



UAW LOCAL 1700

Dec 30, 1936 – Feb 11, 1937

Lest We Forget:

In Tribute to the Pioneers of the Great Flint Sit-Down Strike



UAW Local 1700 Union Leadership sits for a photo commemorating the Flint Sit-Down Strike of 1936-1937

The 1936–1937 Flint sit-down strike, was a sit-down strike at the General Motors plant in Flint, Michigan. This strike changed the United Auto Workers (UAW) from a collection of isolated Local Unions into a major Labor Union, and led to the unionization of the domestic Auto Industry.

Background

GM agreed to recognize the UAW as the bargaining agent for workers on February 2, 1937. The United Auto Workers (UAW) labor union had only just been formed in 1935 and held its first convention in 1936. Shortly thereafter, the union decided it could not survive by organizing campaigns at smaller plants as it had in the past. Instead, they would organize automobile workers and go after the biggest and most powerful employer, General Motors Corporation. The UAW would do this by focusing on their most valuable plants in Flint, Michigan. The production plants in Flint were essential to the multiple lines of GM cars, and to the cars of GM's subsidiary companies like Chevrolet and Buick. Another Chevrolet factory, Plant No. 4, would be critical to the sit-down strike as it produced the engines for all Chevrolet cars sold at the time. Organizing in Flint was a difficult and dangerous plan. GM controlled city politics in Flint and kept a close eye on outsiders. As Wyndham Mortimer, the first UAW officer put in charge of

organizing the campaign in Flint, entered the town, he was noticed. The day after he entered Flint, in early June of 1936, he was followed by people who were most likely working for the General Motors Company.

The Strike

Events forced the union to accelerate its plans when the workers at Cleveland's Fisher Body plant went on strike on December 28, 1936, due to two brothers being fired from the assembly line. The UAW immediately announced that it would not settle the Cleveland strike until it reached a national agreement with GM covering all of its plants. As this was going on the union began making plans to shut down the Fisher #1 Plant in Flint; on December 30, at 8:00 AM, when the union learned that GM was planning to move the body dies out of Fisher #1 lead UAW organizer Bob Travis immediately called a lunchtime meeting at the union hall across the street from the plant, explained the situation, then sent the members across the street to occupy the plant. This was the beginning of the Flint sit down strike.

Resistance

In a conventional strike, union members leave the plant and establish a picket line to discourage other employees from entering, thus preventing the employer from operating. In a sit-down strike, the workers physically occupy the plant, keeping management out. By employees remaining inside the factory rather than picketing outside, striking workers prevented owners from bringing strike breakers to resume production. The police, armed with guns and tear gas, attempted to enter the Fisher Body 2 plant on January 11, 1937. The strikers inside the plant were able to withstand several waves of attack, eventually ending the standoff. At the time, Vice President John Nance Garner supported federal intervention to break up the Flint Strike, but this idea was rejected by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who instead urged GM to recognize the union so the plants could re-open.

Conclusion

The agreement gave the UAW instant legitimacy. The workers there got a 5% increase in pay and were allowed to talk about the union during lunch. The UAW capitalized on that opportunity, signing up 100,000 GM employees and building the union's strength through grievance strikes at GM plants throughout the country.

RB: yc.opeiu#42/aflcio