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VI

From the end of December, 1936, attention in the GM strike was centered on Flint, where the UAW strikers occupied the Fisher Body No. 1 and No. 2 plants. The ability of the sit-downers to retain their hold on these two plants, particularly the larger and more important No. 1 plant, and such other factories as they had occupied and would occupy was essential to victory in the strike. Whether this could be accomplished depended not only on what transpired outside the occupied plants but, also, on whether the strikers on the inside, who had never before engaged in such a venture, could organize their activities with sufficient effectiveness to be able to live within the walls of a factory until a settlement of the strike could be reached. The pattern of organization of the GM sit-down did not differ greatly from factory to factory, but since the records are most abundant for the sit-down in the Fisher Body No. 1 plant, the focus in the pages that follow will be primarily, but not exclusively, on that establishment.¹

Since no advance preparations had been made for the Fisher No. 1 sit-down, all was confusion within the plant for the first day or so of the strike. It was “the biggest nightmare I ever went through,” Bud Simons, the chairman of the strike committee, later recalled. The plant was too large to occupy as a whole, and so the leadership decided to confine the sit-down to the so-called North Unit, which contained the cafeteria and where there were finished bodies that the men could use for sleeping purposes. It was also decided at the outset, for rather obvious reasons, that the organization of life within the plant would be less difficult if the sit-in were confined to male workers, and so the three hundred female employees inside the plant when the strike began were sent home during the first night of the sit-down.²

Nearly all observers were impressed with the high degree of organization achieved by the sit-in strikers. “The most astonishing feeling you get in the sit-down plants is that of ORDER,” one of the strikers’ bulletins accurately reported. “Every action is systematized.”³ Analogies to the military most readily came to mind to many of those who had the opportunity to witness life within the struck plants. The editor of Mill and Factory, Hartley W. Barclay, after spending many hours with the No. 2 sit-downers, thus described the “system of organization” in the plant as “a completely military type.”⁴

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In a real sense, the strikers formed a "new and special kind of community" within the plants in which they sat. As Charles R. Walker has noted, the nature of the technology employed in a particular plant "not only affects the individual on the job in his daily work experience but also molds in good measure what might be called in-plant society." In the automobile industry, the assembly line and the work methods severely limited the size of the work groups and the "team relationships" possible and tended to keep group morale at a low level. The noise and strain of the line also restricted the degree of social intercourse within the plant. In the sit-down, by contrast, the strikers, almost for the first time, became acquainted with one another and began to develop a sense of fellowship and coherence. There was, during the strike, "a greater sociability," a recognition of a "'consciousness of kind,'" a feeling of solidarity produced by the common struggle in which the strikers were engaged. "It was like we were soldiers holding the fort," one of the Chevrolet No. 4 sit-downers declared. "It was like war. The guys with me became my buddies."

Enthralled by the sit-down, a psychologist writing in the New Masses contended that "the atmosphere of cooperativeness" in the sit-down reoriented the thought of the sit-downers and created "a veritable revolution of personality" so that the pronoun "'We'" came to replace the pronoun "'I.'" One need not go this far, however, to recognize that a feeling of kinship did develop among the strikers who remained inside the plants for any length of time that was unique in the experience of automobile workers and that gave a special quality to the social organization developed in the plants that they occupied.

The chief administrative body of the "little government" created within the No. 1 plant was the strike committee of fourteen members selected to represent the various departments of the plant. The chairman of the committee was Bud Simons, and he and four other members of the committee also served as the executive board or council. The decisions of the strike committee and the executive board were subject to the approval of the strikers, although in an emergency the executive board was empowered to act on its own initiative. The available records indicate that the strike committee recognized the strikers themselves as the final authority in the plant and that it sought their consent for virtually all of its decisions. Although Simons recalls that his leadership within the strike committee was occasionally challenged, the minutes of the strikers' meetings give no evidence of friction within the community of strikers. As with all organizations, however, decisions reached were not always imple-
mented. "Recommendations of strike committee ignored," Simons wrote in his notebook probably during the first week of the strike.8

There were daily meetings of the strike committee and the strikers as a whole and frequent meetings of the executive board, and on occasion the stewards held their own meetings or met with the strike committee.9 Life in the struck plants must have seemed to some like a round of meetings, but since idle time was a commodity in abundant supply in the plants, the meetings were probably a welcome break in the daily routine for most strikers. The mass meetings were also an occasion for song: it was agreed on January 13 that all such meetings should be opened and closed with a verse of "Solidarity," the strikers' favorite.

