The Workers

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The automobile workers who manned the motor-vehicle plants of GM and its competitors were drawn from Canada and Europe, from Michigan’s declining lumber industry, from the coal fields of Pennsylvania, and from the border states and the upper South. Negroes and the foreign born, especially Poles and Italians, were conspicuous among the operatives and laborers in the Detroit automobile plants, but in the citadel of GM’s power, in Flint, Michigan, native-born whites predominated.¹

Although skilled workers were originally drawn to the automobile industry from the metal, machine, and woodworking trades, they were soon swamped by workers of lesser skill: the Automobile Manufacturers Association concluded on the basis of a 1935 United States Employment Service analysis of job specifications in the automobile industry that 26.9 percent of the workers in the industry required no training at all and that only 9.8 percent required more than one year of training. Contrary to popular belief, however, workers classified as semiskilled rather than unskilled predominated in the industry. Thus, according to a study by Michigan’s State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission, 55 percent of GM’s 28,455 employees in Flint at the beginning of 1935 were semiskilled (buffers and polishers, filemen, grinders, operatives, guards and watchmen, truck and trailer drivers), 24 percent were skilled (blacksmiths, forge and hammer men, foremen, machinists and mechanics, metallurgists, molders, cranemen, upholsterers, tool makers, die-setters, etc.), and only 8.9 percent were unskilled (furnacemen, puddlers, heaters, janitors, and laborers). The remainder of Flint’s automotive employees were classified as professional (1.8 percent), clerical (9 percent), and proprietors, managers, and officials (0.8 percent).²

The image of the automobile worker is of the man on the assembly line, but in the 1930’s, as today, less than 20 percent of the workers in the industry were engaged in assembly-line operations. The work of the remainder, however, was “no less specialized or less carefully planned,” and it was the line that determined “the rhythm of production” of the industry as a whole.³

To the observer of the work process in one of the great automobile plants, the workers looked more like robots than human beings. A New York Times reporter, describing a visit to one of Flint’s GM plants at the time of the sit-down strike, saw “thousands of men
working, but not moving back and forth.” Each man stood at his place, tools and material in hand while the line moved past him with the part on which he labored. “He performs the same operation all day or night, five days a week, the year round.” The final assembly line appeared to the reporter to be “the acme of efficiency. Here the men become animated as they turn out completed cars, sixty an hour, along a U-shaped line thousands of feet long, which works like a cogwheel railway. Some of these men move spasmodically. They walk or run along the line twenty feet or so, screwing something on, trimming a fender, spraying a side with paint, or performing their own special operation. They seem to work on strings as a monster jerks them back to begin on another car.”  

The modern industrial sociologist views the automobile worker as the most alienated of America’s factory employees. Because of the minute subdivision of labor in the industry, the automobile worker on the assembly line, Robert Blauner tells us, is more subject than other workers to the alienation of “meaninglessness.” Because he cannot control the pace of his work but must conform to the centralized control of production standards, he is subject also to the alienation of “powerlessness.” A survey by Elmo Roper in 1947 of three thousand factory workers in sixteen different industries revealed the automobile worker to be near or at the bottom of the group in nearly every indicator of job satisfaction.  

The GM workers of the 1930’s were doubtlessly unfamiliar with the concept of alienation, and most of them were probably less concerned with the monotony of their tasks than scholars and outside observers were inclined to believe. They expressed their dissatisfaction with their jobs largely in terms of the “speed-up,” and it was the speed-up in the view of the principal participants that was the major cause for the GM sit-down strike.  

The speed-up meant different things to different automobile workers. It was the inexorable speed and the “coerced rhythms” of the assembly line, an insufficient number of relief men on the line, the production standards set for individual machines, the foreman holding a stop watch over the worker or urging more speed, the pace set by the “lead man” or straw boss on a non-line operation, and incentive pay systems that encouraged the employee to increase his output. However expressed, the complaints of the speed-up summed up the automobile worker’s reaction to the fact that he was not free, as perhaps he had been on some previous job, to set the pace of his work and to determine the manner in which it was to be performed. Since the tempo of his work was determined for him and since he did not share in that determination, it was natural for him to complain
that he was being driven, that he was being compelled to produce more and more without a commensurate, if any, increase in pay.

"The essence of Flint," a New York Times reporter who covered the GM sit-down found, was "speed." "Speed, speed, speed—that is Flint morning, noon and night." Charlie Chaplin's film Modern Times, a lampoon of the speed-up, played for two months in Flint and was shown to the sit-downers themselves with considerable success. After spending six days in Flint during the sit-down strike, James Myers, the industrial secretary of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ, reported that union and nonunion men alike reported dissatisfaction with the pace of their work. Even "conservative citizens" of Flint who opposed the strike conceded that the speed in some of GM's Flint plants was "an unreasonable strain on the workers."8

When the Research and Planning Division of the NRA sent its investigators to Flint late in 1934 to hear testimony regarding conditions of labor in the automobile plants, GM workers talked feelingly of the speed-up and of how GM was "getting more production with less men." A Buick worker complained, "We didn't even have time to go to the toilet.... You have to run to the toilet and run back. If you had to... take a crap, if there wasn't anybody there to relieve you, you had to run away and tie the line up, and if you tied the line up you got hell for it." A Fisher Body No. 1 worker told of a fellow employee who did not have time to wring out the gasoline-soaked rag he was using to clean car bodies on the line with the result that gasoline spattered back on him and he was burned from the thighs to the knees. Some time later the man's nerves cracked—"He went crazy." A straw boss in the Chevrolet plant complained, "They keep rushing me to crowd the men more." A fifty-five-year-old worker testified that the only difference he could discern between a penitentiary and the GM plant in which he worked was that the GM worker could go home at night. "It is cruel; it is absolute cruelty." An employee of the Fisher Body No. 2 plant protested that the men were pushed "right down to their last nerve.8"

The story as dissatisfied GM workers told it was much the same at the time of the sit-down strike. A UAW official reported in November, 1936, that one punch-press operator in GM's Guide Lamp plant in Anderson, Indiana, had lost three fingers and another a thumb because of the speed at which the machines were operated. "Let's [sic] not forget these tragedies," he wrote, "General Motors must pay for these happenings." At GM's Janesville Chevrolet plant workers complained of foremen and straw bosses yelling at the men to hurry, of an insufficient number of men on the line, and of too few relief men.
Flint workers told Myers during the strike that the work was "more than you can do." A worker who claimed that the men had been "speeded up more all the time" during the preceding two years said, "I can hardly stand it"; and another man, whose job required him to make 115 double motions per minute with his hands, complained of the "terrible nervous strain." A Flint Chevrolet worker later recalled that "The supervisors that they chose at that time were just people with a bullwhip, so to speak. All they were interested in was production. They treated us like a bunch of coolies. 'Get it out. Get it out. If you cannot get it out, there are people outside who will get it.' That was their whole theme." William "Red" Mundale, the leader of the sit-down strikers in the Fisher Body No. 2 plant, succinctly summed up the number one complaint of the strikers: "I ain't got no kick on wages, but I just don't like to be drove."10

The effect upon at least some of the automobile workers of the pace of their work and the nature of their jobs was graphically revealed at the time of the sit-down strike. A New York Times reporter discovered that when the men began to explain their jobs, "their bodies involuntarily begin to sway in the rhythmical motions they are accustomed to make on the line." Genora Johnson described her husband, Kermit, the leader of the sit-down strikers in the Chevrolet No. 4 plant, as "a young man grown old from the speed-up. He has come home at night, when the new models were starting, so tired he couldn't eat. He was wakened the next morning with his hands so swollen he couldn't hold a fork." The wife of another striker said that she would "like to shout from the housetops what the company's doing to our men. My husband, he's a torch solderer. . . . You should see him come home at night, him and the rest of the men in the buses. So tired like they was dead, and irritable. . . . And then at night in bed, he shakes, his whole body, he shakes." Her companion agreed. "Yes, they're not men any more if you know what I mean." Her husband was only thirty, she said, but he looked like fifty, "all played out."11

A Buick worker, Gene Richard, described work on the assembly line at his plant. "Men about me," he said, "are constantly cursing and talking filth. Something about the monotonous routine breaks down all restraint. . . . Suddenly a man breaks forth with a mighty howl. Others follow. We set up a howling all over the shop. It is a relief, this howling." When Richard left the plant one day after working overtime, he was "so dulled" he had forgotten how he had arrived there. "I stop—ponder. I can't think where I parked my car: the morning was so long ago." "When people glide along the smooth
highway, enjoying the comforts of a modern automobile," Adolph Germer wrote a friend in 1936, "little are they mindful of the human price that has been paid to make this possible."12

In rebutting worker complaints of a speed-up, GM insisted that speed had to be kept at a " 'reasonable' rate" if only for efficiency sake and to maintain quality. Resentment about their jobs was generally greatest among the workers during the "grooving-in" period when new models were being introduced, but, industry engineers observed, the dissatisfaction expressed reflected primarily the shift of employees from accustomed tasks and familiar tools to new tasks and new tools. GM, however, could not explain away all the employee complaints about a speed-up. The industry worked on averages in the timing of jobs, but a tempo of work that was satisfactory for the mythical average worker was too fast for some workers. Foremen were also guilty of assigning men to jobs for which they were not fitted and which placed too great a strain on them. One reporter thus pointed out just after the sit-down strike that it was by no means GM policy "to grind the workers down and cast them aside as human wreckage" but that company engineers and supervisory personnel had not always succeeded in making the necessary adjustments between men and machines.13

Although the men unquestionably worked hard in the auto plants of GM and its competitors, there was nevertheless a tendency among them to confuse technological improvement with the speed-up: figures cited by the workers and union representatives as evidence of increased output sometimes indicated simply the introduction of new machines that might actually have lightened the burden of labor. It was true that output per man hour in automobile, body, and parts plants—conditions, of course, varied from plant to plant—increased much more sharply between 1934 and 1936 than in manufacturing as a whole, but this undoubtedly reflected the substantial increase in volume in the automobile industry and the abandonment of share-the-work policies of depression and NRA days. By contrast, during the period 1929–34, when automotive production declined drastically and there was a good deal of part-time employment in the industry, output per man hour in automobile, body, and parts plants had increased only 1.2 percent as compared to a 14.3 percent increase in manufacturing as a whole. During these years, as GM pointed out, there was actually an increase in the average number of hours required to produce a Chevrolet body and a Chevrolet car.14

The complaints of GM workers about the speed-up and the nature of their jobs were not, however, to be answered by the citing of statistics, however relevant, for the reaction to their work situation
of the company's employees in Flint, Cleveland, Anderson, and elsewhere was as much psychological as it was physical. When they struck GM and joined the UAW, they were, in a sense, expressing the resentment of men who had become depersonalized, who were badge numbers in a great and impersonal corporation, cogs in a vast industrial machine. "Where you used to be a man, . . . now you are less than their cheapest tool," a Flint Chevrolet worker complained to Senator Robert La Follette during the strike. Had the corporation treated its workers "with a little respect," another GM worker later stated, it could have forestalled the union for years. "We were treated like a bunch of dogs in the shop and we resented it so much that the people with principle . . . were grabbing for anything to try to establish themselves as men with a little dignity. . . ." "The world is surprised to learn," a reporter declared shortly after the strike was over, "that these robots are human beings after all."15

Closely related to the commonly heard complaint of the speed-up was the charge emanating from some of the workers and the UAW that GM and the other automobile companies callously displaced their blue-collar employees when they reached the age of forty or so. "We draw our old age pension at the age of forty instead of sixty five," a Flint Chevrolet worker wrote the President during the sit-down strike. Earlier, a forty-five year old worker in Fisher Body No. 2 lamented, "It seems as though every year they try to see how quick they can kill you and get you out of there."16

It seems likely that the automobile manufacturing companies preferred to hire young men for their production lines, but the allegations of the deliberately premature superannuation of automobile workers do not seem to have been well founded, at least insofar as GM was concerned. The percentage of GM workers aged forty or over actually increased between 1930 and 1933 at a time when the corporation could easily have discriminated against older workers had it desired to do so. As of January, 1935, approximately 21 percent of GM's Flint employees were more than forty-four years of age, which did not differ too greatly from the 23 percent who were forty-five or older among the remainder of the city's gainful workers, most of whom were engaged in nonmanufacturing operations. GM reserved special jobs for men over forty, and it was the men in this age group who seem to have been the best paid and the most regularly employed among the corporation's hourly workers. It was, perhaps, the rural background of so many auto workers, which conditioned them to think of physical decline as a rather slow process, that caused them to exaggerate the extent to which workers were prematurely superannuated in the automobile industry.17
Second only to the speed-up among the grievances of the automobile workers was the irregularity of their employment, a result of the industry’s reliance on new annual models as a means of stimulating demand for passenger vehicles. Irregular employment, an important source of job dissatisfaction, reduced the worker’s loyalty to his employer and contributed materially to his profound sense of insecurity.

