

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

Jerry White
16 February 2017

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 first installment of this two-part series can be found [here](#).

On December 29, 1936, the day after Cleveland GM workers began a sit-down strike, workers in Flint sat down in the plant after five union leaders at GM's Flint Fisher Body Plant Number Two were fired and management tried to move critical equipment to other plants. With the strike spreading to other GM plants in Detroit and elsewhere, 200 UAW delegates convened in Flint, elected a board of strategy headed by Kermit Johnson, and issued their demands. These included: union recognition and a signed contract; abolition of piecework; the 30-hour-week and six-hour day; time and a half for overtime; minimum pay rates; reinstatement of victimized workers; sole collective bargaining rights for the UAW; and union participation in regulating the rate of the assembly line.

Knudsen denounced the strikers as trespassers and said there would be no talks until the plants were vacated. GM obtained an injunction from County Judge Edward Black, but it was revealed that the judge owned 3,365 shares of GM stock worth \$219,000. Since Michigan law prohibited a judge from presiding over a case in which he had an interest, the injunction became invalid.

On January 11, 1937, the "Battle of the Running Bulls" (aka "Battle of Bulls' Run") took place after GM shut off the heat and sent guards and police to block supporters from delivering food to the strikers inside. Other workers then charged, overwhelming the cops, i.e., "bulls," and opening the way for the delivery of food. After several police counter-attacks were repulsed by workers inside the plant firing bolts, car hinges and other metal missiles, plus freezing water from a fire hose, the cops retreated.

Afterwards, however, Michigan's supposedly pro-labor Democratic governor dispatched 1,300 National Guardsmen to Flint, with machineguns and 37-inch howitzers. He then restarted negotiations, reaching a deal with UAW President Homer Martin to pull the workers out of the plant for 15 days, while negotiations took place, during which time, GM would not try to operate the plant. The deal fell through, however, when a telegram was discovered from GM to the right-wing vigilante group Flint Alliance, which indicated that it would recognize both the Alliance's company union and the UAW as "representatives."

Workers refused to leave the plant and devised a plan to seize Plant Number Four, the engine assembly plant that supplied Chevrolet operations all over the country. Well aware that GM would have spies everywhere, they leaked information instead that they had planned to seize Plant Nine. After hundreds of guards descended on Plant Nine to accost the strikers there, workers in the real target seized the engine plant, bringing GM's empire to a halt.

As historian Robert Conot wrote, "There was a widespread conviction that America's 1917 was at hand ... For Sloan and Knudsen, the coup represented Bolshevism unbridled. The UAW had taken over by force the property of General Motors. If this were not a revolution, then it was the prelude to a revolution. Most liberals, while backing the workers, were almost as horrified as management by the sit-downs and, especially, by the seizure of the plant. AFL President Green thought it outrageous. President Roosevelt was shocked. Governor Murphy regarded it as a betrayal of his own studied impartiality. Furious he told union leaders that if they did not order the men out, he would order the National Guard in."

As the deadline approached, the sit-downers issued a defiant statement in the face of another violent attack. But they were defended by workers who poured into the city. "All roads into Flint were jammed with cars loaded with unionists from Detroit, Lansing, Pontiac and Toledo," wrote Art Preis. "More than a thousand veterans of the Toledo Auto Lite and Chevrolet strikers were on hand. Rubber workers from Akron and coal miners from the Pittsburgh area rallied to defend the Flint strikers."

"We threatened to burn the plant if the National Guard came in," Malone said. "At Plant No. 8, the National Guard tried to bulldoze the back door. We used slingshots, monkey wrenches and clubs, anything we could use. Our feelings toward the Democratic Party were the same as for the Republicans. They were both for big business."

On February 11, after a week of continual maneuvering and bargaining, a six-month agreement was signed. GM would not recognize or deal with any other organization in the 17 plants closed by the UAW; all unionists and strikers would be rehired; unionism could be discussed on company property during lunch and rest periods, and that negotiations would proceed at once on wages, hours, production speed-up, and other issues.

The workers elected the only black sit-downer in the Flint strikes, Roscoe Van Zandt of Plant 4, to lead them out of the occupied plants in a victory parade.