Solidarity forever
Solidarity forever
Solidarity forever
For the Union makes us strong.10

The sit-down strikers had their daily duties to perform, and these chores were apparently assigned on a shift basis that conformed with the work schedules familiar to the strikers.11 One of the first acts taken by the leadership in the No. 1 plant was to organize a special patrol or police force to make regular tours of the entire plant to ensure that the company was making no effort to resume production in the unoccupied portion of the factory, to see that the gates of the plant were secured, to detect any possible sabotage of the company's property by individual strikers, and to make sure that no one was inside the plant who was not supposed to be there. Joe Devitt of the strike committee recalled that the patrol on one occasion apprehended two supervisors who were attempting to listen in on one of the strikers' meetings and that the sit-downers released the two men after they had been given an appropriate warning. The patrol committee was "the hardest working group" in the plant, and its head, Pete Kennedy, selected because he had had National Guard training, had to be deterred from performing his duties around the clock to the detriment of his health.12

Committees were organized for every conceivable purpose in the No. 1 and the other occupied plants: food, recreation, information, education, postal services, sanitation, and contact with the outside. In Fisher Body No. 1 a complaints committee was formed to listen to the grievances of the workers; and Simons tells us that it received "a continuous string of complaints," some of them, he insists, instigated by company men. The No. 1 strike body also had its committee on
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rumors, which sought to track down the numerous rumors that not surprisingly circulated in the plant. The strikers discovered that one of the members of this committee was reporting on their activities to the Flint Police Department.\textsuperscript{13}

The No. 1 sit-downers were very much concerned about maintaining systematic contact with the union and strike organization outside the plant. Travis and other strike leaders came into the plant regularly to report on the progress of the strike, but this did not seem to satisfy the strike committee, which decided on January 21 to send delegates to the daily meeting of the UAW in the Pengelly Building, the union’s Flint headquarters. In addition, some of the sit-downers were designated as “runners” to carry messages from inside the plant to union headquarters when this seemed necessary. The No. 1 strikers cooperated in the city-wide recruiting drive of the UAW in Flint, they held regular meetings with the union’s welfare committee, and they created their own “outside defense squad.” They even had their own two-man espionage team, which was to “get around everywhere [on the outside] and pick up info.”\textsuperscript{14} The sit-downers expected the support of the outside strike apparatus when circumstances required this. “... when I see I’m losing the fight and ask for action from the outside,” Red Mundale, the strike leader in the weakly held No. 2 plant, wrote Travis on one occasion, “see to it that I get it.”\textsuperscript{15}

The sit-downers in several of the occupied plants instituted their own judicial system in the form of kangaroo courts. In the Cadillac plant the oldest worker was made the judge, and a striker who had studied law was designated the prosecuting attorney.\textsuperscript{16} In the No. 1 plant the decision to establish a court was not made until January 27. Prior to that date the executive board had apparently assigned the penalties for infractions of the rules.\textsuperscript{17}

The list of punishable offenses in the No. 1 plant and the rules of behavior adopted there and in other plants provide an insight into the nature of the institutional life that developed in the occupied plants and what was regarded as good citizenship on the part of the sit-downers. Workers were to be sentenced for failing to report for the performance of any of their assigned duties, leaving their duty post before the scheduled time or sleeping while on duty, failing to return their dirty dishes to the kitchen, throwing paper or rubbish on the floor or throwing foreign matter into the urinals or toilets, using toilet stools designated as out of order, failing to assist in the daily clean up, using the plant loud-speaker system for an improper purpose, carrying matches up the stairs or smoking in places other than the plant cafeteria, failing to search everyone entering or leaving the building, and contempt of court. They were not to bring liquor into
the plant, they were to be quiet in areas set aside for sleeping and were not to “yell” anywhere in the plant, and they were to shower only at specified hours. The most serious “crime” in the eyes of the sit-down strikers was failure to perform assigned duties since derelictions of this sort weakened the strike community.