However serious the problem of irregular employment was in the automobile industry in the boom years of the 1920’s, it became even more critical after 1929 when automobile employment contracted and automobile workers could no longer find other work during periods of layoff. For every year from 1930 to 1936 the layoff rates and total separation rates in the automobile and body industry and the automobile parts industry were substantially above the comparable figures for manufacturing industries as a whole. During the period September 4, 1933 – September 4, 1934, almost 40 percent of GM’s 132,169 hourly employees worked fewer than twenty-nine weeks, and more than 56 percent worked fewer than forty weeks.

The fall introduction of models beginning in 1935 helped to make automobile employment somewhat more regular than it had been during the preceding several years, and GM, as we have seen, was able to report that 85 percent of its hourly rated employees had remained on the company’s payroll throughout the year in 1936. This still meant, however, that twenty-four thousand of the company’s hourly workers had been irregularly employed during the year, and it is likely that many of the remainder continued to view their future employment with some uncertainty. “The fear of being laid off,” a church publication that was seeking to explain the GM sit-down strike declared, “hangs over the head of every worker. He does not know when the sword will fall.”18

The GM worker was concerned not only about “when” the sword would fall but upon whom it would fall. GM continued to apply the ALB seniority rules even after the NIRA lapsed, but since seniority under these rules was determined not only on the basis of the length of service of the employee but also on his marital status, the number of his dependents, and the nature and degree of his skill, the workers tended to be uninformed or confused regarding their position on the seniority list; and, at all events, they knew that the corporation was under no obligation to pay any attention to such lists. The automobile workers were inclined to believe that it was the foreman who really determined the order of layoff and rehiring and that favoritism played a large part in his decision as to who worked and who did not. “If he happened to like you,” a unionist who had worked at the Chevrolet Gear and Axle plant later declared, “or if you sucked
around him and did him favors—or if you were one of the bastards who worked like hell and turned out more than production—you might be picked to work a few weeks longer than the next guy.” Under the circumstances, the auto workers were disposed to look with favor on the idea of seniority based on length of service alone.19

The irregularity of employment in the automobile industry meant that the well-publicized high hourly wages of the auto workers did not necessarily become translated into equally high annual earnings, which persuaded the UAW federal labor unions to look favorably upon the idea of the guaranteed annual wage. As a Chevrolet worker told an NRA investigator late in 1934, “Of course, we make enough to live on while we are working, but we don’t work enough time.” Thus during the year beginning September 4, 1933, hourly employees on GM’s payroll all year averaged $1197 for the year, but 61.7 percent of the company’s hourly rated workers received less than $1000. During 1936 the steadily employed workers at GM averaged $1541, but 15 percent of the hourly rated employees earned less than $1150, and average earnings for hourly workers were probably between $1200 and $1300.20

How well one could live in 1936 on an income of between $1200 and $1300, which was above the $1184 average for full-time employees in all industries, is difficult to say, although it is relevant to note that a Works Progress Administration study estimated that a maintenance level budget for a family of four in Detroit as of March, 1937, was $1434.79. Hartley W. Barclay, the editor of Mill and Factory, thought that an income of $150 a month was quite adequate for a Flint auto worker, but most Flint auto workers received less than this in 1936. On the other hand, Barclay, who spent several days in Flint in January, 1937, did not detect any “starvation standards of living” and noted that the auto workers saved money, that some of them owned small businesses, that their income was supplemented by working wives, that retail sales in the city had reached record proportions in the last months of 1936, and that the auto workers and their children were well dressed. What he did not say was that some GM workers in the city lived in hovels and shacks without central heating or indoor plumbing.21

Although there was little complaint from GM workers about their hourly wages, there was a good deal of dissatisfaction among them with the methods of wage payment used in some of the corporation’s plants. In 1934 and 1935 many automobile plants had abandoned the complicated systems of compensation that had come into vogue in the industry in the 1920’s and had shifted to straight hourly rates. Incentive pay systems, however, continued to be used in many
plants, including Fisher Body No. 1 and No. 2 in Flint, where individual and group piece rates determined the workers' pay above a guaranteed minimum. Barclay, an experienced industrial engineer, advised Harry W. Anderson after extended conversations with Fisher Body strikers that the workers in these plants objected to many features of their system of pay. They complained that they did not receive individual tickets specifying the going rate but were simply permitted to examine the sheet of time standards, which many of them did not understand and which left them uncertain as to their actual daily earnings. The rates, furthermore, were set in fractions (11.32 cents per hundred operations, for example), with the result that some of the men, who had problems with multiplication, found it difficult to determine the pay that was due them.

In so far as group piece rates were used, the able Fisher Body workers complained that they had to “drive” the lazier workers or slow their own pace, neither of which alternative appealed to them. Experienced workers also thought that there should be a higher guaranteed minimum for them during the grooving-in period for operations similar to those on the previous model, and they objected to being placed on apprentice rates when the model changeover eliminated their previous jobs and they had to be broken in on new tasks. Finally, since perhaps 80 percent of the work on a Fisher body in Flint at that time was in the form of “hard manual labor,” workers in the No. 1 and 2 plants could increase their earnings under the piece-rate system only at a considerable physical cost as compared to piece-rate workers—those at Flint Chevrolet for example—whose tasks involved the use primarily of machine power rather than human power.22

Barclay, who advised GM that there was “a great deal” to the workers' complaints regarding piece rates, not only thought that GM would have to revise its pay system in the Flint Fisher Body plants, but he also concluded after speaking to many of the workers that the nine-hour day in effect at these plants at the time of the strike was “too heavy a schedule to maintain without completely exhausting the workers.” He thought that some of the men were suffering from “occupational psychosis” resulting from fatigue and that they even had encountered domestic difficulties because of their tiredness after work. The union at the time was pressing for a thirty-hour week, but Barclay concluded, and he was probably correct, that the men would have been satisfied with a forty-hour standard.23

The grievances expressed by automobile workers before the GM sit-down strike were of long standing and were not peculiar to the conditions of labor in 1936. The strike, however, as Professors George
W. Hartmann and Theodore W. Newcomb have indicated in their psychological interpretation of industrial conflict, is "a relatively brief and traumatic episode in the natural history of industrial conflict. What is really important psychologically is the long and continued process of thwarting and frustration to which human beings are subjected during the work processes of modern manufacturing. Accumulated tensions and suppressions mount until the threshold of restraint is reached and an explosion occurs."24 By the end of 1936 that "threshold of restraint" had been reached by many GM workers.

With the exception of some former coal miners, the workers who were drawn to the automobile plants of Michigan and elsewhere during the first three decades of the twentieth century had at least one characteristic in common: they were almost entirely innocent of trade unionism in so far as their personal work experience was concerned. With wages high and jobs abundant, they appear to have been reasonably content with their lot before 1929, but depression and the opportunity provided by the New Deal for unionism and the airing of employee grievances revealed that working conditions were far from perfect in the automobile plants in the opinion of many automobile workers and that there were employee grievances upon which union organizers could seek to capitalize. Unionism, however, did not come easily to the automobile industry, and up to the eve of the GM sit-down strike the paid-up union membership in the plants of GM and its competitors constituted but a small minority of the production workers in the industry.

Organizational interest in the automobile workers was evidenced during the early years of the twentieth century by the Carriage and Wagon Workers' International Union (CWW), but like the UAW at a later date it was to discover that the AFL's craft unions would not permit the invasion of their claimed jurisdiction over some of the workers in the automobile plants even though they had made little if any effort to organize these workers themselves. Anxious to expand its small membership, the CWW petitioned the AFL in 1910 for a grant of jurisdiction over all workers in the automobile industry, and it was rechartered the next year as the Carriage, Wagon and Automobile Workers' International Union (CWAW). The AFL, however, prodded by the interested craft unions, ordered the CWAW in 1914 to abandon efforts to organize automobile workers falling within the jurisdiction of other national and international unions and to strike the word "automobile" from its name; but since the membership of
the union by that time was made up largely of automobile workers, it refused to comply with this order and was consequently suspended from the Federation on April 1, 1918. It was then reorganized as the United Automobile, Aircraft and Vehicle Workers of America (UAAVW). Although primarily an organization of skilled craftsmen, particularly trimmers, painters, and woodworkers, it was “dedicated,” it proclaimed, to “the principle of Industrial Unionism.”

Prospering as the result of World War I, the UAAVW attained a claimed membership of forty-five thousand in 1920. The strongest unit in the organization was the Detroit local, which had succeeded in making some headway in Fisher Body, but the membership, for the most part, was concentrated in the small custom body shops in the East, where skill remained a factor. The recession of 1920–21, a disastrous strike against Fisher Body in Detroit in 1921, the introduction of lacquer in the automobile paint shops, and the resistance of the employers contributed to the disintegration of the union in the 1920’s and made it an easy prey for Communist penetration.25

The Communists, who had initiated organizing work in the Detroit auto factories in the middle 1920’s, gained control of the Detroit local of the virtually moribund UAAVW in the late 1920’s, converted the national organization into the Auto Workers Union (AWU), and affiliated it in 1929 with the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), which had just been established by the Communists as a center for dual unionism. Its membership probably not in excess of one hundred, the AWU was little more than a paper union when it joined the TUUL.26

The advent of the depression presented the AWU with an opportunity to spread its doctrine among the automobile workers, to urge them to organize, and to seek their support by leading their strikes, organizing hunger marches, and agitating for relief. At least one astute student of the automobile industry concluded in 1932, before the rules of the game were somewhat altered by the New Deal, that the Communists had made “a profound impression” on the auto workers by their “continuous and strenuous activity,” and he predicted that if the industry were to be organized from the outside the Communists would be responsible.27

The AWU, however, was never able to enroll more than a handful of members. Despite its appeal that it was the only “militant union” in the industry and that, in contrast to the AFL, it was committed to industrial unionism and control by the rank and file, the automobile workers refused to enlist under its red banner. The result was that the Communists increasingly directed their main attention in the industry away from the AWU and toward the building up
of opposition sentiment within the UAW and the Mechanics Educational Society of America (MESA), an independent organization of tool and die makers. In December, 1934, the Communists officially dissolved the AWU and instructed its members to join the UAW if they were production workers and the MESA if they were tool and die makers. At the time this decision was made there were only 450 members in the twenty-one locals of the AWU, and only a handful of even this small number were actually employed in automobile factories. Since the former AWU members, unlike most automobile workers, were, however, unionists of some experience and considerable dedication, their addition to the Communists and fellow travelers who had previously enrolled in the UAW gave the Communists a nucleus of adherents within that organization that was out of all proportion to the small numbers involved. Although they had failed to sustain an automobile workers union of their own, the Communists, by boring from within, were able to gain positions of power inside the UAW, and they were to play an important part in the GM sit-down strike.28

