The Coming of the Strike

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The term "sit-down strike" has generally been used to embrace a variety of work stoppages ranging from the brief strike or "quickie," in which a group of workers cease their labors for a few minutes or for a single shift until their grievances are settled, to the "stay-in strike," in which a portion or all of the workers remain in the plant overnight and perhaps for an extended period of time. Most commonly when the term is used the reference is to the extended sit-down strike, the so-called stay-in strike.¹

Assuming that its legality could be sustained or its illegality ignored, the sit-down strike had numerous advantages over the conventional strike from the point of view of the strikers. The fear that his job would be taken by a strikebreaker or that production would somehow be maintained without him, a fear that deterred the potential striker or impaired the worker's morale when he was on strike, was removed when the employee sat by his idle machine inside the plant. As a picket outside the plant, moreover, the striker might be attacked by the police or even arrested and sent to jail. The employer, however, would hesitate to employ force to dislodge strikers inside his plant because this cast him in the role of aggressor, because violence might damage his machinery, and because the strikers were capable of putting up a more formidable defense inside the plant than on an exposed picket line. The strike on the inside thus offset the advantages which access to the forces of law and order normally gave the employer.

It was in some ways easier to maintain the morale of participants in a sit-down than in a conventional strike. The strikers were removed from outside pressures and the hostility of the community that their action might have induced. Bad weather did not constitute a problem for sit-downers as it did for the pickets in an outside strike. The strikers inside the plant might even find the experience an enjoyable one in many ways. They became better acquainted with fellow workers and might develop a group feeling, a "'consciousness of kind,'" that they had not heretofore experienced on the job. If the strikers controlled the gates, they could be provided with necessities from the outside without difficulty, they could keep in touch with family and friends, and they could come and go subject to such regulations as governed the conduct of the strike. Provided that the sit-down did not
continue for too long a time, the strikers might find the experience of striking considerably more exciting than the routine of the job.

It is not surprising that the sit-down strike became, for a season, the favored tactic of the automobile worker. Because of the closely interrelated processes of automobile production, a small group of automobile workers could tie up a large factory by closing down a few key departments, and they could paralyze even one of the major producers by stopping production in a few strategic plants that fabricated the parts upon which its other plants depended for their uninterrupted operation. All this could be accomplished by a minority of workers in any given plant or in any given company, which meant that the sit-down was marvelously effective as an organizing device for a union like the UAW that had succeeded in enrolling only a relatively small percentage of the automobile workers.

The sit-down strike, moreover, satisfied the urge for recognition of the depersonalized and alienated automobile worker. Looking at the idle machine beside which he sat, he could believe, for the first time perhaps, that he was its master rather than its slave and that without him the line could not move nor the machine perform its tasks. He was, after all, a human being not just a badge number, an indispensable rather than a dispensable man.2

The origins of the sit-down, using the term in the broadest possible sense, have in all probability gone unrecorded. Governor Frank Murphy, who had every reason to stress the antiquity of the tactic, traced its beginnings to ancient Egypt and a group of masons who sat down near the chapel in which they were working in order to compel the Pharaoh to listen to their grievances. Murphy also pointed to sit-down strikes of workers building the Rouen Cathedral in fifteenth-century France, of textile workers in Lille in 1715, and of English textile workers in 1817.3 The first stay-in strike in the United States is said to have occurred in 1884 in Cincinnati, where brewery workers sat down in the establishment of the Jackson Brewery Company and, using barrels of beer as a barricade, successfully defended themselves against state troopers whose efforts to pierce the strikers' fortifications resulted in the flow of beer into the streets. The Industrial Workers of the World staged a sit-in strike in some of the departments of General Electric's Schenectady plant late in 1906; and apparently for the first time in a strike of this sort in the United States food had to be brought into the plant for the strikers, who remained inside the factory for sixty-five hours.

In 1907 there was a sit-down strike of fifteen hundred workers in an engineering works in Coventry, England; and in 1919 and to a far greater extent in 1920 Italian workers, with metallurgical operatives
in the van, occupied and continued production in a large number of factories, but the objective, as strike leaders saw it, was less the simple improvement of working conditions than it was the achievement of worker control of the factories or, as a minority of Communists desired, the outright sovietization of Italian industry. Sit-down strikes were staged in 1934 by coal miners in Jugoslavia, Hungary, and Poland, copper miners in Spain, and rubber workers in Salonika. Seventy-one Welsh miners remained in their colliery for a little more than a week in 1935, and there were "stay-down" strikes the next year in mines in England, Wales, Poland, and France.

There was a three-day sit-down at the Hormel Packing Company plant in Austin, Minnesota, in 1933, some brief sit-downs in the rubber factories of Akron in 1933, and quite a few sit-downs of the quickie variety in the automobile industry, especially in body plants, in 1933, 1934, and 1935; but it was not until the next year, 1936, that the sit-down strike began to receive widespread attention and to become a matter of some public concern. There were forty-eight strikes in 1936 in which the strikers remained at their jobs for at least one day; in twenty-two of these work stoppages, involving 34,565 workers, the strikers stayed inside the plants for more than twenty-four hours. Most of these strikes were over organizational issues rather than over wages, hours, and working conditions. Thirty-five of the stoppages involved CIO unions, but the strikes were generally called without advance union authorization.

Although its sit-down phase was very brief, the Goodyear rubber strike of February 14–March 21, 1936, was the first American work stoppage really to focus public attention on the sit-down tactic. It was the "first CIO strike," and it was in some ways a rehearsal for the automobile sit-downs that came at the end of the year. The strike, which was immediately preceded by a three-day sit-down at the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company and very brief sit-downs at Goodyear and Goodrich plants, began spontaneously on Friday, February 14, when workers on three of the four shifts in Goodyear's Plant 2 sat down for various lengths of time to protest the layoff of seventy workers on the fourth shift without the customary three-day notice that might have permitted work sharing. Goodyear closed for the weekend and was not scheduled to reopen until February 18, but on the evening of the seventeenth the Plant 2 unionists voted to strike because the company had refused to guarantee 180 tire builders on the fourth shift that they would receive the usual notice before their threatened layoff.

The United Rubber Workers (URW), a weak union whose history since 1933 had in many ways paralleled that of the UAW,
agreed to support the Goodyear strike although it had had nothing to do with the February 14 sit-downs. Late at night on February 17 the URW established an "endless human chain" of pickets around Plant 2; and the next day five hundred tire builders sat down in Plant 1, and pickets appeared before Plant 3. The sit-downers remained inside Plant 1 for twenty hours, and when they emerged, pickets effectively closed this unit also. By February 19 production at Goodyear had been paralyzed and fifteen thousand workers idled. The CIO sent in organizers and funds to aid the strikers, and Adolph Germer in particular helped to direct their efforts.

The company was able to secure an injunction limiting the number of pickets at each entrance to the plant, but it failed to persuade Governor Martin L. Davey of Ohio to send in militia to police the strike. Efforts by an official of the Goodyear Industrial Assembly, a company union, to stimulate a back-to-work movement were unsuccessful, and the same fate befell the provocative action of C. Nelson Sparks, a former mayor of Akron, who created a "Law and Order League" and invited the good citizens of Akron to "'gang up upon the out-of-town radicals and communist leaders who have brought to our city the threat of a reign of terror.'" The strikers obeyed the injunction in the main, but when the police threatened to tear down the sixty-eight shanties that served what has been characterized as the longest picket line in the history of the strike in the United States to that time, the strikers congregated on the line in numbers that exceeded the limits imposed by the court order.

The strikers failed to gain some of their principal demands, such as the elimination of the company union in the plant and the designation of the URW as the exclusive bargaining agency for Goodyear workers, but the union and the CIO chose to characterize the settlement as a victory, and the strike at the very least enhanced the URW's prestige and helped to attract members to its ranks. This fact was not lost on the UAW leadership, which from the start of the strike had displayed a keen interest in what was going on in an industry so closely allied with the automobile industry.

"Your fight is our fight," the Detroit District Council of the UAW wired the striking rubber workers. The Cleveland Auto Council sent an official delegation headed by Mortimer to Akron to offer all possible aid to the URW; and the organ of the Council, the United Auto Worker, observed that the auto workers "feel very close to the rubber workers and can almost see themselves in their shoes, going to bat with their own oppressors, with General Motors and Ford, who are no whit better than the rubber magnates when it comes to crushing down their employees!" The relationship between
their own fate and that of the Goodyear strikers was impressed upon the auto workers when one of the company conferees "let it slip" that the auto and steel manufacturers had warned Goodyear that they "could go into the rubber business" if the company yielded to the strikers. The auto and steel industries know, Germer informed Brophy on March 12, that if the Goodyear strike succeeds, "they are next in line for a battle." 8

Homer Martin, Walter Réuther, and other UAW leaders traveled to Akron for the URW's "victory" celebration, and Martin told CIO representatives, "'We'll be next.'" The UAW progressives in particular saw the "victory" as a triumph for industrial unionism, and they gave much of the credit for this success to the assistance rendered the strikers by the CIO and to the rubber workers' defiance of the injunction. Whether the progressives' assessment of what had occurred was accurate or not is less important than that they were prepared to apply what they regarded as the lessons of the strike to their own industry. The strikes against the major rubber producer and the major auto producer were to be linked not only in terms of tactics but in terms of personnel: CIO and URW organizers who had participated in the Goodyear strike were later to play a part in the GM sit-down, and Merlin D. Bishop, who was to direct the UAW's educational program during the GM strike and to be active in Flint, had spent a few days in Akron during the Goodyear strike aiding the efforts to maintain striker morale. 9

About two months after the settlement of the Goodyear strike, the first mass sit-down strikes in history took place in France. 10 The strikes were preceded by the reunification of the sundered French labor movement, which was consummated in March, 1936, and by the Chamber of Deputies elections of April 26–May 3, which resulted in victory for the Popular Front, strengthened the "self-confidence" of the workers, and persuaded many of them that they no longer had to submit to existing conditions of labor.