The punishments meted out by the kangaroo courts were designed to fit the crime. Strikers who did not perform their assigned duties were sentenced to perform extra duties, and if they did not observe the sanitation rules they were assigned to the clean-up detail. The ultimate punishment for the serious offender was expulsion from the plant. As in any community, there were law breakers in the strike communities, but the citizenship rules of the various plants appear, for the most part, to have been rather faithfully observed.18

Sometimes, the sessions of the kangaroo courts served as a form of theater for the sit-downers, and entertainment rather than the dispensing of justice became the court objective. On one occasion, for example, a striker who entered the No. 1 plant without the proper credentials was sentenced to make a speech, which no doubt provided a great deal of merriment for the strike body. Edward Levinson, a reporter close to the auto workers, observed at the time that “there was more substantial and original humor in a single session of the Fisher strikers’ Kangaroo courts than in a season of Broadway musical comedies.”19

The strikers were willing to admit visitors to the plants when they believed that it would serve the purposes of the strike to do so. Everyone authorized to enter the No. 1 plant, including clergymen, was searched for concealed weapons and liquor, and his credentials were carefully checked. Once he came into the plant through the high window that served as the gate of entry, the visitor was never out of sight of his guides, and he traveled only along designated routes. Information was given visitors inside the plant only by the strike committee; individual sit-downers were not normally permitted to grant interviews lest they reveal information damaging to the common cause.

Aware of the publicity value of the right kind of pictures and news stories, the No. 1 strike committee on January 5 agreed to admit Pathé News men into the plant and on January 10 to allow cameramen and newsmen to enter to take pictures and to conduct interviews “where directed.” The leadership in the No. 1 plant understandably preferred to admit newspaper and magazine writers who were likely to be sympathetic to the UAW cause and for a time, therefore, excluded reporters who were not members of the American Newspaper Guild. “We don’t interview no un-union [sic] men,” one
of the guards at the plant's Information Window announced. The nonunion reporter in Paul Gallico's novelette based on the Flint sit-down, which Gallico had covered, is told by a union official, "'It's war. We don't recognize any neutrals.'"20

Although the No. 1 sit-downers controlled the plant cafeteria and were able to prepare sandwiches and coffee on the inside, the bulk of their food, and all the food of the strikers in the No. 2 and later the Chevrolet No. 4 plants, was prepared on the outside. Ray Cook, the owner of a restaurant across the street from the No. 1 plant that was normally patronized by Fisher Body workers, placed his establishment at the disposal of the strikers a few days after the sit-down began; and shortly thereafter Max Gazan, who had been a chef at the posh Detroit Athletic Club for fourteen years and had cooked for the sit-down strikers in Detroit in December, came to Flint to take charge of the strike kitchen. The chairman of the UAW food committee in Flint was Dorothy Kraus, who, like Gazan, had gained experience along these lines during the Detroit sit-downs, and she was aided by the wives of some of the strikers.21

Since, on occasion, as many as two thousand strikers had to be fed three meals a day in the occupied Flint plants, it was necessary for the UAW to purchase a good deal of additional kitchen equipment for its restaurant. On a typical day the kitchen provided the strikers with five hundred pounds of meat, one hundred pounds of potatoes, three hundred loaves of bread, two hundred pounds of sugar, and thirty gallons of fresh milk. The food was taken to the plants, under guard, in large kettles; insofar as vehicle transportation was required, the responsibility was assumed by Flint Trolley Coach employees, whose strike the UAW was directing. Henry Kraus reports that two hundred persons in all were involved in the preparation and distribution of food for the Flint strikers.22

On a typical day the strikers received eggs, fruit, cereal, fried cakes, and coffee for breakfast, pot roast, boiled potatoes, green beans, and coffee for lunch, and chili, sandwiches, cookies, and coffee for supper. There seems little doubt that the food was ample and that many strikers ate better-balanced meals inside the plants than they had consumed in their own homes. So many strikers and unionists outside the occupied plants began appearing at the strike kitchen for their meals that it became necessary to limit the food available to them. Inside the No. 1 plant the strikers stored a reserve supply of food to tide them over for about a week should the introduction of supplies into the plant be shut off for any reason.23