Insofar as strikes had occurred in the automobile industry after 1920 and before the NIRA was enacted they were largely spontaneous in character, although the AWU and the Communists were sometimes called in by the inexperienced workers after their walkouts to provide needed leadership. These strikes, almost without exception, were precipitated by suddenly announced changes in working conditions, particularly in piece rates. Nearly all the strikes occurred in body factories, with Fisher Body the principal target. Discontent had been building among the more skilled workers in the body plants as machinery downgraded their skills and reduced their pay, and yet their consciousness of skill, however slight, persuaded them that they were not without bargaining power.29

The most significant of the Fisher Body strikes in the pre-New Deal era, and one that was not without some relationship to the GM sit-down strike, occurred in July, 1930, among workers in the Flint Fisher Body No. 1 plant, the most important plant involved in the 1937 strike. The strike began on July 1 when two hundred metal finishers spontaneously quit work because of a reduction in piece rates. Advised by AWU and Communist representatives from Detroit, some of the strikers marched through the plant the next day and persuaded the rest of the seventy-six hundred workers to join the walkout. The prominent advisory role played by the Communists after the strike had begun enabled the police and the management to charge that the whole affair was the product of Communist and foreign agitation, which presumably justified the harshest repression. Reinforced on the third day of the strike by the Michigan State
Police, the city police dispersed the strikers' picket lines, used horses to ride down demonstrators, attempted to break up a mass parade of strikers to the Buick plant, arrested strike leaders and their AWU and Communist allies, seized the local AWU membership rolls, and interfered with the strikers' freedom of assembly by forcing them to meet outside the city and on one occasion chasing them beyond the Genesee County line. Defeated, the strikers returned to work on July 9. They were promised that there would be no discrimination against them, but their leaders were subsequently let go by the management for one reason or another.\textsuperscript{30}

Several of the workers later involved in the GM sit-down received a demonstration in the 1930 Fisher Body strike of what a strike on the outside might mean in a city where company and municipal authorities were so closely allied. Jack Palmer, who participated in the strike and then subsequently transferred to the Chevrolet plant, recalled many years later how the police had raided a strikers' meeting held in an open field and how the men had fled "like a bunch of scared rabbits because we did not want to get run down by horses." He remembered that there was no talk of unionism among the workers following the collapse of the strike.\textsuperscript{31}

Although the AFL had been able before the advent of the New Deal to enroll a few craftsmen in the automobile industry—principally pattern makers, metal polishers, and molders—it had failed altogether to organize the semiskilled and unskilled production workers who constituted the bulk of the labor force in the automobile and automobile parts plants. Following the expulsion of the CWA in 1918 and prior to 1933 the Federation on two occasions projected organizing campaigns in the industry, but its efforts were more rhetorical than anything else and were singularly unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{32}

When it became clear that the National Industrial Recovery Bill would become law, President William Green of the AFL called the presidents of the Federation's national and international unions to a conference in Washington on June 6 and 7, 1933, to formulate plans for the organization of the unorganized and to take advantage of the opportunity afforded by Section 7 (a). It was at this conference that the decision was reached to launch an organization campaign in the automobile industry. To head the drive, which was to center in Detroit, Green selected William Collins, an AFL organizer who had previously represented the Federation in the motor city. Collins served as the AFL's national representative in the automobile industry until the end of September, 1934, and was then succeeded the next month by Francis Dillon, who had been working as an organizer in the industry since February.\textsuperscript{33}
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The automobile workers who responded to the AFL's plea to join the union were placed in federal labor unions chartered directly by the Federation. One federal labor union was generally provided for each automobile plant, although a single local sometimes served Chevrolet and Fisher Body workers in the same city (Chevrolet and Fisher Body production was often carried on in the same plant); and in Toledo, for no logical reason, there was only one federal labor union for all of the city's automobile plants. Altogether, the AFL had chartered 185 federal labor unions in the industry by the time an international union of automobile workers was created in August, 1935.34

The AFL was never able to secure more than a beachhead of unionism within the automobile industry prior to the time that the UAW decided to cast its lot with the fledgling Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO). For this failure there were many reasons.35 Some of the problems the AFL faced were the result of its use of the federal labor union as the means by which to enroll auto workers in the Federation. In contrast to the trade autonomy that normally prevailed in the AFL, federal labor unions were regarded as "wards" of the Federation, and the AFL, in theory at least and sometimes in practice, exercised direct control over most of their activities. This naturally raised the question of the rights of the rank and file, which plagued the AFL almost to the day the UAW joined the CIO.

Also, although federal labor union members paid dues of only $1 per month, thirty-five cents of this sum was sent to the AFL, whereas the national and international unions paid a per capita tax of only one cent per member per month. Moreover, when a federal labor union went on strike, it learned that it was not entitled to benefits from the AFL defense fund, despite its per capita tax, unless it had been in continuous good standing for one year. President Green might argue that the AFL performed "tremendous services" for its federal labor unions, but some auto workers felt that they had received much too little from the Federation in return for their per capita tax. "We have fought our fight alone," the president of the strong Bendix local complained to Green in the spring of 1934.

Since the federal labor unions had a direct relationship to the AFL but, at the outset, no relationship at all to one another, the AFL was faced with the problem of coordinating their efforts. Collins tried to create some sense of unity in Detroit by establishing a Detroit District Council to represent the city's automobile federal labor unions, but not until June, 1934, was a National Council set up for the automobile unionists and not until August, 1935, was an international union of automobile workers created. The result was that many
of the federal labor unions developed as virtually autonomous organizations and were disinclined to consult interests other than their own in determining strategy and tactics in the struggle to unionize the automobile workers. The consequences of this lack of centralized control were to become evident as the UAW organizing drive gathered force in the closing months of 1936.

Since the UAW federal labor unions were free to accept any plant worker not already in an AFL union, they were temporarily at least of an industrial-union character. Inasmuch as the federal labor unions were regarded as a recruiting device for the trade unions, however, the likelihood was that the skilled workers in these locals would at some future date be parcelled out among the craft unions. The craft unions gave little indication that they had any real desire to organize the bulk of the automobile workers—the Metal Polishers, one of their members recalled, “wanted to build a fence around themselves even in the big plants”—but they insisted that their jurisdictional rights be respected.

Green was aware that the relentless technological progress in the automobile industry had “practically wiped out” craft lines, but as president of the AFL he had no choice but to advise AFL organizers that the jurisdictional rights of the International Association of Machinists and other internationals would have to be observed. He knew, however, that this was easier said than done. “It is impossible for us,” he told the AFL Executive Council, “to attempt to organize along our old lines in the automobile industry. . . . I must confess to you that I am come, you will come, and all of us will always come face to face with the fact, not a theory but a situation actually existing, that if organization is to be established in the automobile industry it will be upon a basis that workers employed in this mass production industry must join an organization en masse. We cannot separate them.” But Green’s views were not the views of the majority of the Executive Council, and the AFL president, in the end, had neither the strength nor the influence to make his ideas prevail over those of his craft-minded colleagues.

To the members of the federal labor unions, there was always the possibility that the craftsmen in their midst would be transferred to one of the national or international unions. “We face our work here [Detroit],” Collins reported to Green, “with more temerity so far as the Machinists are concerned than we do in facing the united hostility of the Employers’ Association.” One UAW leader protested to the AFL president that craft-union jurisdictional claims constituted “one of the greatest hindrances of organization” and warned that if the attempt were made to place auto workers in the craft unions, it would
“kill” auto unionism. The attempt was made, and although it did not “kill” auto unionism, it reduced substantially the AFL’s chances of keeping the auto workers within its ranks.

The failure of the AFL to make an all-out effort in its campaign to organize the auto workers also helps to explain the meagerness of its accomplishment. The Federation, a member of the National Council of United Automobile Workers later declared, “could have organized all the automobile workers by the middle of 1935 if they had sent the right number of people in to do it. And the people with the right kind of orders to do it.” “It was not easy, believe me,” the leader of the sit-down strike in the Cleveland Fisher Body plant declared, to secure AFL help in the early days. “They did very little. . . .” Green claimed in 1936 that the AFL had expended almost $250,000 on its federal labor unions in the industry between July 1, 1933, and October 1, 1935, but this sum exceeded the per capita tax paid by the automobile locals by only $67,000, and, however large it may have appeared at the time, it was insufficient considering the magnitude of the job confronting the Federation and the opportunity that the New Deal presented.

The AFL was particularly defective in the leadership that it supplied to the auto industry. Although the handful of organizers the Detroit office engaged were drawn from the automobile plants, the organizers the AFL assigned to the industry, including Collins and Dillon, knew precious little about shop conditions even though they were familiar with the “technique of joint relations.” “We had Organizers that came into our plant,” one federal labor union president declared, “who did not know what the hell the automobile industry was, they didn’t know one thing about it.”

Neither Collins nor Dillon had the force or the imagination necessary to lead a campaign so fraught with difficulties as the AFL’s organizing drive in the automobile industry. Both men reflected in their attitude the discouraging experience of the AFL in the 1920’s, when the Federation had thought it necessary to shift “from militancy to respectability.” They believed that the labor movement, “above all else, must move cautiously,” and both of them sought to further union ends by enlisting government support and seeking to convince the employers that the UAW was a “good” union rather than by encouraging militant action on the part of the workers themselves. This cautious, almost timid approach to automobile unionism limited the effectiveness of the AFL in the automobile industry and lessened its appeal to the auto workers.

Both Collins, who told the auto manufacturers, “I never voted for a strike in my life,” and Dillon, who was afraid of “making a
mistake which would bring to our people disaster," backed away from the use of the strike weapon. Such strikes as were called in the industry during the NRA era were called by the federal labor unions themselves, often without the knowledge and generally without the advance approval of the AFL. Conscious of its limited membership in the industry and of the generally depressed state of the economy, the AFL hesitated to risk a showdown with the automobile manufacturers in the economic field and was reluctant to support or to expand strikes initiated by its federal labor unions. One can well understand the caution of the AFL, even though the demand for automobiles was on the upswing, but the Federation was too timid for its own good. Neither Collins nor Dillon seemed to realize that the auto workers, like workers in general, were more likely to join a union under strike conditions than otherwise, that “Once they were released from the plant,” to quote a UAW member, “they felt their own freedom.” The AFL was unquestionably wise to recognize, at long last, the crucial role that government could play in the organization of the unorganized, but as the auto workers were to demonstrate when they broke away from the Federation, bold action in the economic field was a necessary supplement to government assistance in winning the day for unionism against the giants of the industry.

The nature of the labor force in the automobile industry was a further deterrent to organization. The overwhelming majority of the automobile workers were not only without the personal experience or the family background in trade unionism that might have made them susceptible to the appeal of organizers, but all too many of them were easily replaceable because of their lack of any significant degree of skill. The presence of a considerable number of Negroes and foreign born in the automobile plants, particularly in the Detroit area, also posed a problem for the AFL, which for a variety of reasons found it difficult to enlist their interest in the UAW.

Finally, and probably of greatest importance, the AFL had to contend with the fear engendered among the automobile workers by their awareness of the implacable opposition of their employers to independent unionism in the industry. Recognizing that they were expected by management to join the company union in their plant rather than the UAW, suspicious that there were spies everywhere in the industry, worried at a time when there was much less than full employment that, if identified with an outside union, they might be discriminated against in layoffs and rehiring or dismissed altogether, the automobile workers understandably hesitated to commit themselves to a cause so fraught with danger for their livelihood. Collins, from the start, recognized that the fear that possessed the workers was
a major obstacle in his path, and three years later organizers in the
industry were still being told that fear was "the one great deterrent to
organization."³⁷

Insofar as AFL organizing efforts met with success prior to the
establishment of the international union in the industry, it was largely
in the plants of the independent automobile manufacturers and the
automobile parts plants. Independents like Nash, Studebaker, and
White were in a far more precarious financial and market position
than GM, Ford, and Chrysler were and hence were less able to resist
union pressure. The parts companies were also vulnerable since many
of them felt that they could not afford prolonged labor strife lest their
inability to deliver their products on schedule would cause them to
lose business to their numerous competitors or to the main plants
themselves.