When reunification was accomplished, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) had a membership that included only 6.3 percent of the workers employed by the private sector of the French economy, and only 1.4 percent of the workers in the metal industries were covered by collective agreements. The CGT was not responsible for the sit-down strikes, which were entirely spontaneous in origin, but it counseled the strikers and coordinated their action once the strike movement was underway. The intransigent attitude of management with regard to collective bargaining, which was especially true of employers in the metal industries, contributed importantly to the development of strike sentiment among the workers; the strikes
were less designed to improve working conditions as such than to enhance the bargaining power of the workers and to raise their status vis-à-vis management.

The strike movement began almost without notice in northern France on May 8, spread from there to the provinces and to Paris and its industrial suburbs, and by May 26 had taken on mass proportions. In June approximately 1.9 million workers, almost one-fourth of all the wage earners in industry and commerce, were on strike, and nearly three-fourths of the strikes, involving 8941 establishments, were of the sit-down type. Among the factories occupied by the strikers were the automobile plants of Citroën and Renault, including the latter's factory at Boulogne Billancourt, the largest in France. The employers insisted upon the evacuation of their plants as a precondition of negotiations, and their press attributed the entire strike movement to Communist influence.

Léon Blum took office on June 5 as France's first Socialist premier and was immediately importuned by the Confédération Générale de la Production Française, which spoke for management, to intervene to end the strikes, although employers apparently did not press for the forcible eviction of the strikers lest this lead to bloodshed and the worsening of the industrial-relations outlook. Despite criticism from the center and right that he was sacrificing legality and property rights in the interests of public order, Blum, although conceding that the sit-down violated French civil law, refused to use force to evacuate the plants and stated that it was his responsibility not to provoke violence but to conciliate the dispute.

Taking advantage of the fact that the employers were willing to make concessions to the workers in return for the evacuation of their plants, Blum brought both sides together for the negotiations that led to the Matignon Agreement of June 7 and the gradual decline of the strike movement. "Matignon," a historian of the French labor movement has written, "blazed the path to a definite recognition of the trade-union movement and to full recognition of the freedom to organize." The agreement was quickly followed by the enactment by the Chamber of Deputies of a group of laws that in effect constituted the "French New Deal," including a statute dealing with collective bargaining that provided for agreements between the "most representative organizations" of employers and employees. This legislation, coupled with the Matignon Agreement, led to an enormous expansion of the French labor movement, with the membership gains coming chiefly among the mass-production workers, such as the semi-skilled and unskilled operatives in the metal industries.

The French sit-down strikes of May–June, 1936, were similar in
many respects to the GM sit-down that began at the end of the year. Like the GM strike, they were initiated without official union authorization at a time when the labor movement was weak. National elections in the two countries had the same exhilarating effect upon the mood of the workers, and the goal of the strikes was primarily recognition, strongly opposed by French employers and by GM. French employers, like GM, originally insisted on evacuation as a precondition for negotiations, but the political leadership in France and Michigan refused to use force to evacuate the plants. Frank Murphy, who like the French premier, took office after the strike movement was underway, was the Léon Blum of the GM strike, and both men took pride in the fact that their efforts had led to the peaceful composition of the disputes with which they were faced and that bloodshed had been avoided at a time of profound social upheaval. Both men indicated that they would have resigned their office rather than use force to drive the strikers from the plants.

Like the GM strike, the French strikes were without revolutionary intent, and the workers in both countries took great pains to protect the property of the plants in which they were sitting. In both France and the United States the successful outcome of the sit-down strikes proved to be a decisive factor in the organization of the unorganized and the unionization of the mass-production industries. After the strikes, employers in both countries were to complain about a rash of sit-down and quickie strikes in their plants resulting from a lack of discipline among the newly organized and inexperienced labor unionists and also, allegedly, from Communist agitation.

But there were differences between the two strike movements as well as similarities. In France the reunification of the labor movement preceded the strikes and strengthened worker morale, whereas in the United States a split in the labor movement buoyed the auto workers and was an important precursor of the GM strike. Union leaders, as distinguished from the UAW as an organization, and individual Communists were directly involved in the origins of the GM strike, but the trade unions did not begin to play a part in the French strikes until some time after they had begun, and the Communists apparently sought to stave off the strikes lest they endanger the Popular Front. In France, labor legislation providing for collective bargaining and employee representation was enacted after the strikes, whereas the NLRA, the corresponding American law, was placed on the statute books several months before the beginning of the GM strike. The American statute, however, did not become effective until its constitutionality was upheld by the United States Supreme Court in April, 1937, after the GM strike; and then, like the French law, it helped
materially to stimulate the expansion of the labor movement.

The French sit-down strikes did not go unnoticed by elements of the UAW leadership. They were aware of what the unorganized workers in the automobile and other mass-production industries in France had wrought, and they had undoubtedly concluded that what could be accomplished in France could also be accomplished in the United States. Knudsen, however, did not believe that the experience could be repeated in his own country. He had visited France in September, 1936, and had been warned by one of the French auto manufacturers whose plant had been closed by a sit-down that the same might happen to GM if it did not take care, but Knudsen thought otherwise. "'No,' " he told the Frenchman. "'That could not happen in the United States. The American people would not stand for them [sit-down strikes].' " Several weeks later the first sit-in strike (to use the UAW's terminology) in the history of the American automobile industry occurred in the South Bend plant of the Bendix Products Corporation, 24 percent of whose stock was owned by GM.4

The Bendix strike originated in the desire of the fairly strong UAW local in the plant to secure the closed shop or at least to be designated as the exclusive bargaining agency for the company's forty-three hundred workers.5 The immediate cause of the dispute was the favored status allegedly accorded by the management to the Bendix Employees Association. The strike began on November 17 when some of the workers sat down by their machines. The works manager thereupon ordered all the employees to evacuate the plant, but more than a thousand of them refused to do so.6

The importance that the UAW and the CIO attached to the strike was indicated by the fact that Homer Martin, Adolph Germer, and Leo Krzycki all came to South Bend to lend a hand in the negotiations. The Bendix management, after first meeting with the union negotiators, refused to continue bargaining unless the plant was evacuated. On instructions from their leadership, the strikers therefore left the factory on November 23; and two days later an agreement was concluded whereby the company recognized the UAW local as the bargaining agency for its members and such other employees as chose to avail themselves of its services, pledged itself not to conclude an agreement regarding working conditions with any group other than the UAW without previously coming to terms with the union on the same questions, and agreed to the establishment of a union-management board of review to which any union member or any other employee who had secured the consent of the local's executive board could protest the decisions of the plant personnel director.7 The union had failed to win exclusive bargaining rights and the
elimination of the company union, but it had achieved a position of power and prestige within the plant, and its membership was to grow rapidly after the strike.\textsuperscript{18}

The Bendix sit-in was the longest strike of its kind in American history to that date, and it is understandable that the UAW should have been impressed with what had transpired. A minority of the Bendix workers had quickly and successfully tied up the South Bend plant, and despite what one source described as “the very unique and rarely seen situation as this strike was,” the management had not sought an injunction against the strikers, the police had made no effort to eject them, and no violence had occurred. If, as was suggested at the time, the Bendix strike was “a major testing ground” for the CIO’s program of organization, the test had proved successful.\textsuperscript{19}

There was one disturbing note for the UAW and CIO high command to consider however: Homer Martin had revealed himself in the Bendix bargaining to be an erratic, inept, and undependable negotiator. He twice left South Bend in the midst of negotiations, despite pleas from Germer to remain in the city, and after agreeing on November 20 to request the strikers to evacuate the plant, he delayed taking the action for three days. When the negotiations reached a climax on November 24, he prepared once again to leave town, and only Germer’s warning that he would be “discredited” if he followed this course caused Martin to reconsider.\textsuperscript{20} Martin’s shortcomings as a negotiator were to plague the UAW throughout the sit-down era.

