

# Flint

By Howard Zinn

In 1934 and 1935, hundreds of thousands of workers, left out of the tightly controlled, exclusive unions of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), began organizing in the new mass production industries—auto, rubber, packinghouse. The AFL could not ignore them, so it set up a Committee for Industrial Organization to organize these workers outside of craft lines, by industry, all workers in a plant belonging to one union. This Committee, headed by John Lewis, then broke away and became the CIO—the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

But it was rank-and-file strikes and insurgencies that pushed the union leadership, AFL and CIO, into action. Jeremy Brecher tells the story in his book *Strike!* A new kind of tactic began among rubber workers in Akron, Ohio, in the early thirties—the sit-down strike. The workers stayed in the plant instead of walking out, and this had clear advantages: they were directly blocking the use of strikebreakers; they did not have to act through union officials but were in direct control of the situation themselves; they did not have to walk outside in the cold and rain, but had shelter; they were not isolated, as in their work, or on the picket line; they were thousands under one roof, free to talk to one another and to form a community of struggle. Louis Adamica, a labor writer, describes one of the early sit-downs:

“Sitting by their machines, cauldrons, boilers and work benches, they talked. Some realized for the first time how important they were in the process of rubber production. Twelve men had practically stopped the works! . . . Superintendents, foremen, and straw bosses were dashing about....In less than an hour the dispute was settled, full victory for the men.”

In early 1936, at the Firestone rubber plant in Akron, makers of truck tires, their wages already too low to pay for food and rent, were faced with a wage cut. When several union men were fired, others began to stop work, to sit down on the job. In one day the whole of plant No. 1 was sitting down. In

two days, plant No. 2 was sitting down and management gave in. In the next 10 days there was a sit-down at Goodyear. A court issued an injunction against mass picketing. It was ignored, and 150 deputies were sworn in. But they soon faced ten thousand workers from all over Akron. In a month, the strike was won.

The idea spread through 1936. In December of that year began the longest sit-down strike of all, at Fisher Body Plant No. 1 in Flint, Michigan. It started when two brothers were fired, and it lasted until February 1937. For 40 days there was a community of two thousand strikers. “It was like war,” one said. “The guys with me became my buddies.” Sidney Fine in *Sit-Down* describes what happened. Committees organized recreation, information, classes, a postal service, sanitation. Courts were set up to deal with those who didn’t take their turn washing dishes or who threw rubbish or smoked where it was prohibited or brought in liquor. The “punishment” consisted of extra duties; the ultimate punishment was expulsion from the plant. A restaurant owner across the street prepared three meals a day for two thousand strikers. There were classes in parliamentary procedure, public speaking, history of the labor movement. Graduate students at the University of Michigan gave courses in journalism and creative writing.

There were injunctions, but a procession of five thousand armed workers encircled the plant and there



was no attempt to enforce the injunction. Police attacked with tear gas and the workers fought back with firehoses. Thirteen strikers were wounded by gunfire, but the police were driven back. The governor called out the National Guard. By this time the strike had spread to other General Motors plants. Finally, there was a settlement, a six-month contract, leaving many questions unsettled but recognizing that from now on, the company would have to deal not with individuals but with a union.

In 1936 there were 48 sitdown strikes. In 1937 there were 477: electrical workers in St. Louis; shirt workers in Pulaski, Tennessee; broom workers in Pueblo, Colorado; trash collectors in Bridgeport, Connecticut; gravediggers in New Jersey; 17 blind workers at the New York Guild for the Jewish Blind; prisoners in an Illinois penitentiary; and even 30 members of a National Guard Company who had served in the Fisher Body sit-down, and now sat down themselves because they had not been paid.

### The Wagner Act and the New Deal: Bailout for Business?

It was to stabilize the system in the face of labor unrest that the Wagner Act of 1935, setting up a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), had been passed. The wave of strikes in 1936, 1937, 1938, made the need even more pressing. In Chicago, on Memorial Day, 1937, a strike at Republic Steel brought the police out, firing at a mass picket line of strikers, killing 10 of them. Autopsies showed the bullets had hit the workers in the back as they were

running away: this was the Memorial Day Massacre. But Republic Steel was organized, and so was Ford Motor Company, and the other huge plants in steel, auto, rubber, meat packing, and the electrical industry.

The Wagner Act was challenged by a steel corporation in the courts, but the Supreme Court found it constitutional—that the government could regulate interstate commerce, and that strikes hurt interstate commerce. From the trade unions' point of view, the new law was an aid to union organizing. From the government's point of view, it was an aid to the stability of commerce. Unions were not wanted by employers, but they were more controllable, more stabilizing for the system than the wildcat strikes, the factory occupations of the rank and file. In the spring of 1937, a *New York Times* article carried the headline "Unauthorized Sit-Downs Fought by CIO Unions." The story read: "Strict orders have been issued to all organizers and representatives that they will be dismissed if they authorize any stoppages of work without the consent of the international officers...." The *Times* quoted John L. Lewis, dynamic leader of the CIO: "A CIO contract is adequate protection against sit-downs, lie-downs, or any other kind of strike." The Communist party, some of whose members played critical roles in organizing CIO unions, seemed to take the same position. One Communist leader in Akron was reported to have said at a party strategy meeting after the sit-downs: "Now we must work for regular relations between the union and the employers, and strict observance of union

Photo: Sit down strikers in the Flint, Michigan, Fisher Body Plant No. 3.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress, photo by Dick Sheldon, 1936



procedure on the part of the workers.” Thus, two sophisticated ways of controlling direct labor action developed in the mid-thirties. First, the NLRB would give unions legal status, listen to them, settling certain of their grievances. Thus it could moderate labor rebellion by channeling energy into elections, just as the constitutional system channeled possibly troublesome energy into voting. The NLRB would set limits in economic conflict as voting did in political conflict. And second, the workers’ organization itself, the union, even a militant and aggressive union like the CIO, would channel the workers’ insurrectionary energy into contracts, negotiations, union meetings, and try to minimize strikes, in order to build large, influential, even respectable organizations.

