Company Town

IV

Although the GM strike of 1936–37 involved GM plants and workers across the land, the vital center of the conflict was Flint, Michigan, the principal seat of GM's power. Flint was to the nation's leading automobile producer what Pittsburgh was to steel, Akron to rubber, and Minneapolis to milling. There was a city of Flint, however, before there was a General Motors Corporation, and it was known as a vehicle center before it became identified with the automobile.

What is now the city of Flint—the name is derived from the river which runs through the town and which allegedly supplied the Indians in the area with flints for their arrows—was founded in 1819 by Jacob Smith as a fur-trading post along the Indian trail between Saginaw and Detroit. The fact that the Flint River could be forded at this point encouraged growth of a permanent settlement; and after a sawmill had been erected along the river some years later, settlers began to come to the area, particularly from northern New York and New England. In 1855 the river settlement was incorporated as the city of Flint. Its population at the time was less than two thousand.1

From the time of its incorporation, Flint has been primarily a one-industry town, as first the lumber industry, then the carriage industry, and finally the automobile industry followed one another in a more or less logical progression to dominate the economic life of the community. The lumber industry began to develop in the Flint area in the 1850's to exploit the magnificent white pine forests that surrounded the Flint River. Within a decade the industry had reached boom proportions, and Flint became the lumbering center of Michigan. In 1870 its sawmills processed ninety million board feet of lumber, and lumbering and associated woodworking industries were the city's most conspicuous form of economic endeavor. The industry went into decline at the end of the 1870's, however, as the natural resource upon which it was based approached exhaustion; but, fortunately for the future of Flint, the great entrepreneurs and firms of the industry—H. H. Crapo, J. B. Atwood and Company, Begole, Fox and Company—kept their capital and profits in the city and provided investment funds for the development there of first the carriage industry and then the automobile industry.2

The carriage industry in Flint traces its beginnings to 1869, when W. A. Paterson set up shop in the city as a carriage blacksmith. As the profits from the lumber industry began to dwindle, lumber capital
and personnel began to be diverted to the carriage business. In 1882, for example, Begole, Fox and Company established the Flint Wagon Works on the site of the company’s sawmill and at the future location of Chevrolet, graphically demonstrating the historical continuity of the three industries that explain Flint’s economic growth. The large-scale expansion of the carriage business in Flint began in 1885 when William Crapo Durant, as we have seen, joined with J. Dallas Dort to form the Durant-Dort Carriage Company and contracted with W. A. Paterson to build the firm’s two-wheel carts. By the end of the century Flint’s various carriage firms, of which Durant-Dort was the most prominent, were turning out 150,000 vehicles a year, twice the number being produced in South Bend, the other great center of the industry, and Flint was “The Vehicle City” of the United States. More than half the community’s 13,109 inhabitants were associated with the carriage business in one way or another.3

Some of Flint’s vehicle producers became interested toward the end of the century in the new-fangled horseless carriage and began installing equipment to manufacture automobile parts. In 1901 A. B. C. Hardy, one of the Durant-Dort lieutenants, organized the Flint Automobile Company, the city’s first automobile manufacturing concern, to assemble the Flint Roadster, “a dashing model all red paint, red leather and brass.” The firm enjoyed a modest success but was forced out of business by the owners of the Selden patent. Another Flint carriage maker, James H. Whiting, brought the Buick to Flint in 1903, as already noted, and Durant and Flint capital were soon to make the vehicle an outstanding success. Flint’s growth was henceforth to be associated with the automobile industry and with components of the GM complex.4

On July 4, 1905, Durant invited Charles Stewart Mott to bring his Weston-Mott Company from Utica, New York, to Flint. “Flint,” Durant wrote, “is in the center of the automobile industry, a progressive city, good people, with conditions for manufacturing ideal.” Mott moved his axle firm to Flint the next year and was to be joined there in 1908, the year GM was formed, by Albert Champion, whose ignition company eventually became the AC Spark Plug Division of GM. Chevrolet moved to Flint from Detroit in 1913, and Fisher Body established its No. 1 and No. 2 plants there in the 1920’s, giving Flint the basic structure of GM plants that it had at the time of the sit-down strike.5

When Buick was moved to Flint in 1903, the city had a population of only about fourteen thousand, but as the automobile industry grew, Flint grew with it. The expansion of Buick toward the end of the first decade of the century, the great increase in automobile
production during the boom years of World War I, and the growth of Chevrolet and Fisher Body in the 1920’s created an enormous demand for labor in Flint, caused agents of GM to search the land for workers, and brought migrants to Flint from elsewhere in Michigan, from the Middle West and the South, and to a more limited extent from abroad. Flint’s population increased to 38,550 in 1910, 91,599 in 1920, and 156,492 in 1930.

Flint grew like a mining camp, without design, without planning. As the workers came in, “the city stretched itself and strained itself to absorb them so that it was as uncomfortable as an adolescent in knickerbockers.” The incoming thousands overtaxed Flint’s limited housing supply, and some workers were compelled to live for a time in tar-paper shacks, tents, and even railroad cars. The same lodging rooms were rented to night-shift workers for the day and to day-shift workers for the night. GM itself felt constrained to enter the home construction business in 1919, and through the Modern Housing Corporation it had built thirty-two hundred homes for its Flint workers by 1933.6

Like housing, public services in Flint failed to keep pace with a rapidly expanding population. Recreational facilities were woefully inadequate until the federal government after 1933 intervened to redress the balance, and the city “never provided” enough personnel, funds, or services to meet its health problems. Among twenty-two cities of from 100,000 to 250,000 population in 1934 Flint ranked nineteenth in the infant death rate and the death of children from diarrhea and enteritis, seventeenth in maternal deaths, in a tie for thirteenth and fourteenth place in the typhoid-fever death rate, thirteenth in the diptheria death rate, and tenth in the tuberculosis death rate.7