The AFL fared better in its organizing efforts outside Michigan
than inside the state. This was in good measure because the power of
the Big Three was concentrated in Michigan, but it also reflected the
fact that several of the non-Michigan locals, removed from the restraining
influence of the AFL's national representative in the industry,
were considerably more militant than their Michigan counterparts.
This greater daring not only brought them occasional success in
their struggles with management but also won them adherents among
the automobile workers in the plants that they were seeking to
organize.³⁸

As the AFL at the end of June, 1935, prepared for the forthcoming
constitutinal convention of the automobile workers, the total
paid-up membership of the UAW federal labor unions was 22,687,
which was approximately 5.4 percent of the 421,000 wage earners
employed in the automobile industry at that time. The paid-up
membership figures were, to be sure, a rock-bottom indication of
UAW strength, but they reveal nevertheless how inadequate were the
results of the AFL's organizing efforts in the industry. Of the UAW's
paid-up members, only 4481 were GM workers, which meant that less
than 3 percent of GM's hourly workers had embraced the organiza-
tion. The bulk of the GM membership, moreover, was located outside
Michigan: the five Flint locals had only 757 paid-up members, the
four GM Detroit locals only 423 members, and the remaining GM
locals in Michigan only sixty-five members. The UAW as a whole had
only 2197 paid-up members in all of Detroit and a mere 1493 additional
members in the rest of Michigan.³⁹

Insofar as automobile workers were organized in Detroit, they
belonged principally to unions not affiliated with the AFL: the Asso-
ciated Automobile Workers of America (AAWA), the Automotive
Industrial Workers' Association (AIWA), and the MESA. The AAALA, which had been formed by several UAW federal labor unions that had seceded from the AFL in the late summer of 1934, had achieved a position of power in the plants of the Hudson Motor Car Company; the AIWA, which developed out of the ALB bargaining agency in the Dodge plant, was building its strength primarily in the Chrysler plants in Detroit; and the MESA, formed early in 1933, had the core of its membership in Detroit's numerous job shops and parts plants. The combined membership of the three independents was probably somewhat greater in the summer of 1935 than the total membership of the UAW was.40

In their efforts to provide organization for the automobile workers between 1933 and 1936, the conservative leaders of the Federation in the industry came increasingly into conflict with militant and sometimes radical local leaders and members who disagreed with the AFL on strike policy, the proper time to establish an international union of automobile workers, and the jurisdiction that should be assigned to this international. The character of this conflict lessened the appeal of the AFL to the automobile workers, gave the "progressives," as they liked to call themselves, the leadership of the UAW once it gained full control of its own affairs, led the UAW to affiliate with the CIO, and set the tone for the organization campaign in the automobile industry that culminated in the GM sit-down strike at the end of 1936.

The first major difference between the AFL and the UAW militants over the use of the strike weapon occurred in March, 1934, when the Flint Fisher Body No. 1 and No. 2, Buick, and Hudson locals were threatening a strike that might have spread throughout the industry. Collins, however, who was convinced that the auto workers lacked the necessary funds and leadership to stage a successful walkout against the giants of the industry, had no intention of allowing the strike to develop and simply used the threatened dispute to secure the government intervention that led to the formulation of the President's settlement of March 25, 1934.41

Collins' view was not, however, shared by the officers and rank and file of the federal labor unions involved, who were deadly serious about striking. The possibility of a large-scale strike, as a matter of fact, had served as a decided fillip to union membership, which reached its high point for the entire NRA period in that month. The most spectacular gains were recorded in Flint. A federal conciliator reported that he had been "reliably informed" by union officials, who were probably confusing enthusiasm for the union with actual membership, that a substantial majority of the workers in the Chevrolet,
Buick, and Fisher Body plants in Flint had joined the union, and he had concluded that "if this situation breaks it will involve a tremendous number of people."[42]

Assuming that they would have been victorious in a showdown battle with GM and the other auto companies, which is problematical, the inexperienced automobile unionists were dissatisfied with the character of the President's settlement and then with its failure to bring any immediate improvement in employer-employee relations in the industry. UAW vice-president Leonard Woodcock, who was in Flint the night the men heard of the settlement, recalls that they felt "a deep sense of betrayal" and began to tear up their membership cards. As the paid-up membership of the UAW dwindled after March—the Flint membership had fallen to 528 by October—many automobile unionists concluded that they had made a fatal mistake in failing to strike and in agreeing to the settlement. "That day," Delmar Minzey, the president of the AC Spark Plug local and later the president of the amalgamated Flint local, privately informed Dillon late in November, "was the turning point of our Unions. . . . Where last March we had a splendid union . . . we [now] have only a handful of the faithful. . . . The morale of our people is broken and where there was hope there is now only fear and despair."[43]

Less than a month after the promulgation of the President's settlement, on April 22, 1934, the Cleveland Fisher Body local went out on strike. Before taking this action, the local leadership had written to other GM locals urging a united strike. This plea was answered, in a sense, by Fisher Body and Chevrolet unions in St. Louis, Kansas City, and North Tarrytown, all of them at that time outside the AFL, but the Federation discouraged a favorable response by its own automobile federal labor unions, thinking that they were not ready for combat. Since the Cleveland Fisher Body plant made all the stampings for two-door Chevrolet models and some parts for all Chevrolet bodies and the Fisher Body No. 1 plant in Flint made all the bodies for Buick and vital parts for Pontiac and Oldsmobile bodies as well, the Federation might conceivably have allowed the latter plant at least to join Cleveland on strike and thus, hopefully, to force GM to terms. Rather than follow this strategy, however, the AFL leadership decided to use the Cleveland strike to secure a conference with the top GM and Fisher Body management.

When GM insisted on the termination of the Cleveland strike as a precondition of the conference, Collins and Green did not demur. Regarding a conference with GM and a demonstration of the Federation's conservatism as of greater long-range significance for the cause of automobile unionism than a continuation of the Cleveland strike,
of whose ultimate success they were dubious in any event, they persuaded the Cleveland federal labor union to call off its walkout. "As rank and file," one of the local leaders declared shortly thereafter, "we built up the membership of the local, we pulled the strike and closed the plant. That was our part of the job, and we did it. After that it was the job of the higher officers of the union to use the situation we had brought about to the best advantage to get concessions from the company. If they bungled their part of the job, that was our hard luck."44

When the GM-Fisher Body summit conference of April 30–May 2, 1934, and the subsequent local conferences at individual Fisher Body plants did not materially alter the industrial-relations status quo in GM,45 UAW progressives concluded that the Federation leaders had indeed "bungled their part of the job." The militants, as it turned out, were eventually able to put into effect themselves the strike strategy that the AFL leadership had rejected in April, 1934.

When the automobile manufacturing code was renewed on January 31, 1935, in a manner that angered the AFL,46 there was talk that the Federation would resort to the strike weapon to indicate its displeasure with the administration and to wrest from the automobile manufacturers the improvements in the terms of employment that it had failed to incorporate in the code. Late in February, 1935, the National Council of the UAW instructed the auto locals to designate Green as their representative in bargaining with the auto companies and to take strike votes authorizing the AFL president to call a strike if the automobile manufacturers refused to accede to demands to bargain collectively. Green’s efforts to negotiate with GM and the other auto concerns proved unproductive, and since nearly all the UAW locals had voted in favor of a strike, the stage seemed set for the much talked about auto work stoppage.

Among the UAW federal labor unions none was more insistent than the Cleveland locals upon the calling of a "united general strike" in the automobile industry. After the management of Cleveland Fisher Body had rejected the demands of the UAW local in its plant, President Louis Spisak wired Green late in February, "We are depending on you for immediate action with General Motors. We are ready." The Fisher Body local somewhat later not only urged the National Council to set a strike date but, ignoring the AFL leadership, sent delegates to the GM locals in Flint to promote joint strike action.47

It seems likely that Green never had any intention of permitting an automobile strike to develop. The auto workers "wanted to engage in a general strike," he later told the Executive Council, "but I
stopped that. I said, you are in no position to engage in a general strike.” Green’s caution is understandable in view of the UAW’s limited membership at that time—the paid-up membership at the end of January was only 18,412—and the weakened condition of the federal labor unions in the Detroit main plants and in GM’s Flint stronghold. The AFL leadership, however, once again underestimated the potentiality of the strike as an organizational device. Some of the UAW leaders, indeed, were advocating a strike precisely because their organizations were in a virtually somnolent state and because they thought “the first constructive militant step” taken by the AFL would be “the spark that is now so badly needed.” One National Council member thought that “the only means we have now is to strike. . . . One thing is certain,” he wrote, “and that is, we must prove to the Automobile workers that we can help them. . . .”

When a strike did develop, at GM’s Toledo Chevrolet plant beginning on April 23, 1935, it was without AFL authorization, although the Federation quickly came to its support. It was this strike that brought the sharpest conflict during the NRA era between the AFL leadership and the militant elements within the UAW and that was of fateful significance for the future of the Federation in the automobile industry.

The nine-man Toledo strike committee was tinged with radicalism: its chairman, the twenty-three year old James Roland, and at least one or two others on the committee were under the influence of A. J. Muste and his Workers party, which had been formed by a merger of Muste’s leftish American Workers party and the Trotskyite Communist League of America. Dillon, who moved in to take charge of the strike, quickly found himself at odds with the strike committee on the most vital matters of strike policy.

The strike committee sought to convert the Toledo walkout into a general strike against GM that would not be settled until all the GM federal labor unions had won signed contracts. The Norwood Chevrolet and Fisher Body local went out on strike, and the Cleveland Fisher Body and Atlanta Chevrolet and Fisher Body locals converted plant shutdowns caused by the lack of Chevrolet transmissions into strikes; but Dillon maneuvered successfully to localize the dispute since he, like other AFL officials, did not believe that other GM locals were strong enough for a contest with the corporation. Dillon prevented the establishment of a general strike committee representing the various GM plants to conduct strike negotiations, and in a crucial test of strength with the Toledo strike committee, he prevented the Buick local from going on strike. Had the great Buick plant been successfully shut down, GM’s position would have been
weakened, but Dillon, who did not think that the Buick local was strong enough to win a strike, exerted pressure on the union’s executive board to defer a walkout even though the president of the local thought that the very “survival” of the union was at stake and that “further delay would be fatal.”

Although the “Memorandum of negotiations” agreed on by the company and union negotiators on May 12 included some gains for the union, the strike committee was miffed that the local had failed to win a signed contract and, officially anyhow, exclusive bargaining rights. Dillon, however, decided to recommend the acceptance of the agreement to the strikers, partly because Knudsen had made it clear to him that this was the company’s final offer and that the Toledo plant would be dismantled if the terms were rejected.

The strike committee, aided and abetted by Communists and Musteites, advised the strikers to reject the terms of settlement, but in a wild meeting on the evening of May 13 Dillon secured the strikers’ acceptance of the agreement by a two-to-one margin. The American Federationist contended that “for the first time in history one of the major automobile manufacturing concerns ... has agreed to recognize and meet with a spokesman for its employees,” but the militants in the Toledo local thought that Dillon had “sold out” the automobile workers and that the AFL, because of its basic fear of the strike weapon, had capitulated when it would have been possible to tie up GM as a whole and to win a national agreement and the original union demands. The Toledo Chevrolet strike not only marked “the beginning of Dillon’s downfall” in the UAW but also made the prospects of the AFL in the automobile industry even bleaker than they already were. When the UAW was to clash with GM again at the end of the next year, its leadership, remembering the Toledo strike, was to pursue a strategy of spreading rather than localizing the strike and of insisting on a national rather than a local settlement.