In a body plant like Fisher No. 1 sleeping arrangements presented no special problem for the sit-downers, who, as one observ-
er discovered, had “managed to create a home out of a factory.” Strikers slept on the floor of the cars in the plant or, more commonly, improvised bedding by arranging car seats between the conveyor lines or placing the wadding for the seats on back-seat springs. When the Chevrolet No. 4 plant was seized, the No. 1 plant supplied the new group of strikers with pads from the cushion room in addition to the cots and blankets that the UAW was able to send into the plant.24

After the hectic first few days in an occupied plant, life became routinized, and the strikers had to combat the monotony of idleness that replaced the monotony of the assembly line. They entertained themselves by playing cards, checkers, chess, dominoes, ping pong, and volleyball and, at least in the Chevrolet No. 4 plant, by roller skating. On the second day of the strike in the No. 1 plant the strike officials decided that the men should exercise in the open air. It is not clear how faithfully this decision was implemented, but apparently the strikers did engage in some form of daily exercise. Reading, particularly of newspapers and magazines, was another means of passing the time for the sit-downers. In the No. 1 plant a special area was set aside as a “reading room,” with the rear seats of auto bodies serving as chairs. When someone raised the question as to whether the Daily Worker should be allowed into the plant along with the more than a dozen other newspapers that were brought in through the Information Window, the strike committee designated Bud Simons to explain the issue to the strikers. He told the men that their constitutional rights would be violated if any one were allowed to censor what they read. “We are only here to better our conditions at home,” he said, “and men who can make a decision as to this are able to make their own decision as to reading material.”25

The strikers were provided with some entertainment from outside the plants. Maxie Gealer, the operator of the Rialto Theater in Flint, sent a variety of entertainers into the No. 1 plant, and the sons and daughters of the strikers also entered the factory to entertain their fathers with song and dance. On one occasion the still cameramen engaged the movie cameramen in a baseball game on Chevrolet Avenue outside the Chevrolet No. 4 plant, with the strikers serving as the umpires. At one point in the game, one of the teams protested a decision of the umpires by sitting down and singing “Solidarity Forever” and promptly won a reversal. The Contemporary Theater of Detroit, a workers’ group, put on the two-act play Virtue Rewarded in both the No. 1 and No. 2 plants. The play had been especially adapted for the sit-downers from a Brookwood Labor College play and was presented in a burlesque, melodramatic style.26

Strike Marches On, the most ambitious dramatic production
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prepared for the Flint strikers, was not seen by the sit-downers until just after the strike came to an end. Written by Josephine Herbst, Mary Heaton Vorse, and Dorothy Kraus and directed by Morris Watson, the managing producer of the Living Newspaper of the Federal Theater Project and the vice-president of the American Newspaper Guild, the play was of the living-newspaper type. It was a dramatic version of various strike events, which were interpreted for the audience by a “radio announcer.” The actors, themselves strike participants, took the sketchy script given them and filled it out with their own interpretations.\(^{27}\)

The strikers provided most of their own musical entertainment. Nearly every occupied plant had its orchestra, and the Kansas City strikers, at least, had a glee club as well. The strikers' orchestra in the No. 1 plant, consisting of two mandolins, one guitar, one banjo, and three mouth organs, had a fifteen-song repertory and gave nightly concerts that were piped outside for the benefit of pickets and sympathizers. The orchestra on at least one occasion even went “up town” to give a concert.\(^{28}\)

Singing was an important form of striker recreation and also a means of maintaining morale. It was encouraged by the UAW's educational director, Merlin D. Bishop, for he had learned at Brookwood Labor College that music could play an important part in building a union.\(^{29}\) The strikers themselves composed crude verses which they set to popular tunes. The following verses, sung to the tune of “Gallagher and Shean,” emanated from the Chevrolet No. 4 group:

I

Oh! Mr. Sloan! Oh Mr. Sloan!
We have known for a long time you would atone,
For the wrongs that you have done
We all know, yes, everyone.
Absolutely, Mr. Travis!
Positively, Mr. Sloan!