Flint’s relative lack of concern for its citizens was matched by the lack of concern for Flint on the part of many of its inhabitants. A large proportion of the workers who were lured to the city by automobile jobs and the high wages that GM paid were from rural backgrounds, and many of them reacted unfavorably to the industrial discipline imposed by the factory. Instability of employment, a characteristic of the automobile industry as a whole in the 1920’s, was especially marked in Flint, where labor turnover rates in some plants sometimes reached 200 or 300 percent. Many workers did not identify with Flint as a community and tended to see the city as “a place to camp, rather than a place to settle.”8

Flint’s population in 1930 was composed principally of native-born white Americans: only 3.6 percent (5,725) of the city’s inhabitants were Negroes, and only 14.2 percent (21,365) of the whites were
foreign born. In Detroit, by contrast, 7.6 percent of the population as of 1930 were Negros, and 27.9 percent of the whites were foreign born. About 55 percent of the operatives and laborers in Detroit’s automobile plants were foreign born or Negros, but the corresponding figure in Flint was 48 percent. Negros were especially inconspicuous among GM’s Flin workers, their employment being limited to the most menial of occupations.

Among the foreign born in Flint, old immigrants and English-speaking immigrants were more conspicuous than the new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe who were so important an element in Detroit’s population. About half of Flint’s foreign born came from British Canada (28.3 percent), England (15 percent), and Scotland (6.2 percent), and an additional 5.2 percent were German in origin. In Detroit about 32 percent of the foreign born were from Poland, Russia, Italy, Rumania, and Greece, but less than 16 percent of Flint’s foreign born came from these countries. The ethnic composition of the native-born whites in Flint of foreign-born and mixed parentage, who constituted about 29 percent of the native-born whites, corresponded closely to the composition of the foreign-born population itself.

Of Flint’s 128,617 native-born whites in 1930, 64.8 percent (83,290) had been born in Michigan and only about 30 percent in Flint itself. Of the remaining native-born whites in Flint in 1930, about 12 percent (15,383) had migrated to the city from Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin, and about 12.2 percent (15,689) from the states of the South. The overwhelming proportion of Flint’s Southerners were drawn from the Central South, from Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee: about 10 percent (12,818) of Flint’s native-born white population in 1930 derived from these four states, and sections of the city had come to be known as “Little Missouri.”

More than three-quarters of the Southern whites in Flint in the middle 1930’s had first come to the city during the prosperity decade of the 1920’s. Because of their “group consciousness” and the persistence of regional attitudes, they were less readily assimilated than Northern whites who journeyed to Flint. They were more attached to their Southern homes than to the city where they were employed, and they returned regularly to the South when they were laid off or during vacation time. In Flint most of them worked in the GM plants as unskilled or semiskilled workers. They tended to be young people, in the twenty to thirty-four age group, and were less affluent and less skilled than the city’s population as a whole. They were entirely without union experience, but they were to play their part in the sit-down strike, and they would in the end react to the CIO with
something akin to the fervor they displayed at the religious revivals that were so much a part of their cultural heritage.\textsuperscript{10}

Flint, like Detroit, lost population when the great depression that followed the stock-market crash of 1929 began to ravage the city. The estimated population of the city had risen to 165,000 in 1931, but a Civil Works Administration survey in 1934 revealed a decline to 144,429. Much of the population loss was attributable to the sharp falling off of GM employment, which dwindled from a high of fifty-six thousand in June, 1929, to a depression low of just under seventeen thousand in August, 1932, and which was only about twenty-one thousand early in 1934. The drop in GM employment was reflected in the decline of the number of whites from the Central South in Flint, their number having fallen by almost thirty-seven hundred between 1930 and 1934.\textsuperscript{11}

Welfare facilities in Flint were quite inadequate to cope with the serious decline in employment. Until 1931 private agencies sought to deal with the problem, caring for an average of 907 families (about thirty-five hundred people) during this period. A public relief agency was created for the city in 1931, the year the full force of the depression hit Flint, but it was privately financed, and its budget was inadequately responsive to public needs. It was nevertheless providing some assistance for 5229 families (almost twenty thousand people) toward the end of November, 1932. More generous financing and assistance came with the fall of 1933, when the federal government through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the state through its Emergency Welfare Relief Commission began channeling funds into Flint for relief. It was undoubtedly becoming apparent to GM workers that the corporation alone could not provide for all their needs and that government could serve as the provender of good things.\textsuperscript{12} Perhaps, some may have thought, the union could also be of some assistance to them, even in a company town, in improving the conditions under which they labored and lived.

When the State Emergency Welfare Relief Commission made a study of employment and unemployment in Flint as of January 14, 1935, it found that 42,435 of the city's 53,929 workers were employed and 11,494 (21.3\% per cent) were unemployed. More than half of the city's labor force (28,455 persons) was made up of automobile workers, nearly all of them employed by GM. Among those classified as automobile workers, 23,216 were employed at that time and 5239 (18.4\% per cent) were unemployed.\textsuperscript{13} Of the unemployed automobile workers remaining in the city, six hundred (11.4\% per cent) had been without work at least twelve months, and 4777 (91.1\% per cent) at least three months. Among the employed workers in the auto industry,
9641 (41.5 percent) had received an income of less than $1000 in 1934; 9227 (39.7 percent) had earned between $1000 and $1499; and 4329 (18.7 percent) had earned $1500 or more. Among those who were unemployed in January, 1935, more than 61 percent (3234) had earned less than $500 in 1934, and more than 95 percent (4996) had earned less than $1000. The plight of many of Flint's automobile workers in the depression years is suggested by the figures cited.