The Toledo settlement was followed by further negotiations in May and June between Dillon and GM executives in Cleveland, Norwood, Atlanta, Janesville, and Kansas City. As a result of these meetings agreements were concluded by which the company, as in Toledo, recognized the UAW shop committees as the spokesmen for UAW members. Dillon was elated with this turn of events and was now “confident” that the union was “upon the way to the achievement of great things.”81 Dillon, however, undoubtedly as a reaction to charges that he had settled for half a loaf in the Toledo strike, was indulging in flights of fancy. As the future was to demonstrate, he was too optimistic about GM’s good will with regard to the establishment of independent unionism in its plants.
The AFL leadership clashed with the UAW militants not only over strike policy but also regarding the establishment and the jurisdiction of an international union of automobile workers. Stimulated to take action by the unauthorized activities of some of the federal labor unions that pointed toward the creation at an early date of an international union or, at least, the closer coordination of the efforts of the UAW federal labor unions, Collins convoked a conference of automobile locals in Detroit on June 23–24, 1934, which resulted in the establishment of the National Council of United Automobile Workers Federal Labor Unions. The Council consisted of eleven members elected by the delegates and apportioned among the locals on a geographical basis, was to meet only at the call of the AFL national representative, and was to help him in organizing work and in gathering information to assist the auto workers in collective bargaining.

William Green made it clear at the June conference that it was premature to talk of establishing an international union. From the start he had indicated that this step should not be taken until the automobile workers had gained additional trade-union experience, developed effective leadership, and, above all, been able to assure the AFL that the organization would be self-sustaining. He was understandably annoyed by the naiveté of those auto workers who thought that the mere establishment of an international would solve the difficult organizational problems in the industry.52

From the AFL point of view the National Council provided a convenient mechanism for coordinating the activities of the federal labor unions while at the same time permitting a deferral of the difficult jurisdictional question. As it turned out, the Council did not play a particularly important role in the development of organization in the automobile industry.53 It did, however, help to give a certain importance to three of its members who were eventually to achieve prominence in the UAW, Fred C. Pieper, Ed Hall, and, most notably, Homer Martin.

Pieper, who had been born in Germany and brought to the United States at the age of three, was only twenty-five years old when he was placed on the Council to represent the workers of the South. He had worked in the Atlanta Fisher Body plant and had become an officeholder and the dominant figure in its federal labor union. He was one of the most vociferous advocates of a GM strike before the outbreak of the Toledo Chevrolet dispute, and he was to advocate a similar policy in the weeks preceding the sit-down strike.54 Hall, who had been born on July 25, 1887, had worked as a welder in the Seaman Body plant in Milwaukee. He was a heavy-set, loud-mouthed,
and often profane person who, it was said, "carried the colorful language of the factory into his union work."  

Born in Marion, Illinois, on August 16, 1902, Homer Martin was a graduate of William Jewell College and did postgraduate work at a seminary in Kansas City. Since he had been the AAU hop, skip, and jump champion in 1924 and 1925 and had done some preaching since 1919, he came to be known as "The Leaping Parson." He assumed the pastorate of the Baptist church in Leeds, Missouri, a Kansas City suburb, in 1931, but when his pro-labor utterances antagonized some of his parishioners, he left the pulpit and took a job in 1932 in the Kansas City Chevrolet plant. When the federal labor union was formed in the plant, Martin became active in it and eventually became its president. He lost his job in 1934—it is not clear whether he was fired or simply laid off—and allegedly said that the company would regret the decision since he would eventually organize every GM plant in the country.

A man of medium height, blue eyes, and a pleasant face, Martin looked far more like a minister or a school teacher than like the public's stereotype of the labor leader. What primarily thrust him forward in the labor movement was his talent as an orator, an important leadership asset in the eyes of inarticulate workingmen and particularly so in a union like the UAW that was without experienced leadership. Martin, to quote Irving Howe and B. J. Widick, "spoke with other worldly fervor; his language was colored by Biblical phrases; no other man could pierce the hearts of Southern-born workers [so conspicuous in GM's Flint plants] as he could. . . . he made men feel that in organizing a union they were going forth to battle for righteousness and the word of God."

But as Martin rose to the top leadership position of the UAW, it became evident that he lacked the administrative abilities to match his oratorical gifts. He was impulsive, unpredictable, inattentive to detail, difficult to work with, and temperamentally unsuited to deal steadily with day-to-day union affairs. In the months before the GM strike Martin's defects as a union leader were to become painfully apparent to many of his associates.

Quite a few of the delegates who attended the UAW conference of June, 1934, opposed the idea of a National Council and argued rather for the immediate establishment of an international, industrial union, controlled by the rank and file. The most important spokesman for this position was the president of the powerful White Motor local and one of the few experienced unionists in the UAW's ranks, Wyndham Mortimer. Older than most of the UAW leaders at that time, Mortimer had been born on March 11, 1884, in a small Pennsyl-
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vania coal-mining community. His father was a Knights of Labor member, and Mortimer “grew up in that atmosphere of unionization and strikes and things of that sort.” His first memory, he was later to recall, was “walking behind the parades of the striking miners.” Mortimer entered the mines himself at the age of twelve and joined the United Mine Workers four years later. Apparently fired for his union activities, he was subsequently to work for the National Tube Company in Lorain, Ohio, as a brakeman on the Pennsylvania Railroad, and as a street-car conductor in Cleveland. He took a job at the White Motor plant in Cleveland in 1916, helped to organize its federal labor union in 1933, and became the local’s president.

Colorless and on the quiet side but industrious, tenacious, and well informed about shop problems, Mortimer was one of the UAW’s most effective organizers. He was to become the leader of the progressive wing of the UAW and would play a decisive part in the GM sit-down. A follower of the Communist line, Mortimer was later alleged by Benjamin Stolberg to have been “a Stalinist from the very beginning,” and Joseph Zack testified before the Dies Committee in 1939 that, when he had been secretary of the Communist party in Ohio in 1933, he had approved Mortimer’s application for party membership.57

The more militant, progressive members of the UAW, who had favored the early establishment of an international union, were dissatisfied with the lack of progress made by the National Council after the June, 1934, conference. The principal center of disaffection was the nine UAW locals in Cleveland, which shortly after the June conference set up their own city Auto Council, with Mortimer as president, to push the progressive program for an international union. It was the Cleveland locals that were mainly responsible for the convocation of unauthorized, rump conferences of auto unionists in Cleveland on September 16, 1934, Flint on November 10, 1934, Detroit on January 26, 1935, and Toledo on June 8–9, 1935, that condemned the AFL’s allegedly timid strike policy and its commitment to craft unionism and ritualistically resolved in favor of the early establishment by the AFL of an international, industrial union of auto workers controlled by the rank and file.58

The AFL denounced the rump movement for an international as Communist-inspired and sought to discourage the attendance of AFL members at its meetings. The AFL did not err in its assumption that the movement was in part at least the result of Communist machinations, but it might well have paid heed to the fact that, whether Communist-influenced or not, the demand for a complete industrial jurisdiction for the international union and for rank-and-file control
struck a responsive chord among the auto workers, the vast majority of whom knew little about Communism and who, in any event, were not then as concerned about the presence of Communists in their midst as they were later to become.50

The AFL was in the meantime proceeding in its own fashion toward the establishment of an international union of automobile workers. At the San Francisco convention of the Federation in October, 1934, the delegates unanimously adopted a resolution directing the AFL Executive Council to issue charters for internationals in several mass-production industries, including the automotive, with the Federation, for a “provisional period,” to direct their policies, administer their affairs, and designate their officers.51

At the winter session of the Executive Council in January–February, 1935, John L. Lewis remarked that the Federation’s failure to set up “a comprehensive and outstanding organization” in the automobile industry was “operating to discredit” the AFL in the eyes of the country, and he urged his colleagues to “throw money, men and a charter” into the industry. The Council was willing to give the UAW a charter, but it was unwilling to surrender to it the jurisdiction over some of the auto workers claimed by the craft unions. Green explained to the Council that the auto workers, because of the nature of their jobs, were “mass-minded,” and Lewis, whose interest was less industrial unionism as an end in itself than it was the organization of the unorganized,61 urged that the jurisdictional issue be postponed until organization had been achieved. “Contention over the fruits of victory,” he sensibly advised, should “be deferred until we have some of the fruits in our possession.” He chided his associates that they had been “too long straining at a gnat and swallowing the camel.”

The Council was, however, unpersuaded by what Green and Lewis had to say and by a vote of eleven to three decided that the jurisdiction of the new union should be defined as embracing “all employees directly engaged in the manufacture of parts (not including tools, dies and machinery) and assembling of those parts into completed automobiles but not including job or contract shops manufacturing parts or any other employee engaged in said automobile production plants.”62 This left the projected union with only a semi-industrial jurisdiction and made a reality of the fear of many unionists that, in the end, they would not be permitted to include in their jurisdiction all the workers in and around the automobile plants regardless of their craft. Like Lewis, they wanted to bring organization to the mass of the auto workers, and their experience since 1933 had convinced them that craft unionism was a deterrent to large-scale organization in the industry and that an industrial-type union was
more likely to appeal to the auto workers and had a greater chance of success.

The Executive Council authorized the Federation's officers to form the union when in their judgment it was "appropriate and convenient" to do so and provided that the officers of the new union were to be designated by the president of the AFL for a temporary period to be determined by the Executive Council. Green and Dillon discussed the subject on June 17, following which Dillon announced that preparations would be made for a convention beginning on August 26 to launch the new international. 63

The impending UAW constitutional convention prompted the convocation of a national conference of UAW progressives in Cleveland at the end of June, 1935. The principal document presented to the conference bitterly attacked the AFL for relying primarily on government agencies and boards rather than "taking the one sure path to winning the demand of the auto workers—the path of organization and militant strike action." What was required, the progressives thought, was preparation in the next production season on "a national scale for a national strike to win a national agreement." They expressed their disapproval of the jurisdictional limits imposed by the proposed charter for the new international and urged that the auto workers be permitted to elect their own officers. The progressives reiterated these views in a statement to the delegates who came to Detroit for the UAW's constitutional convention and declared that their purpose was not to advocate Communism but to build a strong union. "Take your stand with us, the progressives," they urged the delegates, "for an Industrial Union, for a union controlled by the membership and led by auto workers, for a union pledged to a policy of militant action in defense of the workers in our industry." 64

The sentiments of the majority of the delegates who attended the UAW constitutional convention in Detroit at the end of August, 1935, were clearly with the progressives, but it was the AFL that controlled the convention machinery, and it was the AFL that prevailed on the two principal issues debated on the convention floor: the jurisdiction of the new union and the right of the delegates to choose their own officers. The delegates reluctantly accepted the jurisdictional limitations imposed by the charter, but in a show of independence they defeated by a vote of 164.2 to 112.8 a resolution calling upon Green to appoint Dillon the president of the new international. After surveying the situation for two days, Green, however, concluded that to allow the convention to select the union's officers would create "serious internal dissension," and he therefore decided to follow the instructions of the Executive Council and to appoint all the officers
himself. He selected Dillon to serve as president during the probationary period, Martin as vice-president, Hall as secretary-treasurer, and the remaining members of the National Council, none of whom represented the power centers in the union, as members, along with the three officers, of the union’s General Executive Board (GEB).