II

Oh! Mr. Sloan! Oh! Mr. Sloan!
Everyone knows your heart was made of stone,
But the Union is so strong
That we'll always carry on.
Absolutely, Mr. Travis!
Positively, Mr. Sloan!
Another striker favorite was sung to the tune of "Goody, Goody":

We Union men are out to win today,
    Goody, Goody
General Motors hasn't even got a chance,
    Goody, Goody
Old Sloan is feeling blue,
    and so is Knudsen too,
They didn't like the little sit-downs,
    Now what could they do?
So they lie awake just singing the blues all night,
    Goody, Goody.\(^{30}\)

The verses most frequently associated with the sit-down strikes, "Sit Down!" were written by Maurice Sugar, one of the UAW's attorneys, probably shortly after the close of the GM strike:

When they tie the can to a Union man
    Sit down! Sit down!
When they give 'im the sack, they'll take him back
    Sit down! Sit down!

Chorus:

Sit down, just take a seat
Sit down, and rest your feet
Sit down, you've got 'em beat
Sit down! Sit down!

When they smile and say, no raise in pay
    Sit down! Sit down!
When you want the boss to come across
    Sit down! Sit down!

When the speed up comes, just twiddle your thumbs
    Sit down! Sit down!
When you want 'em to know they'd better go slow
    Sit down! Sit down!

When the boss won't talk, don't take a walk
    Sit down! Sit down!
When the boss sees that, he'll want a little chat
    Sit down! Sit down!\(^{31}\)
Programs of education were introduced into many of the occupied plants to supplement the recreational activities. In Flint, Eugene Faye, who directed the UAW’s education program in the city, and later Merlin Bishop conducted classes in the plants in parliamentary procedure, public speaking, collective bargaining, the duties of shop stewards, and the history of the labor movement. Classes in journalism and creative writing were also provided for the strikers by University of Michigan graduate students.\(^{32}\)

Since there was always the possibility that the company or public authorities might seek to eject the sit-downers from the plants they occupied, the problem of defense could not be ignored by the strikers. In Fisher Body No. 1 the men at an early stage of the sit-down set up “a regular production line” to make blackjacks out of rubber hoses, braided leather, and lead, and the blackjack became a sort of symbol of the strikers’ readiness to defend themselves. Some of the left-wing observers of the strike were impressed with the communal aspects of life within the plants,\(^ {33}\) but private enterprise reared its head inside the strike community in the No. 1 plant as the strikers began selling blackjacks to the souvenir hunters. The “No. 3A” blackjack plaited in leather sold for $1.25, and the “Model 9F skull crusher” for $2.00 or $2.50 if autographed.\(^ {34}\)

In the No. 1 plant the strikers covered the windows with metal sheets containing openings through which fire hoses could be placed, and there were regular drills in the use of the hoses. Door hinges, bolts, and nuts were stockpiled at strategic points, and security groups were assigned to the doorways and stairwells. The strikers were prepared to carry their resistance to the roof of the plant, where they would have made their final stand had they come under attack.\(^ {35}\)

There were persistent rumors that the strikers had firearms in the Flint plants in addition to their blackjacks and clubs. Occasionally, a worker would, indeed, bring a gun into one of the plants, but this was strictly against the rules, and when such weapons were discovered they were removed from the plants. Observers who went into the factories reported that they saw no firearms,\(^ {36}\) but had there been any guns in the plants the sit-downers would surely have kept them out of sight when visitors were present.

Because of its obvious relationship to morale, the strike leadership took every care to maintain sanitary conditions within the occupied plants. Also, aware of the danger to their cause that would result from damage to the expensive machinery inside the plants, the sit-downers were, on the whole, equally solicitous for the company’s property that they now physically controlled. Without exception,
persons who had visited the Flint plants remarked on their tidiness and the lack of significant damage to company property.

The sanitation committee in Fisher Body No. 1 made a daily inspection of the living and sleeping areas in the plant. During the clean-up period beginning at 3:00 P.M. every day, the windows were opened, and refuse was removed by the plant maintenance men, who, Henry Kraus says, remained at their jobs throughout the strike. The management, again according to Kraus, supplied the brooms for the clean-up and the paper towels and toilet tissue for the lavatory. After visiting the Chevrolet No. 4 plant, George A. Krogh, a state labor commissioner, remarked on the cleanliness of the commissary and reported that its floor was cleaned every hour. Hartley Barclay observed in the middle of January that men were detailed in shifts to sweep the floors in Fisher No. 2 and noted that State Department of Health officials had visited the Fisher plants three times and had complimented the strikers on the condition of the factories.