The improving economic conditions in Flint during the eighteen months before the GM strike began are reflected in the rise of GM employment, the decline in the relief cases of Genesee County, whose population was made up chiefly of Flint residents, and the increase in the city's population. GM employment, which stood at about twenty-one thousand early in 1934, rose to 47,247 in December, 1936. Whereas the average number of persons receiving general relief in Genesee County was 18,504 (8.8 percent of the 1930 population) during the fiscal year July 1, 1933–June 30, 1934, and 24,514 (11.6 percent of the 1930 population) during the fiscal year 1934–35, only 13,148 persons (6.2 percent of the 1930 population) received general relief during the fiscal year 1935–36; and from July, 1936, through December, 1936, the number receiving relief from all programs did not reach 8800 (4.1 percent of the 1930 population) in any month. Only about 35 percent of the relief cases in 1936 were directly attributable to unemployment in the automobile industry. As for the city's population, it rose to an estimated 160,000 in 1936, which was somewhat above the 1930 figure.

When it issued its report for the period May 1, 1934–June 30, 1935, the Flint Public Welfare Board commented that the "great need" in the city was better housing for its wage earners and dependent families. The report noted that the board had been unable to find satisfactory housing at reasonable rentals for families on relief and that the poor of the city lived in "shacks, huts, and hovels." Of Flint's 95,248 housing units as of 1934, only thirteen had been built in 1932 and fourteen in 1933 as contrasted to 3538 units in 1927, 2504 in 1928, and 2214 in 1929, and there was to be little new construction in the next few years. Among the existing housing units, 14.34 percent required structural repairs, meaning that there had been "serious deterioration" in one of the essential elements of the dwelling, and 1.94 percent of the units were altogether unfit for occupation. More than 20 percent of the homes were without a bath, and 12.7 percent had no toilet. About one-fourth of the homes were without hot water, and about 6 percent had no running water at all. About 18 percent of the homes had no central heating. A local housing expert reported at the time of the sit-down strike that approximately one-fifth of Flint's
inhabitants lived in homes that he did not consider adequate in terms of the American standard of living. In some working-class districts half of the homes were reported to have been without baths, indoor toilets, and running water. When the UAW stepped up its organizing activities in Flint in the summer of 1936, it reminded workers of the "poor houses" in which they lived.¹⁸

Flint's houses helped to give the city the dingy look and the appearance of "drab uniformity" that impressed so many Flint visitors. One of the characters in Catherine Brody's Flint-based depression novel, Nobody Starves, described the workingmen's homes in the city as "Shacks—neat packing-boxes upended, unpainted many of them, row after row of them, divided by dirt roads ... each with a leaner, taller box of privy behind it." "Who would live in such a place?" the chief female character in the novel asks. Twenty years later a visitor to the city was struck by the lack of variety in the houses that GM had built in the 1920's, which stood "row on row and mile on mile as ugly reminders of two hectic decades." The neighborhoods adjacent to the great GM plants were particularly depressing, with their cheap housing, unattractive workingmen's restaurants, beer halls, and cheap stores.¹⁸

Prior to 1932 Flint and Genesee County had been solidly Republican in their politics, although Flint had elected a Socialist mayor in 1911. This had shocked the power structure of the city, with the result that the Republicans and Democrats had joined forces the next year to form an Independent Citizens' party and to elect Charles Stewart Mott as the city's mayor. The election of November, 1932, marked the "unprecedented elevation to power" in Genesee County of the Democratic party, which swept every county office being contested. The Democrats, whose votes were drawn from Flint's low-income districts just as the Republican strength was concentrated in the high-income areas, repeated their triumph in 1934 and 1936, but in the spring elections of 1935 the three Republican Circuit Court judges, Edward D. Black, James S. Parker, and Paul V. Gadola, were retained in office.²⁰ Two of these judges were to play prominent roles in the GM sit-down strike.

At the time of the GM strike Flint had a nonpartisan, commission-city manager type of government. Voters in each of the city's nine wards biennially elected a commissioner, and they in turn selected one of their number to serve as mayor and also designated the city manager, by far the more important of the two officials. The city manager when the sit-down strike began was John M. Barringer, who had come to Flint in 1917 and had been prominent in the foundry business. Although totally without experience in politics and public
life, Barringer became the president of Flint’s Civic League when it was organized in 1928; and when the League bloc gained control of the city commission in 1932, he was appointed city manager. Barringer was an excitating person who was difficult to approach, lacked political awareness and the common touch, and was inclined to see the problem of industrial relations essentially as Flint’s GM executives did.21

“Flint is decidedly a Company Town,” the superintendent of the Flint District of the Methodist Episcopal church declared shortly after the GM sit-down strike had been concluded. He observed that one of the leading social-gospel advocates who had been in the city during the strike had remarked that the only difference between Flint and the usual company town was that in Flint the workers did not have to buy at a company store. The company “‘owns this town,’” the bus driver declares in Catherine Brody’s novel. “It was hardly possible,” the author noted, “to find a person” in the city “who was not conversant or did not appear to be conversant with its [the company’s] affairs.”22

GM’s factories, “long, squat, and seemingly all windows,” were dispersed throughout Flint: Buick, which took up nine million square feet of floor space, in the north, Chevrolet and Fisher Body No. 2 in the west, Fisher Body No. 1, the largest plant of its kind in the world, in the south, and AC Spark Plug in the east. GM’s 47,247 employees as of December, 1936, constituted more than two-thirds of all the gainfully employed in the city and more than one-quarter of the city’s entire population. It was estimated that 80 percent of Flint’s families were dependent on GM’s payroll. The goal of GM public relations in the corporation’s plant cities, it will be recalled, was to have GM employees and the public at large “think and say ‘WHAT HAPPENS TO GENERAL MOTORS HAPPENS TO ME.’”28 In Flint, this message must have appeared self-evident.

