

Eighty years since the victory of the Flint sit-down strike—Part one

Jerry White
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February 11 marked the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Flint sit-down strike. The 44-day battle by autoworkers lasted from December 29, 1936 to February 11, 1937. It forced General Motors, then the largest industrial enterprise on the planet, to recognize the recently founded United Auto Workers union.

“The revolt, which no bureaucracy could contain, was spearheaded by new people—the young mass production workers, the new young militants whom nobody had ever heard of,” wrote American Trotskyist James P. Cannon about the strike. This revolt of the “men from nowhere,” Cannon said, was driven by the “bitter and irreconcilable grievances of the workers: their protest against mistreatment, speedup, insecurity; the revolt of the pariahs against their pariah status.”

The workers who were the “real creators” of the new mass industrial unions, Cannon added, had to split with the “conservative labor fakers of the AFL before they could consolidate unions of their own.”

Long known as “the strike heard around the world,” the Flint sit-down was led by socialists and left-wing militants who understood the irreconcilable conflict between the interests of the working class—whose collective labor produces society’s wealth—and the capitalist owners whose profits are based on the exploitation of labor. The most politically conscious also understood that both the Democrats and Republicans were capitalist parties that would employ violence to defend the property and profits of the ruling class.

Today’s autoworkers and other workers have been largely cut off from this history due to the decades-long efforts by the UAW to eradicate any semblance of class consciousness, let alone socialist opposition to capitalism. UAW officials endlessly promote the sickly gospel of labor-management “partnership,” which denies that workers have any interests apart from and antagonistic to the capitalists. This goes hand-in-hand with the UAW’s support for the pro-capitalist Democratic Party and its promotion of nationalism to divide

US workers from their class brothers and sisters around the world.

Marking the anniversary, UAW President Dennis Williams said, “There are many lessons to draw from the Flint Sit-Down Strike, but the biggest one is that worker solidarity is how we keep our seat at the bargaining table.” Such comments would make the original sit-downers turn over in their graves.

The UAW has kept its “seat at the table” by colluding with the auto bosses to destroy everything an earlier generation of workers fought for. It has collaborated in the closure of hundreds of factories and the decimation of entire cities, including Flint, dividing workers against each other with multi-tier wage and benefit systems. With the help of the UAW, GM has created a largely disposable temporary workforce that has as little job security as the workers GM hired and fired at will before the sit-down strike.

The UAW does have a seat, however, on GM’s board of directors, which voted last month to increase its multi-billion-dollar payout to rich investors while it wipes out the jobs of 3,300 GM workers, including 1,300 at the GM Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly plant next month. After decades of degeneration, the UAW has become a business—complete with ownership of the largest block of GM shares. A new generation must build genuine fighting organizations, rank-and-file factory committees, to wage a fight to defend their jobs, living standards and social rights.

The fledgling UAW in 1936, however, was a very different organization. It had a level of internal debate and rank-and-file democracy, including active socialist factions, that would be unrecognizable to any union member now. That year, delegates to its national convention voted to support the formation of a Labor Party, independent of the two capitalist parties.

What were the conditions GM workers faced in 1936-37?

Fifty thousand of GM’s 150,000 hourly workers labored in Flint—a company town where GM controlled the police, the judges, the politicians and the news media. Workers were essentially day laborers with no job security who were

subjected to brutal speed-up. As one witness described, “The men worked like fiends, their jaws set and eyes on fire. Nothing in the world exists for them except the line chassis bearing down on them relentlessly.” In July 1936, when temperatures soared over 100 degrees, deaths in Michigan’s auto plants rose into the hundreds.

The average worker took home \$900 a year, at a time when the government reported that \$1,600 was needed as the minimum income for a family of four to live decently. Workers had no guarantee that they would be rehired after the annual change-over from the old to the new models, which would last for three to five months with no unemployment insurance. Instead, they would be forced to take loans from the company that they would be forced to pay back if rehired, resulting in a de facto 10 percent wage cut.

As an original sit-downer, Ken Malone, told the *Bulletin*, one of the forerunners of the *World Socialist Web Site*, in 1986, workers also faced terrible extortion under the foreman system. “To keep your job you did anything the foreman asked. If you went hunting you brought him a piece of venison; if you went fishing, he got the largest fish; if you had a garden, he always got a basket of vegetables from it. And women, the foremen chased after your own wife, and if you wanted a job you let him.”

Malone continued, “We were worse than a chattel slave because I know from what I read about them they had at least a barn to sleep in. There was mass unemployment. Not only was there hunger, but people wore badly torn shoes, with no coats. They were wearing rags. There was no unemployment insurance. There was no such thing as pension funds or welfare, and no one heard anything about someone retiring.”

GM was determined to oppose unionization, which its top executives Alfred Sloan and William Knudsen saw as a threat to private property and management rights. The company hired hundreds of management spies, spending \$839,000 on “detective work” in 1934 alone. GM also used the services of the “Black Legion,” a split-off from the Ku Klux Klan, whose black-robed thugs beat, tarred and feathered, and murdered suspected unionists and socialists. The company controlled the *Flint Journal*, which continuously railed against “reds.”

The business owners did everything they could to sow ethnic and racial divisions among the workforce, which included native-born whites and blacks from the southern US states, along with large numbers of immigrants who did not speak English from Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Italy and other countries. Of the 12,000 workers employed by Chevrolet, only 400 were black, and they were confined to the foundry at Buick and to janitorial work, with

no hope of getting a raise or promotion. The socialists fought against racial prejudice and nativism, issuing leaflets in many languages to fight for the unity of the working class.

The 1929 stock market crash and the Great Depression that followed led to mass unemployment and poverty, with GM laying off half of its workforce between 1928 and 1932. An uptick in employment in 1934 led to growing worker militancy. There were general strikes in Toledo, Ohio; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and San Francisco, which were led by left-wing workers in the Communist and Socialist parties, and, in the case of the Minneapolis truckers strike, by Trotskyists. By the time of Flint, sit-down strikes had occurred in Akron, Ohio; Detroit and South Bend, Indiana, and in France and other European countries.

Among the key leaders in Flint were Wyndham Mortimer, a Cleveland autoworker and a supporter of the Communist Party, and Socialist Party members Sol Dollinger, Kermit Johnson and his 23-year-old wife, Genora. (See BBC video.) The latter three were influenced by the writings of Leon Trotsky, the co-leader of the Russian Revolution and opponent of Stalinism. In 1938 they joined the Socialist Workers Party, the Trotskyist movement in the US. Walter Reuther, who also called himself a socialist and would become the president of the UAW in 1946, played a marginal role.

In an October 6, 1936, Mortimer wrote an open letter to Flint workers, saying:

“ALL THE EXPLOITERS OF LABOR HANG TOGETHER. THEY ARE CLASS CONSCIOUS. They are aware of the fact that the interests of their CLASS is involved, and all the patriotic blah blah is for the consumption of fools, and they are hoping we are fools. We as workers must too become aware of CLASS INTEREST. It is only in this way we may get the true picture and understand all the move[s] being made on our political and economic checker board. Under our present economic system, we as workers can only improve our condition by improving the condition of the entire working class.”

The sit-down strike began less than three months later.

To be continued



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