Two days after the settlement of the Bendix strike the UAW brought the sit-down tactic to the Detroit heart of the automobile industry by a strike at the plant of the Midland Steel Products Company, which made steel body frames for Chrysler and Ford. The union had been negotiating with the management for a wage increase, reduction of hours, and the abolition of piece work, but it decided to seek its objectives via the strike route rather than at the bargaining table when the management refused to extend a preferred wage increase to all the departments in the plant. About twelve hundred of the company’s day-shift workers sat down in the plant on November 27, and the resulting halt in the production of steel frames caused the layoff within the next few days of at least fifty-three thousand workers at the Plymouth, Dodge, Chrysler, Lincoln-Zephyr, and Briggs plants. The strike was settled on December 4 and resulted in what the UAW described as “the most significant union victory in the history of the automobile industry in Detroit.” The company increased its original wage offer, agreed to abolish piece rates as soon as was “practicable,” reconfirmed the offer it had made just before the
strike to pay time-and-a-half for hours worked above forty-five per week and on Sundays and holidays, and promised “free access for discussion” to its employees and to union representatives. The UAW might have obtained even better terms from Midland had not Ford threatened to remove its business from the company if it made any further concessions to the union.21

The Midland sit-down demonstrated graphically how a strike in one key automobile plant could paralyze the operation of other motor-vehicle factories that depended on its product. The strike also gave evidence of that sense of solidarity, that bond among the automobile workers and between the automobile workers and the rubber workers that was to characterize the sit-down era in the automobile industry. Chrysler and Dodge unionists informed their employers during the strike that they would not work on frames supplied by companies other than Midland, and at a crucial juncture in the strike Dodge unionists in three hundred cars paraded in front of the Midland plant. William Carney, a veteran of the Goodyear strike and a URW organizer, rendered “invaluable assistance” to the UAW throughout the strike. The strike also demonstrated how women could support a sit-down by activities on the outside: the female Midland workers and the wives of the strikers prepared the food for the strikers throughout the dispute. The head of the women's buying and cooking committee was Dorothy Kraus, the wife of the editor of the Flint Auto Worker, and she was to play an approximately similar role in the GM strike.22

Just as Communists, fellow travelers, and sympathizers with Communism were to be conspicuously involved in the GM strike so the far left was at the center of things in the Midland strike. John Anderson was the UAW organizer in charge of the strike; Nat Ganley, who had served as an organizer for the Communist-dominated National Textile Workers Union and as general organizer for the Communists' Trade Union Unity League and had been a Daily Worker correspondent, was an official of the UAW local involved and edited the Midland Flash; and Wyndham Mortimer was in on the negotiations to settle the strike. William Weinstone, the secretary of the Communist party of Michigan, called on Communists to support the strike, and the Daily Worker, delighted with the whole affair, predicted that the sit-down would “take the automobile industry by storm.” A handbill “exposing” the Communist role in the dispute was distributed in the strike area, but it had no visible effect on the course of events.23

December, 1936, as it turned out, was a month of sit-down strikes in Detroit. In addition to the Midland workers, employees of the Gordon Baking Company, the fabricating and extrusion plant of the
The Coming of the Strike

131

Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa), Kelsey-Hayes Wheel Company, National Automotive Fibres, Incorporated, and Bohn Aluminum and Brass Corporation all sat down at their posts for varying periods. The UAW must have noted with keen interest that only in the Gordon Baking strike was a warrant charging trespass issued against the strikers, and only here was an effort made by police, constables, and some company employees to eject the sit-downers.\textsuperscript{24} The UAW must also have been heartened by the opinion of the Wayne County prosecutor, Duncan McCrea, that, although employers might seek redress in the civil courts, the police could not interfere with a peacefully conducted sit-down since no statute forbade such a strike and since the applicable common law did not authorize police intervention. The sit-downers, the prosecutor declared, were inside the plant by the invitation of their employers, “so there can be no trespass.”\textsuperscript{25}

In addition to the Midland strike, several of the Detroit sit-downs of December affected the automobile industry: National Automotive Fibres made upholstery and floor mats for automobiles, Bohn Aluminum and Alcoa made a variety of automobile parts, and Kelsey-Hayes produced wheels and brakes. Of the auto-related sit-downs other than Midland, the most important was the Kelsey-Hayes strike. There were brief sit-downs in the two Kelsey-Hayes plants on December 11 and 12, but both were called off on the promise that the company would meet with union representatives. Dissatisfied with the progress of negotiations, however, the union broke off the talks, and a third sit-down was initiated on December 14 that continued to December 23. Before the third sit-down the UAW—the unit involved was Walter Reuther’s West Side local—had secured the virtual dismantling of the Kelsey-Hayes company union and company agreement to a seventy-five cent minimum wage;\textsuperscript{26} but it wanted additional increases in the higher brackets, time-and-a-half for hours worked above eight per day and forty per week, adjustment of complaints involving an alleged speed-up, and exclusive bargaining rights.

Since the Ford Motor Company received most of its brake shoes and brake drums from Kelsey-Hayes, production at the giant Rouge plant was crippled by the strike. Ford, consequently, put pressure on the company to settle and, at the same time, persuaded the union to be reasonable by threatening to seek a court order authorizing the Wayne County sheriff to seize Ford brake dies in the possession of Kelsey-Hayes. The union won the overtime rate it was seeking and the promise of adjustment of rates above the minimum, but it did not secure exclusive bargaining rights.\textsuperscript{27} The union defeat on this point, however, was more apparent than real since the strike had an almost
miraculous effect on union membership. Before the sit-down began the local had enrolled at most two hundred of Kelsey-Hayes' forty-five hundred employees, but after the strike the membership “just swelled like a great tidal wave.” and before long the union had a majority of the firm’s production workers in its ranks.28

The Kelsey-Hayes sit-down brought into prominence three UAW officials who were later to apply in the GM strike what they had learned in the Kelsey-Hayes affair: Walter and Victor Reuther and Merlin D. Bishop. Little known in the UAW at the time of the South Bend convention, Walter Reuther enhanced his reputation among the auto workers by his leadership role in the Kelsey-Hayes strike. Victor, who had just joined his brothers in the UAW campaign, and Bishop, who had once lived with the Reuthers in Detroit and had been at Brookwood with Roy, hired in at Kelsey-Hayes shortly before the strike, and Bishop in particular helped to organize the strike on the inside. After the strike began Victor left the plant to lend a hand outside the factory, and he became the union’s voice in the sound car. Both Victor and Bishop were soon to be sent by the UAW to Flint to help with organization work in that city.29

Like the Bendix and Midland strikes, the Kelsey-Hayes strike had once again demonstrated the effectiveness of the sit-in technique, and like the Midland strike it had revealed the vulnerability of the automobile industry to a work stoppage in a key parts plant. The CIO had sent in organizers to aid the Kelsey-Hayes strikers just as it had aided the Bendix and Midland sit-downers, and public authorities had not interfered in the Kelsey-Hayes sit-down just as they had avoided involving themselves in the other two strikes. This latter fact caused Iron Age to remark with foreboding that “the whole political aspect of employer-employee relations has taken an abrupt turn toward organized labor in the last few months.” The UAW undoubtedly reached the same conclusion, although without any foreboding.30

The sit-downs at Bendix, Midland, and Kelsey-Hayes provided the UAW with the necessary know how to conduct a strike of the same type against one of the major auto producers. The union had learned how to organize the sit-downers inside the plant and how to coordinate their efforts with pickets on the outside. It had experimented with workers' education inside the plant and with the sound car as a strike weapon, and it had acquired some knowledge of the logistics involved in supplying sit-downers with food and other necessities. It had discovered that worker morale might be less a problem in a sit-down than in a conventional strike, that “it became a sort of festivity for these guys.”31 Above all, the UAW had learned that a
minority of auto workers could tie up a large plant by a sit-down and by so doing could bring a recalcitrant employer to terms.

It has been said that it required “a brilliant meteor flaming across the dark sky” to capture the attention of the auto workers, who, in the main, had hitherto resisted the appeals of union organizers. If so, the sit-down strikes became that “meteor.” Not only did they bring the union a good deal of publicity, but they provided it with something it badly needed—the aura of victory. Before the UAW would be able to gather the majority of the auto workers within its ranks, however, it would have to win the kind of victory over one of the major producers that it had achieved in strikes against the far more vulnerable and far less powerful independent parts makers. There was an awareness among observers of the auto scene as 1936 drew to a close that the struggle with the Big Three was near at hand and that the first union target among them would be GM. “The successful sit-down strikes in the ‘feeder’...[plants],” observed the Daily Worker, which had excellent contacts within the UAW, “have been a prelude to the march forward upon the General Motors Corporation.”

Of the Big Three, GM was the logical UAW target. Chrysler, which had once been Germer’s first choice, seemed to be ruled out because the union enjoyed somewhat better relations with it than it did with Ford and GM, and a victory over Chrysler, in any event, was not likely to have the same impact on the auto workers as a victory over Ford or GM. Ford was more bitterly anti-union than even GM, but the UAW had almost no membership among Ford workers, and the mammoth Rouge plant seemed impregnable to union attack. GM had the advantage from the UAW point of view of not only being the leading producer in the industry but also, because of its size and the fact that du Pont was its principal shareholder, as personifying “Big Business” in the United States to a far greater extent than its rivals did. If the UAW could somehow widen the narrow salient that it had thrust into the GM lines and could effect an actual breakthrough on this front, its forces would be in a strong position to conquer the auto industry as a whole.