The establishment in Flint was dominated by GM. Its top executives and their wives, along with members of some of the old pre-automobile era families, formed the upper crust of Flint society, and the company’s influence radiated throughout the community. When the UAW in the summer and fall of 1936 pushed its organizing drive in Flint, it found itself unable to secure a permit to pass out handbills, to purchase radio time, or to secure publicity in the Flint Journal, the city’s only daily newspaper. “Both outfits,” Bob Travis informed Adolph Germer with regard to the local radio station and newspaper, “shiver in their boots when an attempt is made to obtain publicity for the automobile workers.” The Flint Journal was not inclined to print anything that might offend the most powerful busi-
ness in the city and the newspaper’s principal advertiser. There was no doubt where the Journal’s sympathy would lie in any conflict between the union and the corporation.²⁴

The political leaders of Flint at the time of the sit-down were closely allied with the city’s principal employer. At least three of the city commissioners worked for GM. Barringer had been invited to come to Flint by Walter Chrysler when he had headed GM’s Buick Division in order to establish a foundry that would provide Buick with castings. The chief of police, James V. Wills, had once been a Buick detective. One of the Genesee County Circuit Court judges held a sizable bloc of GM stock, and the county prosecutor was a minor GM stockholder. The mayor of Flint, Harold Bradshaw, had been employed by Buick since 1919. He had edited the Buick News, served as the division’s recreation director, worked in its payroll department, and at the time of the strike was employed in its sales and distribution department. He represented one of Flint’s “better” residential districts and had the political support of the minor GM executives, merchants, professional men, and better-paid workers who resided in the district.²⁵

In times of crisis GM could count on the loyal support of the Flint police department. During the Fisher Body No. 1 strike in July, 1939, the city police had in effect served as an arm of the company in the suppression of the walkout. In September, 1933, the city of Flint, which was, among public agencies, the eleventh largest purchaser of gas in the United States during the period 1933–37, bought $400.73 worth of tear gas. The order was billed to the Manufacturers’ Association of Flint, but the salesman who forwarded the order thought that the gas was really being purchased for Chevrolet. When the Toledo Chevrolet strike threatened to spread to the Buick plant in May, 1935, city and county law officers agreed to cooperate to “the fullest possible degree” in the implementation of the Buick “Plan of Action for Emergency.” The city police arranged to have thirty to fifty police officers report for assignment to the plant at the expected zero hour, and police headquarters were linked to the plant by direct wire.²⁶ In seeking to organize Flint’s automobile workers the UAW had to contend not only with the most powerful manufacturing concern in the world but also with local law officers who were prepared to support the corporation at every turn.

Flint in 1936 was a laboring man’s town, but it was not a union town. The UAW, it will be recalled, had registered impressive membership
gains in the city immediately preceding the President’s settlement of March 25, 1934, but disillusionment and despair had set in after that date; and as of June, 1936, the total membership in good standing in the five GM locals in the city was a paltry 150. It was apparent to the UAW leadership, however, and to no one more than Wyndham Mortimer, that if the automobile workers were to be organized the UAW would have to penetrate GM’s Flint stronghold. In early June, 1936, Mortimer was sent to Flint to take charge of the UAW’s organizing work in the city. It is possible, as has been alleged, that Homer Martin, who distrusted his first vice-president, hoped that Mortimer would discredit himself in a vain effort to stir Flint’s hitherto apathetic auto workers into action, but it is more likely that Mortimer asked for the assignment because he saw Flint as “the most important point in the whole organization Campaign.”

When Mortimer arrived in Flint, the prospects for the UAW in the city could not have appeared more somber. The membership of the five locals was miniscule, and their treasury was depleted—the cash assets of the locals totaled $24.41, and they had debts for rent alone of $700. Mortimer reported that his steps were “dogged by stool pigeons,” that the workers were enveloped in “a pall of fear,” and that “a wall of hate and dissention [sic] had been erected between various factions.” His initial action was to consolidate the five locals into a single organization (Local 156) to promote a feeling of unity among union members and to discourage parochialism. Elections were then held by the members to select a thirteen-man executive board for the consolidated local.

Mortimer, however, soon found himself at odds with the members of the union’s board, and he was to claim that two of them were allegedly members of the Black Legion, a Ku Klux Klan-type organization that was centered in the industrial cities of southern Michigan and that the UAW charged was intimidating unionists, two were suspected of espionage, and five were not employed in the industry or were inactive in union affairs. Mortimer insisted further that the executive board deliberately kept the union small so that it could be “more readily controlled.” The instrument to achieve this result, he contended, was the so-called investigating committee which reported on the eligibility of applicants for union membership following a two-week probationary period. Although Mortimer was rarely inclined to attribute noble motives to the opposition in the UAW’s factional fights, there was some substance to his allegations. But he did not tell the whole story. Partly, the opposition to him in Flint simply reflected continuing, conservative Dillonite sentiment within the board, partly it bespoke an anti-Communist reaction to his left-
leaning proclivities and his refusal to exclude Communists from the local. The tension between the local’s executive board and the UAW vice-president remained unresolved throughout Mortimer’s stay in Flint.