Clearly displeased at what had transpired, the indignant delegates resolved to select a committee of seven to protest to the AFL Executive Council and, if necessary, to the next AFL convention Green’s designation of the union’s officers and also, although the proceedings of the convention do not reveal it, the jurisdictional limitations of the charter. The delegates left no doubt regarding their preferences with respect to the issues in contention by selecting a committee dominated by progressives.65

After being rebuffed by the Executive Council—Mortimer later claimed that David Dubinsky and William Hutcheson wanted to know how many Communists there were in the group—the committee of seven carried its protest to the floor of the AFL’s October convention in Atlantic City, a convention whose defeat of a proposal calling for “the organization of workers in mass production industries upon industrial and plant lines, regardless of claims based on jurisdiction,” led the following month to the formation of the CIO. The decision of the convention on the industrial-union question presaged the defeat of the proposals of the committee of seven. The delegates voted down the committee’s resolution requesting that the UAW be granted “complete jurisdiction . . . over all employees in or around plants engaged in the manufacture of automobile parts and the assembly of such parts into completed automobiles” and referred to the Executive Council a second resolution that provided for the calling of a special convention of the UAW not later than March 1, 1936, to permit the auto workers to elect their own officers. The Executive Council left the question of the termination of the probationary period up to Green, with the proviso that no final decision on the subject was to be made before the Council’s January meeting. The decisions taken by the Atlantic City convention not only led to the formation of the CIO but made it virtually certain that the UAW would eventually cast its lot with the new organization. The committee of seven, as a matter of fact, met with Lewis at the convention, and he assured them that he was “in back” of them.66

The fall of 1935 and the winter of 1935–36 were a time of troubles for the UAW—its average paid-up membership for the last four months of the year was an incredibly low 5135—and particularly for the AFL leadership in the union. Disgruntled at the reluctance of
the majority of the delegates at the Detroit convention to accept him as their leader, Dillon pursued a course of action during the months after the convention that lost him whatever support he still enjoyed among the automobile workers. He largely ignored the GEB members and unwisely held up the reimbursement of the members of the committee of seven for the expenses they had incurred in carrying the protests of the Detroit delegates to the Executive Council and the Atlantic City convention. Of greater importance in serving to widen the breach between the UAW's first president and an increasing number of its members were the tactics Dillon employed with regard to the granting of a charter to the Toledo federal labor union and the participation of the UAW in a strike at the Motor Products plant in Detroit that began on November 15, 1935.

The composite Toledo federal labor union had sought Dillon's ouster as the AFL's national representative in the automobile industry following the Toledo Chevrolet strike and had spearheaded the opposition to him at the Detroit convention. When Dillon after the convention rejected the powerful local's request for a charter from the new international and adamantly insisted that charters could be assigned only to individual plant unions, it looked as though he was seeking to gain revenge on an old enemy rather than being concerned with the best interests of the international.

The "bloody, violent, vicious" Motor Products strike was less important in the long run as a conflict between labor and management than as a dispute affecting the relationship of the independent auto unions to the UAW. The strike was called by the AIWA and quickly supported by the MESA, which had organized the plant’s tool and die makers. Some of the Motor Products workers belonged to the UAW and a lesser number to other AFL unions, and they too were forced from the plant on November 16, when the management decided to cease production temporarily. Denouncing dual unionism, Dillon rejected a MESA invitation to the UAW to join the strike that gave the AFL unions more substantial representation on the strike committee than their numbers warranted and injudiciously characterized the walkout as "the most ill-advised and unpopular strike ever called in Detroit." He insisted that the Motor Products management was willing to negotiate with its workers but did not know which of the several unions in the plant should be treated as their spokesman, and he therefore proposed a return to work pending an NLRB election. The UAW members voted to accept this suggestion and accordingly marched into the plant on November 25 behind their shop committee and with a police escort.

When it became apparent after the UAW returned to work that
the Motor Products management, despite Dillon’s previous assurances to the contrary, was anxious to “avoid” all unions rather than to recognize and deal with one, the UAW local on December 8 voted to strike but left the timing of the walkout to the president of the local. A brief sit-down appears to have been staged in the plant on December 18, but Dillon, after conferring with the management, announced the UAW withdrawal from the strike because, he said, it had “no possible chance of success.” The MESA and the AIWA, however, continued the strike—the MESA did not admit defeat until May 27, 1936—and denounced Dillon as a “Judas” and a strikebreaker.69

Dillon’s tactics threatened further to weaken the already weak AFL position in Detroit and to make it impossible for the independents to merge with the UAW once its probationary period had come to an end, which was a prime UAW objective. Claiming a membership of thirty thousand, which was almost certainly an exaggeration, the three independents had begun to talk about a merger of their forces shortly before the start of the Motor Products strike. This had caused the newly formed CIO to dispatch John Brophy to Detroit to undertake his “first field job” as the committee’s “director.” Brophy met with Matthew Smith of the MESA on November 11 and concluded that the proposed merger was “a bona-fide attempt on the part of the workers to set up an industrial union in the automobile industry.” Late in November the leaders of the AIWA and the MESA wrote to Lewis indicating their willingness to affiliate with the AFL should the UAW receive an industrial-union charter and attain “internal democracy.” The CIO took the matter under advisement, but in the meantime the independents went ahead with their merger plans. Seeking to capitalize on Dillon’s bewildering policy in the Motor Products strike, they appealed to UAW members to choose “between a delapidated [sic], reactionary group asking you to scab on your co-workers and . . . a new mobile industrial organization, democratically controlled.” The independents, primarily because of differences among their leaders, were to find it easier to talk about merger than to achieve it, but, largely because of the Motor Products strike they continued to look askance at affiliation with a UAW controlled by Francis Dillon.70

The coolness between the UAW and the regular AFL leadership toward the end of 1935 was reflected in the growing antagonism between Vice-President Martin and President Dillon and the enthusiasm expressed in UAW circles for Lewis and the CIO. In the middle of November, 1935, Martin journeyed to Cleveland to present the charter of the White Motor local and there talked with such opponents of Dillon as Mortimer. Martin “made a great hit” with the
Cleveland unionists and apparently agreed with their leadership on the need for "militant progressive unionism." He was becoming increasingly aware of the desire of the auto workers for a full-fledged industrial union and of their interest in Lewis and the CIO. "I find," he wrote, "that every where the Auto Workers are of the same opinion, they all want Lewis..." The Cleveland Auto Council had decided to launch an organizing campaign in the industry, and Martin joined the delegation that visited CIO headquarters in Washington on November 26 to request that Lewis be the speaker at a mass meeting that would initiate the campaign. The Cleveland group explained that "a gigantic mass organizational drive" was required "to overcome... apathy and suspicion" among the workers and that only Lewis could draw a large crowd at the meeting. Brophy informed the delegation that the CIO wanted to "encourage and keep alive [the] feeling for organization" in the automotive and other mass-production industries but that its "procedure and policy" were not yet "fully developed." The appropriate action at the moment, he advised, was for Adolph Germer to visit the automotive centers to canvass the situation.\(^{71}\)

Germer, the first field representative of the CIO and soon to become director of its Detroit regional office and, in effect, its man in the automobile industry, was a large hulk of a man, six-feet two inches in height and weighing 240 pounds. Born in Germany in 1880, he had joined the United Mine Workers at age eleven, when he quit school to enter the mines, and eventually became an organizer for the union and vice-president of one of its sub-districts. He had become a member of the Socialist party in 1900, and from 1916 to 1920 had been its national secretary. He had long been an opponent of John L. Lewis, but Lewis now put him to work for the CIO. He was to serve the CIO as an organizer for twenty years until his retirement in 1955.\(^{72}\)

Germer visited Cleveland and Detroit early in December and also met with delegations of auto workers from Toledo and Flint. He discovered that there was "a quite general organization sentiment" but that it was "wholly" for the industrial form of organization. He reported that the UAW had five thousand members in Cleveland among the city's twenty-five to thirty thousand auto workers, which was undoubtedly an exaggeration, but that there were only three to four thousand members in Detroit out of a potential of 200,000 and a bare five hundred members in Flint out of a possible forty thousand.

While in Detroit, Germer had two conferences with Dillon and concluded, as the CIO representative advised Lewis, that he was "with us," that he believed the auto workers could be organized only along
industrial lines, and that he would go along “passively” with the CIO drive although he could not “openly cooperate” since he had to implement AFL policy in the industry. Germer was later to offer Dillon CIO organizers and funds, but he rejected the offer. When Germer then asked him what his reaction would be if individual UAW locals sought and received CIO aid, he replied, “‘Well, I wouldn’t know anything about that.’ ” At the same time, Dillon, who told Germer one thing and his AFL superiors something quite different, reported to the AFL Executive Council that he had rejected CIO support since it was a dual organization; and Ed Hall told Germer that Dillon had said that the CIO “‘can shove their organizers up their a—.”’73

On the basis of information supplied by Germer that union sentiment was increasing among auto workers but that the AFL’s craft-union policies were a deterrent to organization, Sidney Hillman recommended at a CIO meeting of December 9, 1935, that the new committee should “centralize its efforts on the automobile industry.” Believing that “real results” could be achieved in two to three months, Hillman argued that the CIO should advise the UAW “to take in all the workers” and that the industrial-union committee should “stand by” the auto workers should a strike develop in the automotive industry. This led to “an extended discussion” of the problems of organizing the unorganized, after which the CIO decided to support organizational efforts in the automobile industry and to press both for the amalgamation of the independents and the UAW and an “unrestricted industrial union charter.” “Sound the unity note for auto workers on basis of industrial unionism in affiliation with AF of L,” Brophy wired Germer on December 20, 1935.74

Seeking to implement his instructions, Germer conferred in early January, 1936, with Dillon and the leadership of the independents in an effort to effect a merger of their organizations. Dillon proved conciliatory for the moment and suggested that Matthew Smith of the MESA and Richard Frankensteen of the AIWA prepare a unity statement that he would submit to the AFL Executive Council meeting later in the month. Dillon, however, was pursuing his usual policy of being all things to all men, and in the end he made no effort to promote amalgamation at the Executive Council meeting. The CIO’s initial efforts to achieve unity among the union forces in the automobile industry thus ended in failure, as did the simultaneous attempt of the independents to effect a merger of their own.75

The CIO was in the meantime moving to implement its promise to assist in the organizing efforts of the UAW. To dramatize CIO support for the auto unionists, Lewis accepted the invitation of the
Cleveland Auto Council and appeared in Cleveland on January 19, 1936, to make his first public address in the interests of industrial unionism since the formation of the CIO. Speaking to a huge crowd that had braved a blizzard to attend, Lewis delivered a “fiery attack” on the automobile companies and called for the “complete unionization” of the industry. He pledged the UAW the aid of the CIO and expressed the hope that the AFL Executive Council, then meeting in Miami, would see the light, “like the Apostle Paul on the Damascus Road,” and grant the UAW a thoroughgoing industrial-union charter.76

The AFL Executive Council was, however, quite unlike the Apostle Paul. At its Miami meeting it reaffirmed the jurisdiction of the UAW as previously defined by the Council and the Atlantic City convention and ordered the union to withdraw the charters it had already granted to forty-three job and contract shops not owned by automobile manufacturing companies. This decision was received with consternation by the independent unions in the industry and the UAW. Matthew Smith told Germer that his “‘people’” refused “‘to be parcelled out like fish on the market,‘” and Frankensteen remarked, “‘that is awful; that is not union that is disunion.’” “‘Let them go to hell,‘” a UAW official angrily declared, and even Frank Martel, the president of the Detroit and Wayne County Federation of Labor, thought that the Executive Council members were “‘crazy.’” There was no likelihood, as a matter of fact, that the UAW locals would abide by the decision. As the recording secretary of one of the strongest locals had previously advised the AFL when informed that some of the members of his union were being claimed by the Pattern Makers’ League: “Definately [sic] and with out [sic] any hesitancy let us inform you that every employee in the industry we claim as within our jurisdiction. For thirty years no craft Union has been able to organize these workers. Today, we have performed that merical [sic] which was said to be impossible. What we have, we hold, relinquishing no one. . . .”77

Although angered by the AFL decision on the jurisdiction question, the UAW did feel that it had won “a distinct victory” when the Executive Council, urged on by Martin, Mortimer, and Hall, decided at its January meeting to bring the probationary period of the UAW to an end and to hold a convention not later than April 30 to permit the auto workers to select their own officers and thus to secure the internal democracy for which they and their friends were clamoring. Seemingly emboldened by this decision, Martin and Hall, who had also become disillusioned with Dillon, attempted to oust the UAW president from office even before the convention to end the
probationary period was held. Without consulting other GEB members, they impetuously “assumed complete charge of the [Detroit] office,” and three days later Martin informed a UAW friend, “Dillon is out! . . . We are in charge and propose to stay in complete charge until the convention.” The rival UAW leaders refused to talk to one another, bolted the door between their offices, spied on one another, and Martin and Hall charged that Dillon had gone so far as to place a dictograph in their office. Germer reported to CIO headquarters that UAW affairs in Detroit were now “a badly mixed up mess” and that organization work in the city was “virtually at a standstill.”