Speaking on September 11, 1936, to representatives from the various GM locals, Homer Martin declared that the right of GM workers to organize would have to be established during the existing production season even if this required a “general strike” against the corporation. At least one GM local leader, GEB member Fred Pieper of Atlanta, who had been one of the leading protagonists of a GM strike in the spring of 1935, construed these remarks as seriously
Sit-Down

134

intended rather than as mere rhetoric and was soon to involve the Atlanta local in a strike against GM that would spread to the farthest reaches of the corporation.34

With Pieper in the lead, Atlanta Fisher Body workers staged a brief sit-down on October 30 to protest a short delay on the part of management in meeting with union representatives to discuss the piece rates announced by the company for the 1937 models, which the union alleged would result in a reduction of earnings as compared to the previous model year. An agreement was quickly reached between the local and the plant manager regarding the points in dispute, but the union was soon complaining that the agreement had not been posted, as it claimed the management had promised, that the rate adjustments made were unsatisfactory, and that plant police had passed out company-union literature inside the factory but that the union had been prevented from distributing its handbills on company property.

The local decided on November 6 to present demands to the company dealing primarily with piece rates, but since Pieper assumed that these proposals would be rejected by the management, he began to think in terms of another strike. Publicly, the local warned that, as "a last resort," the "demonstration" of October 30 would "not only be repeated on a local basis but it will develop[sic] into a National sit-down"; privately, Pieper wrote to members of the GM Advisory Council informing them that he was writing with Martin's knowledge and asking them to what extent they were prepared to support the Atlanta Fisher Body workers should they go on strike. Declaring that it would be necessary to close all Fisher Body plants to defeat GM, Pieper promised to avoid strike action until he was assured of "your support 100%."35

The Fisher Body and Chevrolet locals of Norwood, Kansas City, and St. Louis and the Toledo and Janesville Chevrolet locals all more or less expressed support for Atlanta. Travis advised Pieper that he would do whatever he could to persuade the executive board of the amalgamated Flint local to back the Atlanta workers, and when Atlanta did go out on strike, the Flint union declared its readiness to aid this effort.36 Before the GM strike had been concluded, every one of the UAW locals that had pledged Atlanta support had itself joined the strike.

On November 18 some of the Atlanta Fisher Body workers sat down in the plant allegedly to prevent the layoff of a few workers for wearing union buttons inside the factory. The strikers remained in the plant overnight but evacuated it the next morning when the management agreed not to operate the factory until the dispute had
been settled. When the strikers left the plant, they met jointly with the Chevrolet employees, and those present voted to declare a strike affecting both companies. The strike was spread to the parts and service division on November 24 after Pieper had told the employees of this unit that other GM locals would give them "active support" when and if their assistance was required.37

Why Pieper should have called the Atlanta workers out on a strike that he himself admitted they were not prepared to fight remains something of a mystery to this day. The shutting down of a single assembly plant was of no great consequence to a concern like GM, which could simply transfer the work of the struck plant to other units of the corporation. This fact persuaded UAW progressives and some others in the organization as well to suspect that Pieper was playing GM's game and had deliberately provoked a premature strike at an unimportant plant so as to tip off the corporation regarding the UAW's intentions and to enable it to throttle the strike movement in its infancy.39 There is, however, no evidence to support this thesis, and GM, at all events, made no direct effort to break the Atlanta strike, nor did it seem to view the events in Atlanta as a prelude of things to come in more important units of the corporation.

The Atlanta Fisher Body plant manager was convinced that Pieper had called the strike "purely for revenge": he recalled—and what he said was confirmed by the president of the local—that when Pieper had been dismissed two years previously, he had stated that he would make GM "pay" for this action. Revenge, thus, may very well have been one of the factors that motivated Pieper, but he insisted that he had acted from the start with the full knowledge of Martin, who, he claimed, had led him to believe that the UAW would strike all GM in support of Atlanta. Pieper so advised the Atlanta workers and then, if one accepts his version of what had occurred, used the buttons episode as a pretext to initiate the Fisher Body sit-down in the expectation that the Atlanta tail would wag the UAW dog. Martin, however, denied Pieper's allegations and charged that the Atlanta leader had blundered his way into a foolish strike and then had tried to "unload" onto others responsibility for his rash action.40

The Pieper version of the origins of the Atlanta strike seems closer to the actuality than the Martin version does. The Atlanta UAW leader was one of Martin's cohorts on the GEB, and it is not unlikely that, unbeknownst to other board members and certainly to the progressive faction, they had discussed GM strike tactics prior to the Atlanta sit-down. Since Martin, as events would show, was dissatisfied with the official UAW-CIO position of restraint in initiating a GM strike, he undoubtedly made remarks that led Pieper to believe
that the UAW president would persuade other GM locals to support an Atlanta strike by strikes of their own. Three days after the Atlanta strike began, Martin, probably in conformity with promises made to Pieper, sent a wire to various GM locals instructing them to advise their members to “stand by for notification from the international union concerning action to be taken.” This wire had been sent without the knowledge of other UAW officers, and Henry Kraus tells us that they were stunned when it came to their attention. Germer, who was also caught unawares by the UAW president’s wire, let Martin know that the UAW was not prepared for the all-encompassing GM strike that he apparently had in mind.41

Called without the authorization of the GEB that the UAW constitution required,42 the Atlanta strike pointed up the lack of discipline that characterized the fledgling UAW and the virtual autonomy of its locals even with regard to so crucial a matter as the initiation of a strike. The veteran unionist Germer complained to John Brophy, “It seems to be a cusrome [sic] for anybody or any group to call a strike at will….”43 The anarchy prevailing in the UAW helps to explain the rather anomalous manner in which the GM strike spread after its Atlanta beginnings.

The strike in Atlanta compelled the UAW officers, the GM Advisory Council, and the GEB to devise a GM strategy. Three different plans seem to have been advanced at the time. Martin, apparently, was thinking of calling out as many GM locals as could be persuaded to strike. If he had a carefully thought out strike strategy that involved any meaningful assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of alternative lines of action or of the plants that had to be struck were victory to be won, it was not apparent to his UAW confreres. Pieper and Hall favored a strike at the GM assembly plants across the land. If all or virtually all of the numerous GM assembly plants could have been closed by strikes, this strategy would have made some sense, but since the UAW simply did not have the membership needed to execute so difficult a plan, it is hard to understand why Pieper and Hall pushed it so vigorously.44

More experienced than the UAW leadership, Germer advised union officials to adopt a strategy of striking only the key GM plants in Cleveland, Flint, and Detroit whose shutdown would paralyze the corporation’s production of automobiles. Germer, however, coun-
selled the UAW to proceed with caution. He was aware that the union at that time had only about nine thousand members among GM’s production workers, that its Flint membership was only fifteen hundred, and that the GM plants in Pontiac, Saginaw, Lansing, and Muncie were virtually without organization. He was concerned about
the enormous power that GM wielded in Flint affairs and what this portended should a strike occur in that city. He realized, moreover, that it would be unwise to strike before the GM workers received the bonus that the company was scheduled to pay them beginning December 18 and before New Dealish Frank Murphy replaced conservative Republican Frank Fitzgerald as governor of Michigan.

Germer repeatedly told Martin that he must consult the CIO leadership before taking any strike action since it was the CIO that would have to finance the strike. He cautioned Martin not to build up strike hopes among the automobile workers that could not be realized lest this adversely affect UAW membership. The UAW could win, Germer wrote John L. Lewis, if it could "pull the key plants," but he feared that the union lacked the strength for this undertaking. The immediate action to be taken, he advised, was to ask GM for a conference to discuss basic demands and to defer strike talk until the corporation's response became evident.45

Martin and Dillonites like Pieper, undoubtedly because they were opposed to Germer's "go slow" policy, sought to exclude the CIO field representative from at least some of the meetings of the GM Advisory Council and the GEB, but wiser heads among the union's leadership, despite the "general strike talk," realized that Germer's advice was sound. By a vote of 7-6, with Hall, who was chairing the meeting in Martin's absence, casting the deciding vote, the GEB on December 4 apparently voted against an immediate strike and in favor of delay until Cleveland and Flint were ready to act, presumably after January 1, 1937. In effect repudiating Martin, the board voted to take the CIO into its "full confidence" regarding GM strategy. The general officers, Germer and Allan Haywood of the CIO, and the three-man GM steering committee then secured GEB approval for a recommendation that the general officers should seek to negotiate an agreement with the GM high command and should be given the authority, should efforts to secure the conference fail or should its results prove unsatisfactory, "to take any further action necessary to protect the best interests of the members" employed in GM. The GEB had previously decided that each GM local should begin negotiations with GM plant managers on the basis of a contract that was being drawn up by the GM steering committee and the general officers.46

The GEB also officially decided on November 30 to give UAW support to the Atlanta strike. Ed Hall contacted Harry Anderson about the strike, but Anderson informed him that it was GM policy for plant managers to settle disputes locally. The GEB therefore dispatched Hall to Atlanta, but he reported back in a few days that "the only word the Company knew was 'No'" and that it had proved
impossible to establish a basis for collective bargaining. The UAW then sent Germer to Atlanta to see if he could arrange a settlement. Germer, who regarded the Atlanta strike as "senseless" and thought that Pieper had run "amuck," wanted to close out the affair, but he saw the need for a face-saving settlement that would not cause the UAW to lose its momentum. The local management, however, would agree to nothing but a return to work on a status quo ante basis. Despite what GM said in Detroit, the Atlanta negotiations revealed that the corporation's plant managers were without power to make concessions to the union that involved any real change in its status. They apparently could not even agree on their own to permit union members to wear union buttons on the job. Unable thus to win a local victory, the strikers were reconciled to remaining away from their jobs until the UAW spread the strike to more important units of the GM domain.  