Barclay discovered that fire protection groups in the No. 2 plant were always prepared for action and that the men had been instructed by the state fire marshal on the use of the sprinkler system. The Mill and Factory editor saw no evidence of sabotage of production materials. Krogh observed that machinery parts were oiled and greased in Chevrolet No. 4 and learned that crews had been assigned to protect the machinery. A La Follette Committee investigator, on February 3, found the property of the company undamaged in the No. 1 plant. In the Fleetwood plant in Detroit the rules called for the ejection of a striker who damaged company property or created a fire hazard.

It was impossible, however, to avoid some damage to property in plants occupied by large numbers of men for as many as forty-four days. The most extensive property damage occurred in the No. 1 plant. There was damage to body seats used for sleeping purposes, and some of the men cut up expensive leather hides to make their blackjacks, a practice that the strike committee anxiously sought to halt by providing the strikers with such scrap leather as was available in the plant. At the strike committee meeting of January 15 it was reported that someone was deliberately “mutilating” car bodies, which the leadership angrily interpreted as an effort to “discredit” the strike community. Simons conceded at a later time that, despite determined efforts to prevent sabotage, “a few things” happened in the plant that “we were not proud of.”

When company officials, insurance investigators, and newsmen inspected the Flint plants after the strike was over, they found the No. 1 plant, to quote the Flint Journal, to be “a scene of wanton
destruction, filth and disruption." Most of the damage, the New York Times reported, had resulted from striker efforts to barricade doors and windows by welding and from the attempt to devise living and sleeping quarters in the plant. Stocks of wrenches, door hinges, wood, leather, and other articles had been depleted by the strikers to make weapons. Some expensive material in the sewing room and in upholstery stores had been cut up for bedding, and many sewing machines required servicing. Heavy steel fire doors had been rammed out of commission and their opening mechanisms wrecked; and the fire protection system itself had been disrupted. Telephones, plumbing fixtures, and cafeteria equipment had been ruined. There had been some petty vandalism in the form of scratched car bodies and broken car roofs. The floor was littered with refuse, and some of the toilets had been stopped up and had overflowed. Despite all this, however, the dies, the expensive machines, and the production lines of the occupied plants were unscathed at the end of the strike, and, considering the duration and character of the dispute, the damage in monetary terms was not great.40

It is difficult to explain the lack of cleanliness and the disorder in Fisher Body No. 1 at the end of the strike in view of reports during the strike of the neat and tidy appearance of the plant. Perhaps, with victory won, the strikers during their last day in the factory ceased to pay any further attention to the rules that they seem faithfully to have observed up to that time. Perhaps, as Powers Hapgood declared, the plant was not left in good order because the strikers marched out on the same day that the settlement was reached and did not have time for the final clean-up effort that had been planned. There is no reason to accept 'Travis' explanation that the condition of the plant could be attributed to Pinkertons among the stay-in strikers.41

The population of the communities of sit-down strikers fluctuated widely during the period of occupancy of the various plants. As long as strikers controlled the gates or windows of a particular plant, it was possible for individual sit-downers to leave the plants and then return, if they so desired, and it was also possible for the union to reinforce the group within the plant from the outside. Where the company or public authorities controlled entry and exit, as in Fisher No. 2 before the Battle of the Running Bulls or in Chevrolet No. 4, strikers were permitted to leave the plant, but their return and the ingress of new recruits were barred.