The history of those years seems to support the argument of Richard Cloward and Frances Piven, in their book *Poor People’s Movements*, that labor won most during its spontaneous uprisings, before the unions were recognized or well organized: “Factory workers had their greatest influence, and were able to exact their most substantial concessions from government, during the Great Depression, in the years before they were organized into unions. Their power during the Depression was not rooted in organization, but in disruption.”

Piven and Cloward point out that union membership rose enormously in the forties, during the Second World War (the CIO and AFL had over six million members each by 1945), but its power was less than before—its gains from the use of strikes kept getting

whittled down. The members appointed to the NLRB were less sympathetic to labor, the Supreme Court declared sit-downs to be illegal, and state governments were passing laws to hamper strikes, picketing, boycotts.

For Black people, the New Deal was psychologically encouraging (Mrs. Roosevelt was sympathetic; some Blacks got posts in the administration), but most Blacks were ignored by the New Deal programs. As tenant farmers, as farm laborers, as migrants, as domestic workers, they didn’t qualify for unemployment insurance, minimum wages, social security, or farm subsidies. Roosevelt, careful not to offend southern white politicians whose political support he needed, did not push a bill against lynching. Blacks and whites were segregated in the armed forces. And Black workers were discriminated against in getting jobs. They were the last hired, the first fired. Only when A. Philip Randolph, head of the Sleeping-Car Porters Union, threatened a massive march on Washington in 1941, would Roosevelt agree to sign an executive order establishing a Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). But the FEPC had no enforcement powers and changed little.

The coming of World War II weakened the old labor militancy of the thirties because the war economy created millions of new jobs at higher wages. The New Deal had succeeded only in reducing unemployment from 13 million to nine million. It was the war that put almost everyone to work, and the war did something else: patriotism, the push for unity of all classes against enemies overseas, made it harder to



mobilize anger against the corporations. During the war, the CIO and AFL pledged to call no strikes.

Still, the grievances of workers were such—wartime “controls” meant their wages were being controlled better than prices—that they felt impelled to engage in many wildcat strikes: there were more strikes in 1944 than in any previous year in American history, says Jeremy Brecher.

The thirties and forties showed more clearly than before the dilemma of working people in the United States. The system responded to workers’ rebellions by finding new forms of control—internal control by their own organizations, as well as outside control by law and force. But along with the new controls came new concessions. These concessions didn’t solve basic problems; for many people they solved nothing. But they helped enough people to create an atmosphere of progress and improvement, to restore some faith in the system.

The minimum wage of 1938, which established the forty-hour week and outlawed child labor, left

many people out of its provisions and set very low minimum wages (25 cents an hour the first year). But it was enough to dull the edge of resentment. Housing was built for only a small percentage of the people who needed it. “A modest, even parsimonious, beginning,” Paul Conkin says (*F.D.R. and the Origins of the Welfare State*), but the sight of federally subsidized housing projects, playgrounds, vermin-free apartments, replacing dilapidated tenements, was refreshing. The Tennessee Valley Authority suggested exciting possibilities for regional planning to give jobs, improve areas, and provide cheap power, with local, instead of national control. The Social Security Act gave retirement benefits and unemployment insurance, and matched state funds for mothers and dependent children—but it excluded farmers, domestic workers, and old people, and offered no health insurance. As Conkin says: “The meager benefits of Social Security were insignificant in comparison to the building of security for large, established businesses.” ■

Photo: Strike ends.

AP photo courtesy of San Francisco State College of Behavioral Studies

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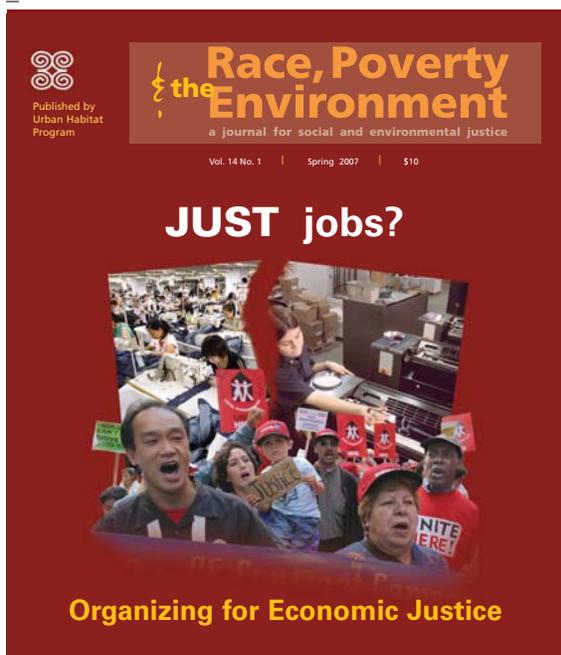
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