The Libby-Owens-Ford glass strike that began on December 15 became an additional factor in the UAW's GM strategy since the continuation of GM automotive production was now threatened by a potential shortage of plate glass. How much plate glass GM had on hand was not publicly known, but Glenn McCabe, the president of the Federation of Flat Glass Workers, contended on December 24 that the glass strike would tie up the auto industry within fifteen to thirty days and that his organization would help the UAW to "force" its demands on GM.  

The day after the Libby-Owens-Ford strike began the GM strike spread to Kansas City. The alleged cause of the dispute was the decision of the local Chevrolet management on December 15 to dismiss a union employee who, despite two warnings, had violated a frequently violated company rule by jumping over the line on his way to the lavatory. When the union leadership the next day failed to persuade the company to reconsider its decision, the Fisher Body workers, who belonged to the same local as the Chevrolet unionists and worked in the same plant, sat down at their jobs, which forced the closing of Chevrolet as well and the idling of about twenty-four hundred workers. The sit-down continued until December 23, when the union moved the strike to the outside primarily because of the difficulties it was encountering in feeding the sit-downers. Martin soon stated that the Kansas City strike, which involved his home local, would have to be settled on a national basis, and he allegedly told the strikers that there would be a general auto strike if the GM strikes then underway were not settled.  

The strikes in Atlanta and Kansas City prompted Knudsen to state in a speech of December 18 that collective bargaining was "here
to stay” but that it should occur “before a shutdown rather than after.” 50 The same day that Knudsen made this speech, Lewis, Brophy, Mortimer, Hall, Martin, and McCabe held a conference of crucial importance in Washington. Rejecting the idea of waiting until the production season of the fall of 1937 to mount an “intensified effort” against GM, they agreed to implement at once the GEB decision to seek a general conference with GM to discuss outstanding grievances and decided that if the company should refuse to negotiate “on a broad scale” the union objective should be “to move towards a climax in January.” 51 Undoubtedly the considerations Germer had previously advanced regarding the GM bonus and the date of Murphy’s assumption of office, plus the fact that the Christmas season was psychologically a poor time to ask workers to go on strike, prompted the decision to delay a possible work stoppage until after the beginning of the New Year.

It is unlikely that the Washington conferees set any specific date after January 1 for a strike should the GM negotiations fail as expected. The CIO must have been aware, however, that UAW leaders were impressed with the “influx” of workers into the organization in the previous few weeks, that Martin believed the membership was “enough to do business with,” that the UAW was committed to a confrontation with GM, and that a strike could not be delayed for very much longer. Lewis told the press that GM’s policy, unlike Chrysler’s, was “antagonistic,” called on the company to “do a little collective bargaining,” and said, “That will be up to General Motors” when asked if there would be a strike. 52

When John Brophy arrived in Detroit on December 20 to aid Martin in preparing the necessary communications to GM requesting a conference, he sought to bring further pressure on the corporation by declaring that the CIO would back the UAW if there were a strike and that his presence testified to this fact. He had previously sent a statement for publication to the writer Louis Adamic in which he noted that the CIO did not “condemn sit-down strikes per se. In the formative stage of unionism in a certain type of industry,” he observed, “the sit-down strike has real value. . . . Sitdown strikes . . . occur when the employer fails to meet in full the requirements of collective bargaining.” Brophy made it clear shortly after his arrival in Detroit that these remarks were relevant to the UAW’s relations with GM. 53

In consonance with the strategy agreed upon in Washington, Martin on December 21 sent a wire and a letter to Knudsen requesting an “immediate general conference” between GM and the UAW. The international and local officers of the union, Martin stated, had made every effort to negotiate at the local level, as the corporation
had advised, but the plant managers had taken an "unyielding position." He blamed the Atlanta and Kansas City strikes on "flagrant" discrimination against union workers and asserted that there was "widespread dissatisfaction" among GM workers because of the speed-up, the lack of job security resulting from the absence of proper seniority rules, piece-work methods of pay, and other matters affecting wages and working conditions. "Bona fide collective bargaining," Martin concluded, "is the only workable instrument for the establishment of [a] satisfactory relationship between the employers and employees. . . ."54

The next day Knudsen met with Martin and Addes in the GM Building, and the union officers formally presented the discrimination cases and grievances noted in the UAW communications of December 21. Knudsen, however, advised the UAW to take up these grievances with the appropriate plant managers or, if necessary, the general managers having authority in the particular locality. Just after the meeting Martin said that it was satisfactory "as far as it went" and that he would comply with Knudsen's suggestion; but on December 24, after Lewis had attacked the GM position on local bargaining as "impractical and an evasion of General Motors' responsibility to bargain collectively," Martin renewed his request to GM for a general conference. He stated that, although the UAW would try to settle minor grievances locally, the principal issues that it wished to discuss with the corporation—collective bargaining, seniority, speed of work, rates and methods of pay—were "national in scope" and would have to be considered at the summit.55 In view of what had occurred in local bargaining in Atlanta and elsewhere56 and the limited authority of plant managers to alter GM policy in matters of substance, the UAW position on this question was altogether realistic. By the time Knudsen replied to Martin's letter, the sit-down strike had spread to the vital center of the GM domain.

Although it was the Christmas season, late December, 1936, was by no means an inauspicious time for a GM strike from the UAW point of view. It was the rush season for automotive production as well as a time of record or near-record output for Chevrolet, Buick, and Fisher Body, factors that might conceivably have weakened GM's determination to take a prolonged strike; and also, since the grooving-in process had not been altogether completed in the various auto plants, the automobile workers, who, like most workers, tend to be upset by changes in their work routine, were grumbling about working conditions.

It is not surprising, moreover, that the major phase of the strike was initiated in some of the body plants of the corporation in view of
The Coming of the Strike

141

what has already been said about the discontent of the more skilled body workers as machinery undermined their skills and reduced the pay differentials between themselves and the less skilled, the surviving consciousness of skill and of bargaining power on the part of such body workers as metal finishers, and the hard manual labor required in body plants like Fisher Body No. 2. The Fisher Body plant managers, also, had a relatively poor record from the UAW point of view in dealing with individual grievances as compared to the plant managers of other GM divisions. Finally, bodies were extremely difficult to store so that the UAW could be certain that the company had no bank of bodies to draw on should the flow of bodies suddenly be halted by a strike.57

It is a matter of no wonder that when the GM strike spread to the key plants of the corporation it took the form of the sit-down. The sit-down strike had been receiving a good deal of publicity, and it had proved itself a formidable weapon and one ideally suited to the automobile industry. It seemed more sensible, moreover, to sit down inside the plant in the cold of winter than to march in a picket line on the outside. In Flint, in addition, union leaders thought that the police might attempt to break up an outside picket line as they had done in the 1930 Fisher Body strike but were less likely to storm a large plant to dislodge strikers sitting on the inside.58

The GM strike took a far more serious turn for the corporation when a small number of workers sat down in the Cleveland Fisher Body plant on December 28. Whereas the Atlanta and Kansas City assembly plants were of minor consequence to the continued operation of the corporation, the Cleveland plant, which made all the body stampings for two-door Chevrolet models and some parts for all Chevrolet bodies, was one of the most important of all GM plants. It employed about seventy-two hundred workers and at the time of the strike was turning out stampings for about twenty-seven thousand bodies a week.59

The UAW local involved in the Cleveland Fisher Body strike had been one of the most militant in the organization in the NRA era, but it had since fallen on hard times, and its membership had dwindled into insignificance. The closing of the plant’s wood mill in the summer of 1936 and a belief that the speed of work had been increased and piece rates cut at the beginning of the 1937 production season caused concern among the plant workers upon which UAW organizers sought to capitalize. The local held its largest meeting since the 1934 strike on November 8, 1936, and at the end of the month the UAW representative in the city, Elmer Davis, reported that “things are really getting hot.”60 Although union membership
was thus on the upswing toward the end of the year, the local had enrolled probably no more than 10 percent of the plant’s work force as of late December, which perhaps explains why the strike began as a sit-down.

Shortly before Christmas the local arranged to meet with the plant manager, Lincoln R. Scafe, on December 28 at 11:00 A.M. to discuss union allegations of discrimination by the company in the layoff of tool and die makers and the possibility of having the employees work shorter hours to avoid additional layoffs. At 10:40 A.M. on the twenty-eighth the company asked the president of the local, Louis F. Spisak, to postpone the meeting until 2:30 P.M., and Spisak agreed to the delay.

Spisak, however, did not control the union situation within the plant, where the key figure was Paul Miley, the chief steward of the union and the chairman of its bargaining committee. Miley, who had once played freshman football at Western Reserve University and had been the president of the local at the time of the 1934 strike, worked in the quarter-panel department of the plant, which was a center of union strength. After checking with Travis to make sure that a Cleveland strike would not upset Flint’s plans, Miley decided that the time had come to act. Following his instructions, the workers in his department sat down at about noon to protest the alleged “run-around” the company was giving the local by delaying the conference; and Miley then went to other departments of the plant and persuaded the union stewards to ask their men to cease working. The plant supervision, after failing to secure a resumption of operations, ordered the workers to leave the plant. Most of them complied, but 259 employees, according to the company, remained inside the idle plant.