Mistrusting a majority of the Local 156 executive board, Mortimer took personal charge of the union’s records, had the combination changed on its safe, assured new unionists that their identity would not be revealed, and established an organizational apparatus that was “entirely independent” of the local leadership. Since the union’s meetings were poorly attended, either because the workers were afraid to appear or were simply disinclined to identify themselves with so impotent an organization as the UAW, Mortimer decided to take the union message directly to the rank and file in their homes. He visited dozens of former members and attempted to ascertain why they had quit the organization and what would induce them to rejoin. When he enlisted a member, Mortimer might designate the recruit as a voluntary organizer, thus giving him a sense of self-importance. Key workers were encouraged to hold house parties for their “trustworthy friends” at which Mortimer would spread the union gospel and for which the UAW provided the refreshments.

Mortimer directed special appeals at the ethnic groups, particularly the Poles and the few Negroes in the Flint plants. He later recalled addressing a small Negro meeting in a Spiritualist church and stating that the UAW would not be a Jim Crow union, whereupon the preacher rose and said that Mortimer was “‘an emissary of God’” and that the members must therefore join the union, which they all did. The initiation fee for new members and the reinstatement fee for delinquent members were reduced for the time being to lighten the financial burden of membership.

Since the UAW did not have a journal of its own, Mortimer decided to send out a weekly letter to more than one thousand Flint auto workers to acquaint them with the union cause. In these letters, the first of which was dated July 10, Mortimer, realizing that there was no hope for the union in Flint as long as it remained identified with the old AFL leadership and policies, contrasted the UAW of the time of Collins and Dillon with the UAW that had now decided “to sink or swim with the Lewis Committee.” The UAW, he wrote, was now “completely autonomous,” it was committed to industrial unionism, it had “a really ‘Progressive’ leadership” that was drawn from the shops, and it was controlled by the rank and file. He reminded the workers of the “mere shacks or shanties” in which they lived, told them that GM was interested in profits, not humanity, and explained that the solution to their problems lay in their own hands. It was not
the union that they should fear but the loss of their jobs because of the speed-up, machinery, and old age, and it was to the union that they should look for job security.

As might have been anticipated, Mortimer's letters were not without their ideological overtones. The workers, he wrote again and again, must be class conscious just as the employers were class conscious; they must be aware that the struggle was between "the robber and the robbed," that the union was "a class weapon." He criticized the individualistic attitudes of laborers who were "capitalists from their ears up, and slaves from their ears down." As for the allegations of Communism within the union, Mortimer insisted that such charges were advanced by either stool pigeons or fools, but he declared at the same time that it was "now possible for a member to hold an opinion originating since the Civil War, without being called a 'Red' or a Communist."31

Despite Mortimer's zealous efforts in Flint, despite the importance attached to his efforts in the literature of the sit-down strike,32 his organizational work in the GM stronghold did not result in any noteworthy increase in union membership. He persuaded a few former UAW members to rejoin the organization, but, if the report of the financial secretary of Local 156 is accurate, he was singularly unsuccessful in getting workers not previously identified with the union to become UAW members.33 The overwhelming majority of Flint auto workers remained uncommitted, and it would require some dramatic display of union strength before they would be willing to embrace the UAW.

Mortimer himself did not claim impressive membership gains for the UAW. "These were by no means days of spectacular growth. . . .," he later reported, "but rather days of slow plodding and painful preparation which only much later bore its fruit." Mortimer not only failed to increase the Flint local's membership to any appreciable extent, but he was also unable to win over his opponents within the union, who were convinced that he was fashioning a "'Red Empire'" in Flint and was "taking everything politically." A union delegation from Flint visited Gummer in Detroit on September 27 to complain that Mortimer was working with Communists and persons who leaned that way and to request that he be removed. They asked that Fred Pieper be brought in to replace Mortimer, but if they could not have Pieper they were willing to accept Bob Travis.

Gummer was apparently persuaded by what he had heard and, probably unaware of the close ties between Mortimer and Travis, suggested to Homer Martin that he place Travis in charge of organizational work in Flint. Martin, who had also received complaints
from Flint and had discussed Mortimer's ouster with some GEB members, had himself decided by this time that the UAW's first vice-president must leave Flint, and so he indicated his agreement with Germer's suggestion.\textsuperscript{34}

In a letter to the UAW's officers, Mortimer struck back at his opponents and defended himself against charges of "lack of cooperation," but he was not unwilling to have Travis, who was very much under his influence, become the organizational director in Flint. Mortimer agreed to remain in the city for three weeks to break in his successor, and he thereafter made frequent trips to Flint to keep in touch with developments there. Mortimer never lost sight of the strategic importance of Flint for the conquest of union power in the automobile industry.\textsuperscript{35}

When Travis drove to Flint and discovered how many workers were employed at the mammoth Buick and Chevrolet plants, he decided that the job assigned to him was beyond his capacity, but UAW officials persuaded him to remain at the post. Pieper was also assigned to Flint to aid Travis and to "investigate" Mortimer, but he appears to have stayed in the city only briefly and then to have returned to his home base in Atlanta.\textsuperscript{36} The job of aiding Travis was then given to Roy Reuther, who, along with his older brother Walter and younger brother Victor, was to be one of the significant figures in the great sit-down strike.

