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

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With General Motors threatening to shut down five factories in the United States and Canada over the next few months, it is valuable to study the heroic struggle by GM workers during the 1936-37 sit-down strike in Flint, Michigan. Monday, February 11, marks the 82 nd anniversary of the victory of the strike, which was a major turning point in the long fight for the industrial organization of workers in the US.

Below we repost the two-part article, which originally appeared on the WSWS in February 2017, marking the 80th anniversary of the end of the strike.

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 roll 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

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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-robbed 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.

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 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 county

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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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