It has been customary to view the Cleveland sit-down as having been entirely spontaneous in its origin, but the available evidence raises serious doubts about this presumption. Elmer Davis, according to Miley, had been “begging” the local to join Atlanta and Kansas City on strike, and Martin had been encouraging similar action. A few days after the strike began Martin told Germer that he (Martin) had ordered the Cleveland strike, and Hall provided the CIO representative with a similar account of what had occurred. The conservative officers of the local—Miley thought them “reactionary” or worse—opposed a strike because of the local’s limited membership, but more militant unionists like Miley were receptive to the idea. “We knew,” Miley recalled, “that we were going out the first opportunity. This was going back and forth like wildfire.” The men held back until their Christmas bonus had been paid, and then the mili-
tants saw their "opportunity" when the management asked for a brief postponement of the scheduled December 28 conference.

Mayor Harold Burton of Cleveland proposed to the union and the company that work be resumed pending negotiations, but when Spisak presented this suggestion to Miley and other union leaders inside the plant, they objected and urged him to call Mortimer, the former head of the Cleveland Auto Council, who was then in Flint. Mortimer, long a proponent of a confrontation with GM, had assumed that the major challenge to the corporation by the UAW would not come until after January 1, but he was shrewd enough to realize that the moment of truth had now arrived. Like Germer, he had long favored the key-plants approach to a GM strike, and he knew that Cleveland Fisher Body and Fisher Body No. 1 of Flint, which was the source of Buick bodies and of parts for Pontiac and Olds bodies as well, were indispensable to this strategy—perhaps three-fourths of GM's production was dependent on these two plants. He therefore advised Spisak to keep the Cleveland strike going and decided to leave for Cleveland himself to provide direction for the strike. At the same time Mortimer told his friend Travis to strike Fisher Body No. 1 at the earliest possible moment. There is no reason to think that Mortimer consulted with other UAW officers before advising this course of action.

At an outside meeting of Fisher Body workers on December 28 Spisak, who had announced his support of the strike, declared, "I'll bet that within forty-eight hours you hear that the whole General Motors is shut down." It is not entirely clear whether Spisak was simply trying to bolster the spirits of the strikers or was making a prediction on the basis of information that he had received from Martin, with whom he had spoken, but the latter seems more likely. Spisak said that the international knew precisely what was going on and that "they're back of us," which may mean that Martin had told him that additional shutdowns were impending.

When Mortimer arrived in Cleveland on December 29, he rejected the Burton peace plan and then went out to the Fisher Body plant to address the strikers. Undoubtedly thinking back to the Toledo Chevrolet strike of 1935, Mortimer, as Martin had asserted with regard to the Kansas City strike, said that the strike was "no longer a local issue" and would therefore have to be settled on "a national scale," a judgment with which the local agreed. He reported that Flint stood behind the Cleveland workers and that the international would support them "to the limit of its resources." The next morning he correctly predicted that a Flint strike was only hours away.

On December 31 Homer Martin, who had come to Cleveland,
asked the strikers to evacuate the plant. The decision was made, apparently, because the layout of the factory made the feeding of the sit-downers a formidable undertaking whereas the plant could be picketed without special difficulty. When the workers paraded from the plant on the afternoon of the last day of 1936, they wore colored paper caps and tooted festooned horns, and, as the Cleveland Plain Dealer observed, “looked more like New Year greeter than men in an industrial struggle.” The Cleveland Fisher Body strikers were thus to celebrate New Year’s eve outside the plant, but in Flint, to which the focus of strike attention had by that time shifted, the strikers welcomed 1937 while sitting inside the city’s two Fisher Body plants.

Although the Cleveland Fisher Body strike led to predictions of an imminent Flint strike, the precise timing of that strike may have surprised even most of the UAW high command. On December 29 the UAW announced that, in view of the “growing seriousness” of the situation stemming from the strikes in Atlanta, Kansas City, and Cleveland, there would be a conference of GM union representatives in Flint on January 3 to which the general officers of the UAW would submit a proposed contract as a basis for collective bargaining. Mortimer, possibly with tongue in cheek, stated that the UAW by proceeding in this manner was conforming to Knudsen’s admonition to bargain before striking. That same day the Flint local presented a proposed contract to Evan J. Parker, the manager of Fisher No. 1 and No. 2, and arranged to confer with him about the document on January 4. It appeared from these two actions that there would not be a Flint strike before January 4, but on December 30 sit-down strikes occurred in both the Fisher Body plants.

At 7:00 A.M. on December 30 not more than fifty workers on the body line in Fisher Body No. 2 sat down in the plant and tied up production. The plant at the time employed about one thousand workers and was turning out 450 Chevrolet bodies a day. The ostensible cause of the strike was the decision of the employer to transfer three inspectors, who had refused to quit the union when the management, which regarded them as part of supervision, had instructed them to do so. The strike appears to have been entirely spontaneous. At 10:00 P.M. on the same day, following the night-shift lunch hour, the vastly more important Fisher Body No. 1 plant was also closed by a sit-in strike. The massive three-storied plant employed about seventy-three hundred workers and was turning out fourteen hundred Buick bodies daily.

The initiative in calling the No. 1 strike was taken by Bob Travis in consonance with instructions given him by Mortimer. Ostensibly, the cause of the strike was the report that the company was loading
The Coming of the Strike

The above is the usual account of what happened, and it is largely substantiated by Roy Reuther, but Bud Simons, the chairman of the No. 1 shop committee, tells another story. As he remembers it, the plant was running out of glass because of the Libby-Owens-Ford strike, and Travis, anxious for the union to seize the initiative rather than be the passive victim of a plant shutdown, therefore came to Simons and said, "'We have got to find something to start a strike about around here.' " The story of the dies was then fabricated—GM insisted that only part of one die had been shipped to Pontiac, because of a machinery failure, and that the transfer of dies was a
routine action—and the decision was then made to strike the plant.\textsuperscript{76} There is no real corroboration of this version of the strike's origin, but it is clear that Travis was concerned about the implications of the glass shortage for Fisher Body No. 1, and he was not inclined, many years later, to dismiss the Simons account as entirely fictional.\textsuperscript{77}

Whether GM really intended to remove large numbers of dies from the No. 1 plant remains a moot point, but, whatever the truth of this matter may be, it is perfectly apparent that the dies story was at most the occasion for rather than the cause of the strike. Travis was determined because of the Cleveland strike to shut down No. 1 as soon as it was possible to do so; and, as he concedes, he would have found one pretext or another to initiate the strike. For the Flint local's leadership and the rank and file, also, the dies story was probably less important as a reason to strike than were their basic complaints about working conditions and their desire for recognition and an improved status in the plant. It is not clear whether Travis and the stewards weighed the pros and cons of the sit-down as compared to an outside strike, but given the popularity of the new strike technique, the time of the year, the minority status of the union, and the nature of the city, it is hardly surprising that the strike when it came was of the sit-down variety.\textsuperscript{78}

After December 30 attention in the GM strike centered on Flint, but in the days and weeks that followed, the strike spread to additional GM plants and to other cities and states. On December 31, on orders from Martin, Fisher Body and Chevrolet workers in Norwood, Ohio, went out on strike, and the Guide Lamp plant in Anderson, Indiana, was closed by a sit-down.\textsuperscript{79} Toledo Chevrolet workers sat down on January 4, Janesville Chevrolet and Fisher Body workers on January 5, Cadillac workers on January 8, and Fleetwood workers, who made bodies for Cadillac, on January 12. On January 13 a conventional strike closed the St. Louis Fisher Body and Chevrolet plant, and on January 25 Oakland's Fisher Body and Chevrolet workers joined the strike, according to the union, but GM contended that the shutdown was the result of a shortage of materials.\textsuperscript{80} The last plant to be struck was the important Chevrolet No. 4 plant in Flint, which the UAW seized in a dramatic maneuver on February 1.

It was assumed at the time and has been accepted ever since that the CIO was caught unawares by the sit-downs in Cleveland and Flint, which changed the GM strike from a peripheral dispute between the corporation and some weak, outlying UAW locals into a direct confrontation between the international union and GM at the center of the corporation's power. Lewis, according to the usual view, was preoccupied with the steel organizing drive and was secondarily
concerned with the United Mine Workers campaign in soft coal and the struggle between the CIO and the AFL and was simply unprepared for an automobile strike.\textsuperscript{81} "The fight," one observer declared, "is not taking place in the scarred field of well-planned industrial civil war: steel, but in a flank maneuver neither at this moment expected nor adequately prepared for: autos."\textsuperscript{82}

There is a degree of truth in the conventional version of the CIO and the beginnings of the GM strike, but it is not the whole truth. The CIO was surprised only that the "climax" of the UAW drive came at the end of December rather than after January 1, as had been agreed upon at the UAW-CIO conference of December 18. It is thus not altogether accurate to argue that Lewis' hand was "forced" by the strike but that, foreseeing the shape of things to come and aware that all would be lost for the UAW and perhaps for the CIO as well if the CIO did not involve itself in the strike and if the strike did not succeed, he shrewdly stepped in, gave the strike support and direction, and led the auto workers to a brilliant victory. Lewis, as a matter of fact, had realized from the time the CIO was formed that its fate and that of the auto workers were intertwined, and he had declared at the CIO meeting of December 9, 1935, that support of organizational efforts in the auto and rubber industries was "the only practical thing as our first thrust."\textsuperscript{83} As it turned out, the "first thrust" of the CIO did come in these two areas of the economy, and it is unlikely that CIO leaders were "left blinking," as Time suggested,\textsuperscript{84} by the one-two punch the UAW directed at GM in late December.