The Reuthers were sons of a German immigrant to the United States who had become an organizer for the United Brewery Workers and then president of the Ohio Valley Trades and Labor Assembly. As Victor said of himself, all three brothers, in a sense, had been "born into the labor movement." In the late 1920's Walter left the family home in Wheeling for Detroit, where he worked as a tool and die maker, and he was later joined there by Victor and then Roy. The three Reuthers, all of whom had been attending Wayne State University (the present name) on a part-time basis and had taken part in Socialist activities there, came to the aid of the Briggs strikers in Detroit in early 1933, and Roy retained an ankle scar resulting from an encounter with the police as a memento of that event.

During the course of the Briggs strike, Victor and Walter, who had lost his Ford job because he was considered an "agitator," began a three-year tour of the world, bicycling their way through Europe, working for sixteen months as tool and die makers in an automobile plant near Gorki that had been built for the Soviet Union by Ford, and then returning to the United States via Manchuria, North China, Japan, and the Pacific. Walter took a job at the Ternstedt plant in Detroit, began to play a part in the small West Side UAW locals that
were eventually amalgamated into a single local, and was elected to the GEB at the South Bend convention. Victor, after his return to the United States, toured the country as a speaker for the Emergency Peace Campaign but was summoned to Detroit by Walter and Roy at the end of November, 1936, to join in the campaign to organize the auto workers.

After his brothers left for Europe, Roy attended Brookwood Labor College, a resident school for workers in Katonah, New York, that championed the "progressive" line in the trade-union debate and was critical of the conservatism of the AFL, and then enrolled in an FERA teacher-training program in workers' education at the University of Wisconsin. He taught in the FERA's workers' education program in Detroit and was then assigned to Flint in 1934 in a similar capacity. His knowledge of the city and of working conditions in the automobile plants persuaded the UAW leadership to send him back to Flint as an organizer in November, 1936. A fine speaker, as were his brothers, Roy nicely supplemented the talents of Travis, who was extremely effective in face-to-face relationships and in small groups but lacked the oratorical power to sway an audience.37

Travis, in the main, followed Mortimer's tactics of organization. He tended to ignore the executive board of Local 156 in the making of policy and, convinced, as Mortimer had been, that the local was "shot full" of stool pigeons, kept the names of new members secret insofar as it was possible to do so. Travis did, however, use executive board members to aid in the job of organization. Each member of the board was assigned a ward in Flint and was in turn to set up precinct committees to reach every auto worker in the city. Travis also used new members as voluntary organizers and, like Mortimer, made special efforts to attract the city's ethnic groups. Following his predecessor, Travis concentrated on enrolling such strategically located workers as those employed in the "body-in-white" department in Fisher Body No. 1, where the principal soldering and welding took place. He sought further to prepare the ground for future action by appointing a number of shop stewards in the various plants, but for the moment their identity was kept secret. Since he found that the men in the plants "will not attend meetings in the Labor Hall," Travis continued the practice of home meetings; but to capture the imagination of the workers and to make them feel both secure and important, Travis, who had a sense of the histrionic, sometimes staged these meetings in basements, with the windows covered by black rags and the only light being supplied by candles.38

Unable to secure a license to pass out handbills or to obtain publicity through the local press and radio, Travis decided to supple-
ment Mortimer’s weekly letter by putting out a local UAW paper, the Flint Auto Worker. To edit the paper, he undoubtedly followed Mortimer’s advice and turned to Henry Kraus, who had been the editor of the United Auto Worker, the organ of the Cleveland Auto Council. The Flint Auto Worker, the first issue of which appeared at the end of October, amplified some of the themes that Mortimer had been developing in his letters, highlighted the grievances of the automobile workers, and sought to convince them of the power that lay in organization. Mortimer was later to report that the journal had been “a major factor” in the UAW’s Flint campaign.39

Travis found an ally in his organizing work in the Senate’s La Follette Civil Liberties Committee, which had sent investigators to the Detroit area shortly after it had served GM with a subpoena on September 10. No sooner did Travis arrive in Flint than he wrote to committee staff member Ben Allen to obtain “all information that is possible on the General Motors Corporation in Flint”; and since he thought that the city was “lousy with these people,” he specifically asked about labor spies in the GM auto plants. He also sought and secured the aid of the committee in attempting to discover whether the Flint police department was cooperating with GM in establishing a “spy system” in the company’s plants. Travis was hoping that the “publicity value” of such information could be capitalized upon by the UAW to the union’s advantage. He sought to persuade the insecure automobile workers that the government was on their side by informing them that La Follette Committee staff members would investigate persons, including foremen, who spread false reports about the union.40

Some of the committee staff members saw themselves more as allies of the UAW in its struggle with GM than as impartial investigators seeking to develop information for the committee’s use. This was especially true of the committee’s chief investigator in Detroit, Charles Kramer, who was later identified by Whittaker Chambers, Lee Pressman, and Nathaniel Weyl as having been a member of a Communist cell (the Harold Ware group) in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration.41

Kramer and Allen visited Flint on November 6 and 7 to secure information on labor espionage activities within the UAW. Kramer reported to the committee that the visit had been “quite fruitful” and that there was a spy “practically ready to be torn apart” by the UAW on the local’s executive board but that he had advised the union to hold off for the time being lest uncovering the individual might cause the detective agency for which he was working “to shut down shop on us.” Kramer also reported that he was planning to write an article for
the UAW newspaper regarding the committee but that he would not sign it and would “have it appear as something done by the union itself.” It appears that on this or perhaps an earlier visit to Flint Kramer had discussed with Travis the possibility of the latter’s gaining the confidence of a female employee in the employment office of one of the GM plants. Travis, at all events, reported to Kramer in a few days that he had met with “utter failure” since he was not a “‘ladies’ man’” and suggested that since Kramer was “young and good-looking” he might himself undertake “this extremely cautious business.”