The ruling class made a tactical retreat. Roosevelt had asked GM to bargain with the UAW to end the strike and the governor wired country sheriffs to take no action against strikers.

“What we did was the seizure of private property, the cardinal sin of society,” Malone said. “Roosevelt saw the danger of losing capitalism and like any skilled driver, he threw out a bone. He saved capitalism. I don’t believe he was pro-labor. You can go back as far as you want, the Democrats and Republicans have always been a tool of the ruling class.”

Roosevelt had facilitated legal recognition of the unions when he signed the Wagner Act into law in 1935. He then worked with leaders of the new Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions, like John L. Lewis, to convince workers that a revolution and socialism were not necessary because their grievances would be addressed through the vehicle of the trade unions, the Democratic Party and American capitalist “democracy.” For the government to openly side with the corporations and violently crush the new unions would discredit the entire political system and radicalize workers even further.

“The workers marching in Flint were determined they would not be pushed back into the ranks of the economic dropouts,” Conot wrote. “To fire on them, and on a man of Lewis’s stature, would be to push America to the brink of revolution—a revolution not of scattered bands of farmers, but of tens of thousands of workers under organized leadership in key industrial centers. As in Spain, or Italy, or Germany, the consequence might well be the division of the country between the extreme right and the far left.”

The ruling class never forgave the Flint strikers. Thirty-five years later in a 1970 interview with historian Studs Terkel, Charles Steward Mott—long-time GM board member and three-time Flint mayor—bitterly complained that Governor Murphy “didn’t do his job” during the sit-down strikes. “He didn’t protect our property. They should have said [to the strikers], ‘Stop that thing. Move on, or we’ll shoot.’ And if they didn’t, they should have been shot.”

The victory at Flint was an enormous breakthrough for the American working class, which had been fighting for the elementary right to organize for nearly a century. An immense impulse to this achievement was the first workers’ revolution in Russia in 1917, which served as an inspiration for the most class-conscious workers. It was the specter of “America’s 1917” that convinced the ruling class to adopt, at least temporarily, a policy of class compromise and social reform based on the immense wealth accumulated by American capitalism.

The rise of the CIO unions demonstrated the revolutionary tendencies in the American working class, its tenacity and self-sacrifice. But the great weakness of this heroic movement was its politics and political program.

“If the class struggle is not to be crushed, replaced by demoralization,” Trotsky wrote in a letter to his supporters in the Socialist Workers Party in 1938, “then the movement must find a new channel, and this channel is political.” On this basis, the SWP fought against the efforts of the CIO leaders and the Stalinists to subordinate the new unions to the Democratic Party by calling for the building of a Labor Party based on socialist policies to fight for the perspective of socialist internationalism among American workers.

Lewis, Walter Reuther and other CIO leaders, fervently opposed a Labor Party and tied the working class to the capitalist Democratic Party and the national and international interests of the US corporations. This included the unions’ collaboration with American imperialism’s intervention in World War II and drive for global domination.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, Reuther carried out a purge of the socialists who played the leading role in building the UAW. In 1954 he would declare that there was no need for a labor party because unlike Europe, America did not have “a rigid class structure” and in the US, the unions could “work within the two-party system” to bring about a “fundamental realignment of basic political forces.” The next year, Reuther would engineer the merger of the AFL and CIO unions based on Cold War anti-communism and the integration of the unions into the apparatus of the national-security state.

The anti-socialist purges in the unions paved the way for their decades-long degeneration and transformation into direct instruments of the corporations and the state. The pro-capitalist unions had no answer when the ruling class, entering a long period of economic decline and facing the rise of powerful competitors, returned to its traditional policy of class warfare in the late 1970s and 1980s. In the face of the globalization of capitalist production the unions in the US and around the world, hostile to an international socialist policy, joined with their “own” capitalists to stamp out working-class resistance and force workers into a race to the bottom.

A new generation of autoworkers, along with every other section of workers, is being thrust into rebellion once more as the global corporations and the Trump administration move to roll back every achievement won by the working class in over a century of struggle. To prepare the coming battles of the working class it is necessary to assimilate the political lessons of history, including the great Flint sit-down strike 80 years ago.



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