAW as the workers' sole bargaining agent and a national contract. That same day, they were joined by another group of workers who took over Flint's Fisher Body No. 2 factory.

Over the ensuing 44 days, a heroic struggle unfolded that gripped the attention of the nation and the world. The Flint workers were supported by thousands of auto workers, steel workers, rubber workers and unemployed from across the Midwest and Canada who flocked to the GM stronghold north of Detroit. They defied court injunctions, police assaults, company thugs and National Guard troops poised to attack with machine guns.

Within three weeks of the start of the Flint sit-down, 15 other GM plants had been shut by strikes. On February 1, after a new strike-breaking injunction had been issued, the Flint workers spread the sit-down, occupying the critical Chevrolet No. 4 plant, which produced the engines for the company's best-selling brand.

Replying to the injunction, the strikers issued a statement addressed to the judge and Democratic Governor Frank Murphy, who had called out the National Guard. The workers declared: "Unarmed as we are, the introduction of the militia, sheriffs, or police with murderous weapons will mean a bloodbath of unarmed workers... We have decided to stay in the plant."

Ten days later, after Franklin D. Roosevelt, fearing the eruption of civil war, refused to sanction the use of

troops to dislodge the strikers, GM backed down and agreed to a six-month national contract, recognizing the UAW.

The union victory at GM opened the floodgates for the organization of American basic industry—until then a vast stronghold of the open shop. Within a month of the end of the Flint strike, nearly 200,000 workers had engaged in 243 sit-downs. Some 500,000 workers sat down in 1937, and the total number of strikers was almost 1,900,000.

Within the first 22 months of the existence of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which had emerged from a split with the craft union-dominated American Federation of Labor (AFL), the organization's membership mushroomed to more than 3.7 million.

The Flint strike was the climax of an enormous upsurge of the American working class, inspired in part by the example of workers internationally. The militants who led the sit-down strikes in the US took their lead from the mass strikes that had erupted in the spring and summer of 1936 in France.

The Great Depression had reduced the already impoverished conditions of American workers to outright industrial slavery. General strikes erupted in 1934 in Toledo, Ohio; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and San Francisco, California. These struggles were led by militant workers influenced by the ideals of socialism and the Russian Revolution, who saw wrenching union rights from the corporations as a step toward revolutionary social change.

From the outset, the aims of the workers in the forefront of the struggle for industrial unions were in conflict with the limited aims of the leaders of the CIO and UAW. The Flint strike was called by second tier national and local UAW officials who considered themselves socialists. Kermit Johnson, a Trotskyist, led the occupation of Chevy No. 4.

Leon Trotsky, in assessing the CIO movement, wrote in the *Transitional Program* of 1938, the founding document of the Fourth International: “The unprecedented wave of sit-down strikes and the amazingly rapid growth of industrial unionism in the United States (the CIO) is the most indisputable expression of the instinctive striving of the American workers to raise themselves to the level of the tasks imposed on them by history.”

He added that “the leading political organizations, including the newly created CIO, do everything possible to keep in check and paralyze the revolutionary pressure of the masses.”

The incipiently revolutionary movement of the American working class was aborted by the reformist, pro-capitalist and nationalist policies of the UAW and CIO leadership. With the support of the Stalinist Communist Party, the union bureaucracy rejected the independent political organization of the labor movement and instead tied the new industrial unions to Roosevelt and the Democratic Party.

This paved the way for the postwar anti-communist witch-hunt, led by UAW President Walter Reuther, which sealed the labor movement’s allegiance to US imperialism and the Cold War by driving socialists and left-wing militants out of the unions. Among the victims of the purge were many of those who had led the formative struggles that established the UAW and CIO.

The consolidation of the unions on the basis of the defense of capitalism and support for the two-party system established the trajectory that has led to the collapse of the labor movement.

The unions have been transformed from defensive organizations of the working class into businesses that serve the interests of an upper-middle class layer of right-wing functionaries. This army of bureaucrats polices the workers on behalf of the corporations. With huge stock holdings in the US auto companies, the UAW has a direct financial interest in increasing the exploitation of its members. The salaries and assets, well above \$1 billion, of the UAW apparatus have continued to climb despite a 77 percent plunge in its membership rolls.

The UAW has abandoned the most elemental gains won in struggles by previous generations of auto workers, including guaranteed wage and cost-of-living

increases, pensions, and the right to strike. Together with the rest of the official unions, it devotes all of its efforts to suppressing the class struggle and slashing workers’ wages and conditions in order to make American companies more globally competitive and profitable.

Thus, the current UAW president, Bob King, could say last October, after pushing through contracts with the Big Three hailed for keeping labor costs low, that the auto industry was the best example of “business, labor and the government all working together.”

Under conditions of a new breakdown of US and world capitalism, the lessons of the Flint sit-down and the explosive birth of the CIO must be drawn in order to prepare for the revolutionary struggles into which the American working class is now entering.

The revolutionary potential that was so powerfully expressed in these earlier struggles will once again come to the fore. This time, however, the movement must be armed with a conscious socialist and internationalist strategy and take the form of a political struggle for workers’ power. This requires a break with the old organizations and the building of a new, revolutionary leadership. The great class struggle traditions of the American working class will find expression on a higher level through the building of the Socialist Equality Party to lead the coming battles.

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