At a public meeting of Flint Chevrolet unionists on December 26, Travis and Roy Reuther, acting on information supplied by La Follette Committee investigators, dramatically exposed a Corporations Auxiliary Company spy who was then serving as the chairman of the union’s welfare committee. The Flint Auto Worker revealed at the same time that another Corporations Auxiliary Company operative, the one that had been “ready to be torn apart” in November, was a member of the local’s executive board and that the La Follette Committee was on the trail of still other spies. Travis was undoubtedly trying to instill courage in the auto workers by demonstrating that an agency of the federal government was aiding the union in rooting out the labor spies in its midst, and Kramer, at least, was not at all reluctant to cast the committee in this role. The committee, Kraus concluded, was “an enormous boon to the union campaign.”

From the time that he arrived in Flint Travis had been thinking in terms of a strike against GM. On October 21, a few weeks after he had assumed his new duties, he advised his own Toledo Chevrolet local that “Things are popping so fast here that by the time you receive this letter we may be in one of the biggest strikes yet. At least I hope so.” Organization had proceeded most rapidly in Fisher Body No. 1, which Travis reported as “just about boiling over.” Anticipating the nature of the GM strike when it would come, Travis advised the Toledo local to be prepared “to come out on the street” at any time and to “organize every man possible that is willing to come to Flint on an hour’s notice.” The day after this letter was written, the first issue of the Flint Auto Worker, a special Fisher Body No. 1 edition that Kraus and Travis had worked through the night to complete, made its appearance. “The iron is hot out there,” Travis wrote to Mortimer, “and so we are striking.”

The national elections of November 3, 1936, had the same exhilarating effect on auto workers in Flint as elsewhere, but Mortimer advised the Flint unionists that they should remember their experience under the NRA and should not expect anything more from the
President than the protection of their constitutional rights; they must fight their own battles rather than look to someone else to do the fighting for them.\textsuperscript{45} This advice was, in a sense, applied in Fisher Body No. 1 on November 13 when a dramatic, quickie sit-down was staged under the direction of Travis’ principal lieutenant in the plant, Berdine Arlington (Bud) Simons.

The lanky, dark-eyed, and dark-complected Simons had been born on April 16, 1905, in southern Indiana, the son of a tenant farmer. A very proud youngster, he quit school after a junior high teacher had told him when he was unable to pay $5 for a school dance, “‘You’ve always been a disgrace to this school, Berdine!’” After working in a number of towns and at a variety of jobs, Simons journeyed to South Bend, where in 1924 he became a torch solderer in the Studebaker plant. He moved on to Hayes Body in Grand Rapids in 1928 and there joined the Communist-dominated Auto Workers Union and participated in a 1930 strike that was led by AWU representatives. It was at Hayes Body that Simons formed an enduring friendship with Joe Devitt and Walter Moore, and the three men were later to work closely together during the GM sit-down.

Like so many other automobile workers, Simons lost his job as the result of the depression and had to go on relief. Early in 1934 he joined Devitt and Moore in a move to Flint, where the three men went to work in the No. 1 plant and joined its federal labor union. Simons identified with the “progressive opposition” to the AFL within the UAW and attended the rump convention of the progressives in Cleveland in September, 1934, even though his local had voted against sending a delegation. The three friends were later to become part of the “secret union nucleus” that Mortimer and Travis fashioned in Fisher Body No. 1.\textsuperscript{46}

Following a string of brief sit-downs in the No. 1 plant late in October and early in November that had brought concessions from the management, Simons urged Travis to permit him to call a strike “‘before one pops somewhere that we won’t be able to control!’” When Travis asked if the men were ready for a strike, Simons reportedly replied, “‘They’re like a pregnant woman in her tenth month!’”\textsuperscript{47} Simons was thus prepared for action when the opportunity presented itself on the evening of Friday, November 13. Three welders who had participated in a quickie sit-down the previous night discovered when they arrived for work on the thirteenth that they were to be dismissed for their behavior. The news of this decision, coupled with the apparently intention of the plant superintendent to dismiss a unionist who protested the firing of his fellow workers, led Simons to order a shutdown of the key body-in-white department, of
which he was the steward. This resulted in the idling of seven hundred men.

Hoping to secure a quick resumption of work, the plant manager, Evan J. Parker, agreed to meet a committee headed by Simons. Simons informed Parker that it was a committee of the union to which he was speaking and that there would be no resumption of work until the men who had been fired had been returned to their jobs. Parker said that the three men would be reemployed on Monday, but Simons, supported by the sit-downers, insisted upon their immediate reinstatement as the condition for the resumption of work. Anxious for the line to be started, Parker agreed to this and also to paying the sit-downers their regular rate for the period of their inactivity. It proved difficult to find one of the discharged men, who was out on a date, and so the company enlisted the aid of the police for this purpose. When the three men returned to the plant, Simons had each of them state to the workers that it was the union that had been responsible for his reinstatement.48

The news of what had transpired in Fisher Body No. 1 on November 13, this minor but clear-cut victory over a powerful employer, had an electrifying effect on Flint’s auto workers. “We have cracked her open at last,” Mortimer told the Daily Worker. The United Automobile Worker reported that five hundred No. 1 workers had joined the UAW on November 14 and that Mortimer and Travis had signed up fifty No. 2 members on the same day. By the end of the month the Flint UAW, whose paid-up membership was probably not in excess of 150 at the end of October, had a membership of fifteen hundred, most of it concentrated in the two Fisher Body plants.49 The steward system, “the vital heart of the union in the shop” that had functioned so effectively in the November 13 sit-down, was now spread to the No. 2 plant as well, and the stewards in both plants were able during the next few weeks to settle some of the minor grievances of their men.50