Proceeding as though the executive authority were vested in them, Martin and Hall quickly dispatched a charter to the Toledo local (Dillon by this time had already granted a charter to the Toledo Chevrolet workers as Local 12, and so the charter presented by Martin and Hall applied only to the remainder of the old federal labor union, now reconstituted as Local 14) and, in an attempt to win the support of the independents, decided to put “everything we have got” into the barely surviving Motor Products strike. Martin thought that the UAW could “make a lasting impression” on the city if it came to the aid of the strikers, and Germer concluded that the fact that at least part of the UAW “official family” was now cooperating with the independents had “eased” the “sting” resulting from Dillon’s strike behavior.

Despite Martin’s statement that Dillon was “out,” he was able to hang on to his presidency until the April convention of the UAW. Green called the disputants to Washington and told them that the fight would have to cease or he would be compelled to take appropriate action, and Germer, Mortimer, and others were arguing that the best strategy for the UAW to pursue was “to lay quiet until after [the] convention” when the unionists could “show their teeth a little more.” “Now that the Convention is assured,” Mortimer advised Martin, “I think our best plan would be not to rock the boat, as the Craft organizations are capitalizing on our difficulties, and the reaction may damage us.” Martin was seemingly content to accept this judgment, but the abortive coup d’état had not been without considerable gain for him: he had succeeded in establishing his independence of the unfortunate Dillon and had increased his popularity among the auto workers.

The progressives were in the meantime making their preparations for the second UAW convention, scheduled for South Bend in April. They held an informal meeting in Toledo early in February and elected a committee of twelve, headed by Mortimer, to draft a
program that was to be presented to a caucus of progressive unionists scheduled for the next month in South Bend. More than 140 delegates, representing most of the big UAW locals, met in the Indiana city on March 14 and 15 and adopted resolutions prepared by the committee that allegedly embodied "the best thought and experience" of the UAW. The resolutions called for a major organizing drive, particularly in Michigan, following the convention, industrial unionism in the mass-production industries and the expansion of the UAW's jurisdiction, the extension of an invitation to the independents to affiliate with the UAW, the revision of the UAW constitution to reduce the power of the officers and to permit locals to strike on their own initiative as long as they notified the international in advance, and, in consonance with the Communist line, AFL support for the formation of a labor party.81

The progressives had begun work on the preparation of a slate of officers to be presented to the April convention as early as January 19, 1936, and apparently had agreed at their Toledo conference to support Martin for president and Mortimer for vice-president. They clearly, however, preferred Mortimer to Martin, whom some of them characterized as "injudicious," and they would try for a time to gain the top spot in the organization for the former; but in the end they would go along with the choice of Martin because he was the more popular figure of the two and because they assumed, in any event, that he was in their camp. The progressives had come to the 1935 UAW convention without an agreed-upon slate of candidates, and this, they believed, had handicapped them in their conflict with Green over the selection of the union's officers, but they now declared, "we do not intend to be caught napping again." Martin reported after the March caucus that "our lines still hold," and they were to "hold" throughout the South Bend convention despite a belated effort by Mortimer just before the meeting to gain CIO support for his candidacy. The long struggle between the AFL leadership and the progressives for control of the UAW was now to be decided in favor of the progressives.82

The second convention of the UAW opened in South Bend on April 27, 1936. Dillon claimed a membership for the organization of forty thousand, but the paid-up membership at the time was less than twenty-four thousand. Most of the membership, moreover, as had been true from the start, was concentrated in auto companies and parts plants outside Michigan. None of Flint's five locals, judging from their representation at the convention, had much more than one hundred members, and the total Detroit membership was probably
less than two thousand. More than half the paid-up members were concentrated in five locals: Studebaker, Toledo parts, White Motor, Kenosha Nash, and Seaman Body.  

“The prime purpose” of the delegates, to quote the managing editor of the Federated Press, “was to run Frank Dillon out of the convention and keep him out, and all others like him—and this was done with great relish.” Dillon stepped down from his position, and the Progressives, who were in control of the convention and enjoyed the support of most of the big locals, put through their slate of candidates. Martin was elected president; Mortimer, first vice-president; Hall, second vice-president; Walter N. Wells, whose Detroit Gear local had the largest paid-up membership of any of the Detroit locals, third vice-president; and George Addes, of Toledo’s Local 12, secretary-treasurer. Of the eleven GEB members, five were definitely linked with the left wing, and three others leaned that way. Only three GEB members could be classified as “Dillonites.” Most of the officers and board members were under thirty-five—Pieper and Walter Reuther, the latter one of the least known of the group at that time, were under thirty—and every one of them had worked in an automobile plant, which reflected the long-standing antagonism of the auto workers to organizers and union officials without experience in the industry.

One place on the GEB was held open for a representative of one of the independent unions, all of which had spokesmen at the convention who expressed a desire for unity with the UAW. Following the convention the AIWA and the AAWA affiliated with the UAW, giving the union a measure of strength in the plants of Chrysler and Hudson. The MESA National Administrative Committee, however, declined a merger invitation, but following the convention three of MESA’s Detroit locals, which contained a large segment of the organization’s membership in the city and the bulk of its Communists, seceded and joined the UAW. The addition of the MESA members further “radicalized” the UAW, bringing into its ranks such men as John Anderson, who had been the Communist party’s candidate for governor of Michigan in 1934 and who now became the president of Local 155.

The power of the radical elements in the UAW was very much in evidence at the South Bend convention. The delegates refused to approve a resolution to expel known Communists from the union’s membership or, as amended, to deny officeholding in the international or the locals to “provén” Communists, approved a Communist party-line resolution calling for the establishment of a farmer-labor party, and refused to endorse Roosevelt for a second term. The latter
action prompted Germer to charge that Socialists and Communists had “taken over the convention” and were “voting not as auto workers but according to their political views.” Germer, whom the CIO had assigned to the convention to “take care of whatever steps are necessary to keep the situation in hand,” took Martin aside and told him that the UAW’s failure to support Roosevelt would be a boon to the Liberty League. Martin thereupon raised the question on the convention floor a second time, and the resolution endorsing the President was approved. “The Communists,” a veteran observer of the auto labor scene declared shortly after the convention, “are riding high, wide and handsome in the United [Automobile Workers].”

The diminished prestige of the AFL and the rising influence of the CIO among the auto workers were quite apparent at the convention. There was “no great demonstration” for Green when he was ushered into the convention hall, and he did not help matters when he told the delegates in reviewing the efforts of the Federation in the industry, “I do not see where a mistake was made.” CIO organizers had already come to the assistance of the UAW in its organizing efforts in Cleveland and Detroit, and CIO representatives Rose Pesotta of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union and Leo Krzycki of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers had apparently helped to round up delegates for the South Bend convention. Pesotta, Krzycki, Germer, and Charles Howard were present at the convention and played an important role in its deliberations. Martin and “all other CIO supported” candidates had been elected and “our entire program adopted,” Krzycki wired Hillman from South Bend. Green concluded when the convention was over that the CIO “completely dominated and controlled” the UAW, but this was certainly an exaggeration.

The South Bend delegates approved a resolution calling for the launching of a nation-wide organization drive and the raising for this purpose of a minimum of $250,000, at least $75,000 of which was to be contributed by UAW locals and the remainder by the AFL and “all sympathetic organizations.” Mortimer accurately predicted that the “fight” with GM would come before the next convention was held, and Hall similarly stated that “General Motors will know damn well we are not running away from them.”

The planning of some sort of action against GM was very much on the mind of the youthful president of the Toledo Chevrolet local, Robert C. Travis. Born in Flint on February 7, 1906, Travis had been active in organizing the Toledo Chevrolet plant, had served on the strike committee during the 1935 strike, and had eventually become president of the local. He had attended the UAW’s constitutional
convention and there had met Wyndham Mortimer; the two men soon came to symbolize the Cleveland-Toledo axis formed as the result of the Toledo Chevrolet strike and the pursuit of common goals at the 1935 convention. Mortimer would stop in Toledo on his way to Detroit or South Bend, and Travis would visit in Cleveland. Travis many years later was to say that Mortimer had been "the main influence in my life, in raising things that I'd never heard about before in a way that seemed logical to me."

Travis had a winning smile and a tremendously attractive personality. He was energetic and ebullient, knew the problems of the shop, and was able to inspire confidence in insecure workers. He had learned during the Toledo Chevrolet strike, and he was not to forget the lesson, how vulnerable GM was to a strike in one of its key plants and how a small, strategically placed group of workers could successfully challenge even a corporation as powerful as GM.

Travis recommended just before the South Bend convention that delegates from the GM plants should caucus and consider the establishment of a GM council, made up of representatives of the various GM locals, to present a united front to the corporation. Travis, who sometimes thought in military terms, saw the conflict between the UAW and GM as a battle between armies of grossly unequal power.

The situation as it stands now [he wrote] is comparable to a vast army on one side with all the hideous advantages of modern warfare—airplanes—poison gas—machine guns—long range guns, and hand grenades, and last but not least, their secret service. This vast army is a well oiled, well disciplined outfit, having a perfectly designed program which when worked out step by step, their final objection [objective] is practically assured.

On the other side, we see scattered battalions, unskilled ... in this modern warfare, armed with bows and arrows, spears, and swords. They have no secret service working ... in the enemy lines. They have no airplanes, poison gas, machine guns or hand grenades. They have not the advantages of a specifically concentrated method of attack. Each battalion is fighting its own battles, without the aid of the other, in its puny way against this vast army. Regardless how well founded their cause, these men are doomed to defeat, unless they concentrate their armies to enter upon the field equipped to fight fire with fire, the odds are greatly against them. 89

On Germer's advice, the GM delegates at South Bend took no action on a resolution calling for the formation of a GM council. 80
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The events of the convention, however, made it appear that there would be a confrontation with GM before many months had passed, and when that occurred Travis would be given a chance to demonstrate how a small army could defeat a much larger one if it had the right strategy and tactics and the proper sort of external support.

Two months after the close of the South Bend convention, on July 2, Martin met with the CIO leadership and, as was predictable, aligned the UAW with the new organization, a decision that was ratified by the GEB on August 3. The CIO promised its full support in the UAW drive to organize the automobile workers, and by the end of August it was paying for three full-time organizers in the motor-vehicle industry quite apart from the aid being rendered the UAW by Germer and Krzycki. Although the automobile industry was the first in which the CIO provided “concrete organizational aid,” it did not make its formal entry into the auto organizing campaign until after the November elections, and at no time prior to the GM sit-down did it make the same kind of organizational commitment to the automobile industry that it was making in the steel industry.91

The UAW was beset throughout the organizational drive preceding the GM strike by discord and factionalism within its high command, a problem that was to afflict the auto workers for many years to come. Communism, the persistence of “Dillonism” on the GEB, and a certain ambivalence of Martin toward the CIO all contributed to disharmony among the UAW leadership. Martin, who on occasion attacked red-baiting within the UAW, complained on other occasions that the Communists were “busy trying to control the International” and that there were Communist party “undercover agents” within the UAW family. In March he had told Mortimer that he (Martin) had “never had anything to do with raising a red scare against anyone, let alone you” and that he considered Mortimer to be “a special friend,” but some months later he concluded that Mortimer and some Communists in the organization were opposed to him and were seeking to “capture” the UAW. No real effort was made by Martin before the GM strike, however, to rid the UAW of the Communist presence, and, indeed, there would have been relatively little support within the union for any such move. The prevailing view of the organization at that time was undoubtedly that expressed by a rubber worker who was aiding the UAW organization drive: “It doesn’t make any difference if a man is a Communist, Socialist, Republican, or Democrat, as long as he is loyal to the union.”92

Perhaps to offset the power of the progressives on the GEB, Martin seems to have forged an alliance with the former Dillon supporters on the board, Pieper, F. J. Michel of the Nash Racine
local, and Russell Merrill of Studebaker, who had been Martin's opponent for the presidency at the South Bend convention. When other GEB members learned of secret meetings of this group, they complained to Germer that Martin was seeking to build a "machine" and that the men involved were red-baiters who wanted to oust such people as Mortimer and Anderson from the UAW.\textsuperscript{93}

Martin pursued a perplexing policy with regard to the CIO. Publicly, he sought CIO aid in the form of money and organizers, but privately he attempted on occasion to exclude the CIO representative in Detroit from GEB deliberations. Martin's motives can only be surmised. Perhaps he thought that the CIO was too closely linked with the progressives in the UAW and on the GEB; perhaps, as Germer thought, he was "feeling his oats" and was disinclined to take advice from anyone; perhaps he did not like the particular kind of advice that Germer was giving him, namely, that the UAW must proceed with caution in challenging the giants in the automobile industry.\textsuperscript{94} In any event, the lack of complete rapport between Martin and the CIO, like the conflict between Dillonites and left-wing elements on the GEB, in part explains the confused beginnings of the GM sit-down.