Concern for the well-being of their families or the desire to spend more time with them than was possible at a plant window, the customary meeting place, caused even some dedicated unionists to quit the sit-down in their plant either temporarily or for the duration
of the strike. Just as many wives assured their husbands that they understood the necessity of their remaining inside until victory was achieved, so other wives made it clear to their men folk that they expected them to come home. "Honey I miss you dreadfully but I know you are fighting for a good cause," one wife wrote her husband in Chevrolet No. 4, but another wife informed her husband in the same plant, "I have felt so sad all the week would thought you would have known better than to stay in this long." Relations between husbands and wives were not eased any by rumors that there were prostitutes inside the plants. Simons recalls that irate wives would come to the Information Window and tell their husbands to "get the hell out of there" and that it was difficult to convince some of the women that "there was not the biggest brothel in there that ever happened any place." Well-dressed, attractive prostitutes, as a matter of fact, did begin to appear outside the No. 1 plant, and since they did not charge for their services, the UAW concluded that this was probably "a G.M. stunt." The strike leadership instructed the union's pickets to keep the women away from the plant and urged the strikers, several of whom had already contracted gonorrhea, to "cut it out."

Counteracting the pull of family ties was the commitment of most of the sit-downers to their cause and also the fear on the part of some, like the fear of the soldier in battle, that they would look cowardly or weak to their associates if they did not remain at their posts. "I don't know how long we will be here but we will never give up," one Chevrolet sit-downer wrote to his wife. Another wrote, "I could not come out unless they went on strike. But hunny I just thought I join the union and I look pretty yellow if I didn't stick with thim."

The number of sit-downers inside the No. 1 plant, which exceeded one thousand on some days, fell to a low of ninety on one occasion, according to Simons, hardly enough for the strikers to have been able to hold that large plant against attack from the outside. The population in the No. 2 plant, according to the Michigan National Guard, fell to seventeen on January 26, whereas the total on January 5 had been about 450. To be sure, the problem of feeding the sit-downers made it desirable to limit the population on the inside to a number adequate to hold the plants. Also, the union could not allow all its members and sympathizers to sit in since it had to deploy some of its forces outside the plant to collect funds, provide food, picket, and enlist sympathy for the cause. As it worked out, however, the problem faced by the sit-down organizations in Flint was not that of persuading strikers to leave the plants because it was difficult to
feed them or because their talents were required on the outside but rather of keeping enough men inside to be able to hold the factories.47

The need to maintain an adequate force of sit-downers was a continuing concern of the strike organization in Fisher No. 1. On January 5 the strike committee decided that the stewards were to permit only 10 percent of the men to leave the plant at any one time. It was proposed at the executive board meeting a few days later that an article be printed in the Flint Auto Worker addressed to the wives and sweethearts of the sit-downers and stressing how important it was that the men remain in the plant. The police patrol was instructed by the strike committee on January 12, the day after the Fisher No. 2 riot, to prevent the membership from leaving the plant that day. On January 23 the executive board considered the “Question of getting more men in [the] shop.”

The strike committee in Fisher Body No. 2 decided to restrict leaves from the plant to twenty-four hours and to grant such requests only when there was a replacement for the individual concerned. When the number of men in the plant on one occasion fell to twenty, Mundale requested assistance from the outside: “God Damn lets have some action out there. I haven’t enough men in here to hold.” Under the circumstances, it is not difficult to believe the assertions that some men were kept in the occupied plants against their will.48

Not all of the men sitting in the Flint plants were employees of those plants. UAW members in Flint whose plants were not on strike, like Norman Bully of Buick, climbed into and out of the occupied factories to relieve fellow unionists and to augment their numbers. In addition, UAW members from Toledo, Detroit, and elsewhere came to Flint on their own initiative or, more commonly, at the request of the union to participate in the sit-in. As one of the Kelsey-Hayes unionists who sat in for a time in Flint declared, “we loaded those plants so that they would not chase us out.” Simons recalls that on one occasion when the number of sit-downers in the No. 1 factory had declined to a dangerously low level, Travis requested his home Toledo Chevrolet local to dispatch reinforcements. Believing that trouble was imminent in Flint, the Toledo group sent forty or fifty of the “toughest guys” that they could find. “I have never seen a bunch of guys that were so ready for blood in my life,” Simons declared.49