The UAW in Flint was once again injected into the city spotlight on December 18, when 110 bus drivers of the Flint Trolley Coach Company went on strike in an effort to raise their wages from fifty-five cents to seventy-five cents an hour. The strikers were members of a local of the Amalgamated Association of Street Electric Railway and Motor Coach Employees of America, but since they had struck in violation of the union’s contract with the management, they were repudiated by the Detroit leadership of the local and were eventually suspended from the union. UAW Local 156, however, quickly came to the support of the strikers, and Roy Reuther became their spokesman.
With the city deprived of its public transportation, the city commission approved a resolution calling on the strikers to return to work pending arbitration of the dispute and threatening the inauguration of city jitney service should the strikers reject the proposal. Reuther warned the city not to sponsor a jitney service and said that the union would meet pressing needs by operating its own system of courtesy cars, which it quickly proceeded to do. Shortly thereafter the company, supported by Detroit officials of the Amalgamated, announced that it would operate its coaches with newly engaged workers and thus attempt to break the strike. When the UAW, however, let it be known that it would oppose this tactic, the company deferred action. Flint was still without public transportation when the auto workers joined the trolley workers on strike.\(^{51}\)

The UAW, displeased when Barringer, in November, had sought to have the city commission pass an anti-noise ordinance to drive the union’s sound car from the streets, thought that the trolley strike provided additional evidence of the anti-labor tendencies of Flint’s city manager and the city commission. Reuther clashed frequently with Barringer and Bradshaw during the strike, and the UAW denounced the commission as “a tool of the moneyed interests and an enemy of the working people.” The Flint local also included GM among the opponents of the trolley strike, insisting that the auto firm had put pressure on the trolley company not to meet the wage demands of the bus drivers lest this influence the auto workers to demand higher wages for themselves.\(^{52}\)

The UAW’s support of the bus drivers undoubtedly enhanced its reputation among the auto workers as a defender of the underdog and a militant champion of the laborer’s aspirations for a better life. Throughout December the UAW and its friends reported impressive membership gains in Flint. “The trickle that became a stream” after the November 13 sit-down, the United Automobile Worker declared, “has now become a veritable tidal wave.” The metaphor employed by the union journal creates an impression of UAW membership gains that is not altogether supported by the facts, but it is nevertheless evident that the union enrolled more new members in Flint in December, 1936, than in any month since the President’s settlement of March, 1934. According to the UAW’s records, slightly more than three thousand Flint workers joined the organization in December, which brought the total membership of Local 156 at the end of 1936 to about 4500, approximately 10 percent of Flint’s GM workers. Organization had proceeded most rapidly in the No. 1 and No. 2 plants, partly the result of the November 13 strike, partly the result of dissatisfaction stemming from a particularly trying grooving-in period,
always a time of discomfort for such body workers as bumpers, finishers, and sanders whose labor was primarily manual. Some of the workers in the No. 1 plant, their fear apparently abated, began to wear their union buttons in the plant, and on December 20 the plant became the first of the GM units in Flint to elect its own shop committee. As the chairman of the committee, the No. 1 unionists, appropriately enough, turned to the hero of the November 13 work stoppage, Bud Simons.53

The UAW's organizing efforts in Flint met with least success in the great Buick plant. Buick workers, employed in the oldest GM division in Flint, were, on the average, older than Fisher Body and Chevrolet workers, had lived longer in the city, and were far more inclined to identify with Flint and with the company than were their counterparts in the other GM plants, who were newer to the city and more hard-boiled in their attitude toward the company and toward their jobs. Working conditions were also better at Buick than in the other GM plants, and the question of production standards was less of a problem.54 When the sit-down strike came, it was the men of Fisher Body and the workers of roughly similar background in Chevrolet who formed the spearhead of the UAW's thrust, whereas the Buick workers and the largely unorganized employees of AC Spark Plug, about half of whom were women, were not called on by the UAW to strike their plants.

GM in November, 1936, increased the wages of its workers, began to pay them time-and-a-half for hours worked above forty per week, and announced that it would grant them a year-end bonus,55 but it gave no sign that it would soften its opposition to the UAW. On the contrary, it is possible that GM had decided to improve the terms of employment in part at least to frustrate the union drive. The hard line of GM with regard to the UAW and its ambitions was best exemplified in Flint by Arnold Lenz, assistant manufacturing manager of Chevrolet and the manager of the Flint Chevrolet plant. Early in December Travis, Roy Reuther, and Mortimer visited Lenz to complain about alleged company discrimination against union members. Lenz rejected this charge and informed the union leaders that he would fire any worker wearing a union button in the plant since this was a form of intimidation. He berated Reuther and Travis, telling them that they had "a lot of piss and vinegar" in their blood and that they were "trying to cause a lot of trouble." Lenz made no effort to conceal his opposition to unionism, informing the union delegation that in his native Germany union workers in the foundry in which he had been employed had burned his legs with hot metal because of his refusal to join their organization.56
Lenz's attitude could hardly have surprised Mortimer and Travis. They had assumed from the start that GM would grant the UAW the kind of recognition that it desired only if compelled to do so by a strike. When the two men began their assignment in Flint, they were undoubtedly thinking in terms of a conventional strike as the culmination of their organizational efforts; but by the end of 1936 the sit-down strike had captured the fancy of many automobile workers and of some of their leaders as well, and when the issue between the UAW and GM was finally and fully joined at the end of 1936, it was the sit-down tactic to which the union resorted.