Quite apart from the division among UAW leaders in ideology and on policy matters, members of the GEB and Germer as well were disturbed by Martin's lack of administrative ability, his erratic behavior, and his indecisiveness. Germer complained that Martin was spending "too much [time] running around" and was not giving enough attention to "getting his organization machinery in shape," that he was unable "to organize himself and assert himself." Germer found it so difficult to get along with Martin that he asked Lewis in November for a different assignment. Secretary-Treasurer Addes, whose talents were administrative and bureaucratic, was troubled because "Martin does not direct affairs but leaves everybody go at will." Several UAW board members complained similarly in November that "things are not 'clicking,' that there is no real system." The lack of "system" and the strong prejudice of UAW members against centralizing tendencies in the organization, a product of the UAW's history, created a condition of near anarchy in the union that made it possible for each local to go its own way and make its own decisions on the most important of union matters.\textsuperscript{95}

The UAW ostensibly launched an organization campaign on June 22, and it was soon claiming substantial increases in its membership, but little if any progress seems to have been made by the auto workers prior to the national elections of November. Some important organizational steps were, however, taken in the months between the
South Bend convention and the Democratic sweep in the fall. An educational director (Merlin D. Bishop, who had been on the extension staff of Brookwood Labor College) was added to the UAW staff on June 19, and a research director (William L. Munger, a former president of the Olds local) was appointed in October. When the GEB met early in August, it appointed a field staff of fifteen paid organizers and provided for an increase in this number to twenty during the next few weeks. UAW officers and GEB members were themselves assigned some of the key organizational responsibilities: Richard Frankensteen, who had been given the seat left vacant on the GEB for a representative of one of the independent unions, was placed in charge of organizational work in Detroit; Delmond Garst, the general executive secretary of the St. Louis Chevrolet and Fisher Body local and a GEB member, was assigned to St. Louis and Kansas City; Mortimer, who was already at work in Flint, was confirmed as organizational director in that city; and Ed Hall was placed in charge in Anderson, Muncie, and Newcastle, Indiana.  

Following the GEB's August session, representatives of the GM locals met to discuss their common problems. The union representatives of the various GM divisions met again on September 14 and finally approved Bob Travis' plan to establish a GM Advisory Council. Travis, Munger, and Garst were designated as a steering committee to plan a GM organizing campaign.  

The UAW did score one "significant material and psychological victory" before the November elections in a struggle with the Chrysler Corporation over the question of seniority in the Dodge plant. During the summer layoffs the Dodge management told thousands of workers that they would not be rehired because their jobs had been obliterated by machines. When production resumed, the Dodge local complained that the company had violated the principle of seniority in its rehiring policy and had discriminated against union men. Confronted by a strike threat as the negotiations dragged on, the company capitulated on October 16 and accepted the union demands regarding the procedures to be followed in the reemployment of Dodge workers. Since the UAW record in Detroit had largely been one of defeat, the "sweet smell of success" resulting from the Dodge victory was not only important for the morale of union members, but it also strengthened the UAW appeal to the unorganized. Soon the word was out that "things are cracking open in Detroit and they are signing them up by [the] hundreds."  

Far more important than the Dodge victory was the stimulus to organization provided by Roosevelt's smashing victory over Alfred M. Landon and the American Liberty League in the presidential election
of November 3, 1936. In a thinly veiled appeal for Republican votes about three weeks before the election, Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., who was prominently associated with the Liberty League and was a heavy contributor to the Republican party, told GM workers that the company was not in politics but that the workers should assure themselves of the economic soundness of the various proposals being spewed forth during the campaign and should understand who would pay for them if they were implemented. Under the circumstances, the election results were understandably viewed by the workers as representing a victory not only over the unfortunate Landon but over GM and the other automobile manufacturers as well. “You voted New Deal at the polls, and defeated the Auto Barons—Now get a New Deal in the shop,” the UAW told the auto workers. With the election of Roosevelt and so many liberal governors, the most important of whom from the UAW point of view was Governor-elect Frank Murphy of Michigan, “our opportunity for a great organization,” Martin reported to the UAW, “should be realized in the next few months. The government is obviously with us.” Perhaps now, the former mine worker John L. Lewis thought, the President “would hold the light” for the union forces while they “went out and organized.” The election, said a CIO leader in Detroit, is “a mandate to labor to organize.”

Adolph Germer had observed before the election that the auto workers were “still gripped with a feeling of fear,” but he was “sure the election of Roosevelt will inject some stiffening in their backbone.” Roosevelt’s victory seems to have had precisely the effect that Germer had anticipated. It helped to make the idea of joining the union somewhat more attractive to the auto worker, somewhat less of a hazard than it had previously appeared to be. He had become more conscious of his power, and perhaps, after all, President Roosevelt did want him to join the union and would protect his right to do so. There were signs in the auto industry during the next few weeks of that great upsurge of unionism, of labor on the march, that was to make the year 1937 the *annus mirabilis* of the American labor movement, but it would take a victory over a foe as formidable as GM before the flow of workers into the UAW would reach flood tide.

When the CIO leadership met in Pittsburgh on November 7–8, with Martin present, it was decided to step up the organizing campaign in the automobile industry so as to capitalize on “the favorable climate for the union” resulting from the Roosevelt and Murphy victories and the rise in the “fighting spirit” of the auto workers stemming from the Dodge success. Brophy and Philip Murray, the chairman of the Steel Workers’ Organizing Committee, visited Detroit on November 12 and 13 to counsel with the UAW and by
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their presence to mark the formal opening of the new organization campaign. They met with the officers of the UAW and with union organizers, who had been brought in from the field for the occasion, and also spoke at three UAW meetings.100

The UAW and CIO leadership announced that the goals of the automobile organizing campaign were an annual wage “to assure security during periods of idleness” and “to provide a standard of health, decency and comfort” for the worker, the elimination of the speed-up, seniority based on length of service alone, an eight-hour day and a forty-hour week, time-and-one-half pay for overtime, the progressive reduction of hours until all the unemployed auto workers and those displaced by machines had been reemployed, improved safety measures, and the establishment of “true collective bargaining through the representatives of the bona fide labor organization.” The UAW asserted that these demands reflected the desires of the auto workers themselves and also the excellent financial condition of the industry.101 It is noteworthy and somewhat puzzling in view of events to come that the UAW did not demand acceptance as the exclusive representative of the auto workers for collective-bargaining purposes and that it called for the forty-hour rather than the thirty-hour week that it had been officially seeking.

The organization drive, pushed by mass meetings, solicitation at factory gates, and even home visits, was aided by victories in sit-down or “quickie” strikes in November and December against Bendix Products Corporation, Midland Steel, Kelsey-Hayes Wheel Company, and Flint Fisher Body No. 1, the increase in automobile production and the usual worker complaints associated with the grooving-in period, the support of the CIO,102 and the assistance rendered by the United States Senate Subcommittee on Education and Labor (the La Follette Committee), which had been cooperating with the union since the beginning of the fall and which announced on December 19 that it would soon conduct an inquiry into GM labor practices and would examine charges of strikebreaking, espionage, and illegal anti-union activities. On December 8 the UAW and the Federation of Flat Glass Workers set up a council for joint action and authorized it to take such common action as it deemed necessary to cope with any labor situation confronting either of the two unions. The Flat Glass Workers had struck the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company, which supplied Chrysler, on October 24, and it was to strike the Ottawa, Illinois, plant of Libby-Owens-Ford, which supplied GM, on December 2 and its remaining plants on December 15. The prolongation of these two strikes posed a major threat to the continued operation of two of the three major automobile producers.103
As its organization campaign continued, the UAW claimed that thousands were “clamoring for organization,” and it appealed for more funds and placed additional organizers in the field. Gains were being reported everywhere. Cleveland told of “the greatest upsurge in union activity” since the strike of April, 1934; from Anderson came word of “a tidal wave of organization”; the auto union in Flint was said to be “sweeping everything before it”; and Frankensteen reported major membership gains in Detroit.\textsuperscript{104}

Although the UAW exaggerated its membership gains, undoubtedly to create the impression of an irresistible union force about to conquer all opposition in the industry, the organization, at least in comparison with its past record, did add appreciably to its membership strength during the closing weeks of 1936. It enrolled approximately 15,500 members in December alone, more than ten thousand of these, significantly, in Michigan; and its total paid-up membership in that month, judging from per capita tax figures and initiation fees, was close to sixty-three thousand, as compared to an average monthly membership of about twenty-seven thousand between April 1 and December 31, 1936.\textsuperscript{105}

The paid-up membership figures, which constituted about 13.7 percent of the average employment in the industry (460,000) in 1936, almost certainly understate the actual membership of the UAW since they do not include workers who, although loyal to the union, were delinquent in their dues because they had been laid off or for some other reason. Also, as one union official later pointed out, it was possible in those turbulent days when the organization was still relatively new and procedures had not been completely regularized to have “a good union atmosphere” in an automotive plant without the union’s having very many dues-paying members. It must also be recognized that it is difficult for a new union to organize a majority of the workers within its jurisdiction until it proves its ability to secure recognition and tangible gains for its members.\textsuperscript{106} The majority of the automobile workers were not necessarily opposed to the UAW so much as they were waiting to see what its fate would be in a struggle with the giant employers in the industry.

Despite the gains registered by the UAW and other unions in the closing weeks of 1936, the labor movement as a whole had failed to realize the hopes that had been entertained by union leaders when Section 7 (a) was included in the NIRA. The limited economic recovery that attended the beginning of the New Deal, coupled with the stimulating effect of Section 7 (a), had caused union membership to rise from just under three million in 1933 to approximately 3.6 million in 1934 (from 5.8 percent of the civilian labor force to 6.9
percent), with most of the gains coming among the coal miners and the needle trades; but the number of unionists increased hardly at all in 1935. The tempo of organization picked up somewhat the next year, but the slightly more than four million union members in 1936 constituted only 7.6 percent of the civilian labor force, which was below the corresponding figure for 1925.107

The AFL as 1936 came to an end was still slumbering, and the CIO, infinitely more daring and energetic than its foe, had yet to prove that it could successfully organize the largely unorganized mass-production industries. The NLRA, to be sure, was the law of the land, and it went well beyond Section 7(a) in the legal protection that it afforded to unionization and collective bargaining, but employers like GM had effectively blocked its operation, and there were widespread doubts about its constitutionality. It seemed evident that if there was to be a surge forward in unionization, the impetus would have to come from the ranks of the workers themselves. It was the UAW, as events were to show, that would provide that impetus.

The progressives in the UAW, almost from the time the federal labor unions had been formed in the various automobile plants, had been complaining about the lack of militancy of the AFL leadership in the organization. The progressives were now themselves in control of the UAW, and the time seemed ripe for a test of their theory that major success would come to the union only if it had the daring to challenge one or more of the three major producers in the industry. As it turned out, the issue was joined with GM, the principal battlefield was the city of Flint, and the weapon employed was the sit-down strike. The fate of the UAW and of industrial unionism in general rested upon the outcome.