There was less certainty at the time, as there has been since, regarding the role that the UAW leadership played in the calling of the major sit-downs of late December. The most common view of what occurred is that the UAW certainly intended a GM strike eventually but that "a few live wires" took matters out of the hands of the leadership and initiated the strikes prematurely. "The people," said Merlin Bishop, himself a participant in the sit-downs, "felt that this was a chance to throw off the yoke and get their freedom, and they just did not wait for leadership."\textsuperscript{85} If this interpretation of events is understood to mean that the GEB did not specifically authorize the Cleveland and Flint sit-downs, as the UAW constitution required, it is true enough, but if it is construed to imply that militants in the plants involved simply took affairs into their own hands without instruction from high UAW officials, the statement is inaccurate. Homer Martin, who on the one hand wanted CIO aid and support but on the other hand wanted to keep control of matters himself, did not choose to be bound by the December 18 CIO-UAW decision and, acting on his own responsibility, ordered the strike in Cleveland and
in Norwood and Anderson as well, even though he later stated that the UAW had never instructed anyone to sit down. First Vice-President Mortimer, once Cleveland was shut down, realized that there was no longer any point in waiting for a January showdown, and so he instructed Travis to strike Fisher Body No. 1 forthwith. It was possible in the loosely organized UAW, which had no tradition of local obedience to or dependence on an international organization, for events to unfold in this seemingly anarchic manner. As Allan Haywood complained to Germer, there was in the UAW "a lack of policy—no head no tail." 86

One of the reasons that the CIO and the UAW had thought it wise to delay a GM strike in Michigan until after January 1, 1937, was the fact that Frank Murphy would become governor of the state on that date. "We felt," said Mortimer, "that while he may or may not have been on our side, he at least would not be against us." 87 If that is all the UAW and the CIO expected of Murphy, and Mortimer was certainly guilty of an understatement, they had no reason whatso- ever to be disappointed in their expectation.

Frank Murphy was born in Harbor Beach (then Sand Beach), Michigan, on April 13, 1890. After completing high school in his home town, he enrolled at the University of Michigan, where he received his law degree in 1914. He then worked for a Detroit law firm until he joined the Army shortly after the United States entered World War I. He served with the American Expeditionary Force in France and Germany, studied briefly in England and Ireland while on detached service, and then returned to the United States in the summer of 1919 to become first assistant United States attorney for the Eastern District of Michigan. He served in that capacity until March 1, 1922, when he entered private law practice with his close friend, Edward G. Kemp. He was elected to the Detroit Recorder's Court in 1923 and served as a Recorder's Court judge until August 19, 1930, when he resigned to run for mayor. He won the mayoralty election in September and was reelected in November, 1931.

Murphy was a supporter of Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1932 presidential election and was rewarded for his efforts by being designated governor-general of the Philippines, a post that he officially assumed in May, 1933. When the Philippines became a commonwealth in November, 1935, Murphy became high commissioner. He announced his candidacy for the governorship of Michigan in July,
1936, and defeated his Republican opponent, Frank Fitzgerald, in November.\textsuperscript{88}

Murphy was a very ambitious person who aspired from an early date to the highest elective office in the land. He believed that the best way to realize his lofty ambition was through dedicated public service rather than through partisan maneuverings. “His creed,” a Detroit newspaper accurately observed just after he was elected governor, “is that the politician who gives the best government is the politician who travels the furthest.” Murphy’s abstemious personal habits—he neither drank nor smoked—were very decidedly related to his ambitions for himself. As he told a reporter early in his public career, “I cherished definite aims in life. I figured I’d need a lot of independence and self reliance and they depend upon self control and firm will. In short I figured I’d go further in attaining my aims if I steered clear of the stimulating influences of alcohol and tobacco.” Keeping in trim through boxing, riding, and other exercise was another means by which Murphy sought to fulfill his ambition to be “the best possible public servant my limitations will permit.”\textsuperscript{89} The gruelling, around-the-clock negotiations during the GM sit-down strike were precisely the sort of endurance contest for which Murphy had been preparing himself from the time of his youth.

Murphy’s vaulting ambition for high office did not mean that he was inclined to sacrifice principle to win public favor nor that he feared to challenge accepted views. “I like public office,” Murphy wrote to his brother George, “but I am no slave to it and from the first I have practiced and preached the doctrine that I would rather be out than in office if to be in meant surrendering a worthy principle.” Indeed, Murphy liked to think of himself as a fighter for unpopular causes who would triumph despite the formidable character of the opposition. “I don’t want the odds my way in any race,” he wrote his mother from overseas at the end of World War I. “I want the odds to be against me if the race isn’t even and I shall expect to win, too. I find that the real zip in life is not in winning but in fighting [,] not in going easily with the current but beating back the breakers.”\textsuperscript{90} In the sit-down strike Murphy was to be given the opportunity to “beat back the breakers.”

As a public servant, Murphy acquired a deserved reputation as a civil libertarian, as a zealous advocate of the freedoms embodied in the Bill of Rights. From the point of view of the leadership of the American Civil Liberties Union, Murphy was just about the ideal government official.\textsuperscript{91} Americans, Murphy thought, were “often a little slothful and drowsy about this precious right we call liberty” and
were indifferent about “the chains forged for our fellows,” but they would do well to remember that “a wrong to the liberty of one citizen is a blow at the liberty of all citizens.” As Recorder’s Court judge, mayor, and colonial official, Murphy tried to live by this creed. As governor dealing with the sit-down strikes, he was undoubtedly influenced by his belief that the civil liberties of the automobile workers had been violated by their employer.

Murphy had “a deep reverence for human life” that made it impossible for him to accept the idea of capital punishment. The admonition “Thou shalt not kill,” he declaimed in a debate on the subject of capital punishment in 1927, came from Mr. Sinai and has been “the cornerstone of civilization” ever since. Because he loathed crimes of violence, he did not wish the state to become “an example of violence and ferocity.” For Murphy, the problem of crime was “interwoven with social and economic conditions,” and he advised those who wished to solve the problem “to seek its causes at their source, and strive to apply the remedy at the beginning, rather than at the end, of a sordid life-story.” It is thus not surprising that when Murphy was confronted with the GM sit-down, he refused to order the forcible evacuation of the strikers and that he thought it necessary to consider the social and economic conditions that had led the workers to sit down and not merely to deal with the problem by labeling their action a crime for which they were to be punished.

As a criminal-court judge in Michigan, which forbade capital punishment, Murphy was spared the necessity of ordering the execution of persons convicted of capital crimes, but even the sentencing of the unfortunate to prison caused him some pain. When he was a United States Supreme Court justice many years later, he wrote feelingly to his brother about “expiring a little each time you have to take part of another man’s life from him.” When he assumed his seat on Recorder’s Court, he characteristically stated that he knew that he would frequently “drop into error” as a judge, but “I trust and pray that when this occurs it shall be on the side of mercy.” In the sit-down strike the governor of Michigan was influenced by similar considerations.

Murphy had great compassion for the weak, the afflicted, the down-trodden, the flotsam and jetsam of humankind. “To me,” he wrote his mother in 1918, “there is deep satisfaction in giving help and relief to the trouble[d] and depressed. I would rather do that than any task I know.” Speaking to the Women’s Club of Manila in the summer of 1933, Murphy declared, “We are not here for ourselves alone; we are here to do things for those around us….” It was the
common responsibility to aid the sick and the aged and to heal “broken spirits.”

As Recorder's Court judge, Murphy sought to salvage "fragments" of the human wreckage that passed before him by "granting a parole, exercising judicial clemency or handing out advice," and he was a prominent figure in efforts to persuade the Michigan legislature to enact old-age pension and unemployment-insurance legislation. When he was mayor of Detroit during the depression, he did more to feed the hungry than any other municipal official in the nation, and he was, in the pre-New Deal era, one of the most conspicuous and influential advocates of federal relief for the unemployed. In the Philippines, Murphy's "most distinctive accomplishments . . . were the awakening of a new social consciousness . . . and the improvement and extension of government services for the amelioration of the lot of the common people."^95

Murphy concluded at an early age that the workingman was among the disadvantaged in American society. He worked as a high school and college student in the starch factory in Harbor Beach, and he was later to recall that "it was a slave's life, those long hours and the living by whistles." When asked to write a paper for a sociology course he was taking at the University of Michigan, Murphy chose the subject "Politics and the Laborer:" "It is because I lived and worked with the common, ordinary, day, laborer and have listened to his complaints and his joys, and feel that I know his wants and needs," the young college student wrote, "that I have ventured upon this difficult problem. I love the subject. I want to make it my life's work. If I can only feel, when my day is done, that I have accomplished something towards uplifting the poor, uneducated, unfortunate, ten hour a day, laborer from the political chaos he now exists in, I will be satisfied that I have been worth while."^96 By this criterion, Frank Murphy at the end of his illustrious career had every reason to be "satisfied" that he had indeed been "worth while."

In addition to his personal experience as a day laborer, Murphy was heavily influenced in his stance with regard to labor by his Catholic religion and particularly by the labor encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI. As mayor of depression-ridden Detroit, Murphy, in an interpretation of Rerum Novarum, declared that he had been guided by "the signpost set up by the beneficent Leo" to put the welfare of his fellow man above balanced budgets. Leo, Murphy thought, had shown the way to those concerned with "safeguarding the worker" in the contemporary world. The encyclical told them that it was their responsibility, as rulers who must protect the "safety of the common-
wealth,” to put the idle to work, to remove the causes of poverty and unemployment, to stabilize the worker’s income, to care for the destitute and the aged, and to secure appropriate labor legislation. No Christian, Murphy declared shortly thereafter, could be indifferent to depressed labor conditions or to the differences between employer and employee that resulted in strikes. Interestingly enough, he joined the Third Order of St. Francis, whose Rule required its members to cultivate charity, love peace, and heal discord and misunderstanding. As governor during the GM strike, Murphy was provided with an unparalleled opportunity to practice the Order’s Rule of Peace.

Quite apart from personal experience and religion, Murphy was undoubtedly influenced to take a pro-labor position by his conviction that labor and the Catholic church were emerging as the “two strongest forces” in the United States. Few public officials in the entire nation in the 1920’s and 1930’s were as closely allied with organized labor as Murphy was, and few were willing to accord it the status and recognition that he was.

Murphy first ran for the position of Recorder’s Court judge in part out of a desire to break up a court ring allegedly unfair to labor. He received the endorsement of the Detroit Federation of Labor (DFL) in this election as in every subsequent election in which he was a candidate. As a criminal court judge, Murphy conducted himself in a manner that pleased the forces of organized labor in Detroit. He did not assume that labor was always responsible for violence in industrial disputes, and in one case he criticized the prosecutor’s office for showing an interest in misdemeanor charges only when they stemmed from a strike, thus creating the dangerous impression that the state was on the side of the employers.

Murphy, in the 1920’s, saw organized labor as “the natural nucleus” of a movement to aid the downtrodden and to solve the problem of the “industrial frontier.” He advised organized labor in Detroit to work for the five-day week, a living family wage, the right to engage in collective bargaining, the right to strike, unemployment insurance, and limitations on the use of injunctions in labor disputes.

In view of Murphy’s record on the Recorder’s Court, it is quite understandable that the DFL was the first organization to ask him to run for mayor in the late summer of 1930 following the recall of Mayor Charles Bowles. As mayor, Murphy worked closely with the DFL in evolving his policy to deal with unemployment, and, believing that “labor must have its share in a well-balanced government,” he made a large number of labor appointments. When Detroit celebrated Labor Day in 1931, Murphy invited Vice-President Matthew Woll of the AFL to deliver the main address, which Woll declared
The Coming of the Strike

was the first time that any city government, to his knowledge, had invited the Federation to share in the observance of the occasion. The Detroit News unhappily remarked that "Mayor Murphy is a labor union mayor in open shop Detroit...".101

"The existence of a strike" Murphy declared shortly after he gave up the Detroit mayoralty, "shows that things are not in their natural order, that something is wrong. The government, therefore, should intervene in such conflicts ... to protect, first of all, the interest of the public." The only major strike that confronted Murphy as mayor was initiated on January 23-24, 1938, by unorganized workers at the four Briggs plants in Detroit, but since the company would not agree to the city's mediation of the dispute, the Mayor was limited in what he could do to compose the strike. He did, however, appoint a Mayor's Fact-Finding Committee of distinguished citizens to investigate the strike, which deplored the company's refusal to meet with strikers and called for collective bargaining between organized workers and their employers to resolve labor disputes in the future.102

The active picketing of the Briggs plant by the strikers and the company's determination to operate despite the walkout brought the Detroit police into the strike and led to striker complaints of misuse of their power by the law officers. Murphy, in this difficult situation, told department heads that it was the city's policy "to maintain the peace" but not "to take sides." Since he did not believe that he could order the company to close its factories, he thought that workers going to and from their jobs were entitled to "a certain amount of protection," but at the same time he ordered the police to protect the strikers from attack and not to interfere with the conduct of the strike. He made it clear that there were to be no "illegal arrests," that no strikers were to be held incommunicado, and that no one was to be deprived of his rights simply because he protested industrial conditions or went on strike. The mayor had to concede, however, that despite his best efforts the police sometimes went "too far." It was far easier for the mayor to outline a strike policy than to ensure that it would be observed by the police.103

Privately, Murphy thought that the Briggs management was, to some extent at least, responsible for the strike because of the labor conditions that prevailed in its plants. The city of Detroit refused to use its Free Employment Bureau to provide strikebreakers for Briggs, and it rejected a company request for transportation equipment to move employees into and out of one of the plants. The city, also, as Murphy was to do in the GM strike, made relief available on the basis of need regardless of whether or not the recipient was a striker.104
In the Philippines, Murphy manifested the same interest in the condition of the workingman and in organized labor that he had demonstrated in Detroit. His administration was responsible for an eight-hour day law for workers in hazardous occupations or engaged in employments requiring great physical effort, the creation of a department of labor, efforts to control usury, the relief of unemployment, slum clearance, and the provision of public defenders for the indigent; and the governor-general vetoed a bill requiring compulsory arbitration. Murphy also made “the first appreciable effort” in the history of the Philippines “to bring the labor movement into its full dignity . . . [as a] co-operative element in the social and economic life of the people.”  

When a strike of cigar workers occurred in Manila beginning on August 16, 1934, Murphy, as he had done in the Briggs strike, appointed a Fact-Finding Board to investigate the dispute. He called for the settlement of the strike by arbitration rather than by force; but the policing of the walkout took a violent turn, and in a clash between strikers and the constabulary on September 17, three strikers lost their lives. “This regrettable and unnecessary incident,” to use Murphy’s phrasing, led to an inquiry about the strike from the American Civil Liberties Union. “At such times of excitement,” Roger Baldwin wrote the governor-general, “you know fully as well as we, it is possible for wise policing to avoid the kind of tragic conflict which here took place.” Murphy learned in Detroit and the Philippines that police forces tend to have a life of their own and that it was sometimes difficult for the chief executive of a governmental unit to control their operations. In the GM strike he was determined to keep firm control of major policing activities so as to provide the “wise policing” that would prevent the sort of tragedy that had occurred during the Manila cigar strike and that must have weighed heavily on his conscience.

When he campaigned for the governorship of Michigan in 1936, Murphy, who was endorsed by labor organizations throughout the state, emphasized his close ties with organized labor. “I am heart and soul in the Labor Movement,” he told the Detroit Labor News. “I have yet to go contrary to the expressed wish of Organized Labor in matters that affect it, and as expressed by its official chosen representatives, and you all know that I shall never do so.” Speaking to an audience in Muskegon, he declared that it was the “duty” of a public official to avoid strikes, but it was not his “duty or prerogative . . . to permit the use of the police power except to protect the public,” nor should he deny welfare aid to strikers. When he won the election, he wrote William Green, “I am certain that you will find that my
administration . . . will mark a new day for labor in Michigan”; and he told the Detroit and Wayne County Federation of Labor at a victory celebration, “If I worked for a wage, I’d join my Union.”

Although Murphy identified strongly with the unfortunate and with organized labor, he delighted at the same time in the company of the well-to-do, and some of his closest friends were among the social and economic elite of Detroit and Michigan. Murphy was on especially good terms with several of the automobile magnates, including Walter Chrysler, B. E. Hutchinson, and Byron C. Foy of Chrysler Corporation and Lawrence Fisher of Fisher Body and G.M. Murphy was also a heavy investor in automobile stock. When he became governor at the beginning of 1937, he held 1650 shares of GM stock, 550 of Chrysler, and five hundred of Packard. The GM stock alone at the end of the year was worth $104,875. On January 18, 1937, during the course of the GM strike, Murphy sold his GM stock at a minimum profit of $52,800. How the parties to the GM dispute would have reacted to this information had it been known to them is an interesting speculation.

Murphy was of medium height and build and had what Russell B. Porter of the New York Times described as a “distinctly Celtic countenance.” Although not handsome in a conventional sense, he was exceedingly attractive to the opposite sex. He had blue eyes, receding red hair, and very bushy red eyebrows—a cameraman remarked after the strike, “I expected a couple of sit downers to jump out of those eyebrows any minute.” The eyebrow-to-eyebrow confrontation of Murphy and John L. Lewis during the strike negotiations must surely have been something to behold. Murphy was gentle in manner, very soft-spoken, and had more than his share of charm, but behind the exterior of charm and affability, there was a reserve that few if any penetrated. It was this man who played so decisive a role in the GM strike.