Morale among the sit-downers was a compound of many factors: the marital status of the men, the quality of their leadership, physical conditions within the plant, the commitment of the strikers to their cause and their view of their role in the dispute, and the progress of the strike. UAW and CIO leaders and organizers regularly visited the
Fisher Body plants to bolster the spirits of the sit-downers. Powers Hapgood thus told the men in the No. 1 plant on January 13 that, whereas the auto workers had stood alone in previous strikes, they now enjoyed the support of Lewis and the CIO unions. He urged the men to “stick together” since they had GM “on [the] run.” Hapgood was followed by Stanley Edward of the URW, who described to the strikers what the Goodyear workers had achieved by their strike, advised them of the support the URW was giving the strike, and told them that the “safest place” to be was inside the plants. The sit-downers on other occasions were informed by visitors like the Reuther brothers that the UAW was rapidly increasing its membership and was winning local settlements and that auto unionists in other plants were providing moral and material support for the strike.\(^50\)

The strikers were also persuaded to see themselves as heroes who were selflessly putting up with hardship and discomfort not only in their own interests and that of the other auto workers but in the interests of American workingmen in general. Thus John L. Lewis, in an astute effort to bolster striker morale, wired the men in the two Fisher Body plants that they were “undoubtedly carrying through one of the most heroic battles that has ever been undertaken by strikers in an industrial dispute. The attention of the entire American public,” he wrote, “is focussed upon you, watching the severe hardships you are suffering in order to demonstrate the strength of labor in the present struggle to organize for the purpose of obtaining a decent standard of living. For every working man in America, every worker and representative of labor in this country owes a debt of gratitude to each of you and I trust that this knowledge will cheer you through your long weary hours of waiting for the honorable settlement which in the nature of things must inevitably come.” Pickets and union sympathizers outside the plants were similarly telling the sit-downers that “the eyes of the whole world” were on them.\(^51\) It must have enormously boosted the self-esteem of the sit-downers suddenly to be transformed from badge numbers and easily replaceable cogs in an impersonal industrial machine into heroes of American labor.

No longer drawing any pay and many of them without savings to tide their families over, the strikers were understandably concerned about the plight of their dependents so long as the strike continued.\(^52\) Aware of the importance of this matter for the morale of the sit-downers, the UAW assured them that it would aid their families in obtaining welfare and would provide them with necessities until public aid was forthcoming. “Dady dont be worried about us,” one wife wrote to her striker husband, “everything is allright we got some
help from the penengelly [Pengelly Building] they give us coal in
some money to bye groceries with.”

Although some men found life inside the plants irksome and
withdrew from the sit-down community at the first opportunity and
others who remained in the plants grumbled about conditions, for
many of the strikers the sit-down was a truly enjoyable experience, a
glorious moment in their otherwise drab lives. Sitting down and
participating in the life of the new plant community were more
pleasurable than the tedium of work on the assembly line and were,
additionally, a means of “‘getting even’” with management for
accumulated grievances. For some of the men, although they were
concerned about their families, it must have been a relief, at least for
a time, to be away from nagging wives and bawling children and to
be free of the concerns and frustrations of their normal, everyday life.
“We like it so well here,” a Guide Lamp sit-downer declared, “that
we’ll hate to leave when the strike is settled.” “I like it here,” a
Chevrolet No. 4 sit-downer wrote his girl friend. “All we have to do is
Sit! Eat! Sleep! Wash dishes! and Guard!” Another No. 4 sit-downer
wrote, “I am having a great time something new, some thing differ-
ent, lots of grub and music.” The reporter in Paul Gallico’s sit-down
novelette sensed “a gaiety and excitement” about the sit-downers
when he entered one of the Flint plants. “They were children playing
at a new and fascinating game. They had made a palace out of what
had been their prison.”

Morale, it would seem, was higher in the No. 1 than in the No. 2
plant. There was a far greater percentage of married men with
families—possibly 90 percent according to Barclay—among the No. 2
than among the No. 1 strikers and fewer of the young, “hard, reckless
type” who Russell B. Porter of the New York Times reported as
predominating among the strikers both inside and outside the fact-
ories. It was the married men in the No. 2 plant, according to the
National Guard, who were “decidedly worried” and among whom
there was a morale problem.

The stronger leadership in Fisher Body No. 1 than in No. 2 may
also account for the superior morale in the former. Red Mundale, the
strike leader in No. 2, was, unlike Bud Simons, a “retiring kind of
person” and lacked the force and dynamism of his counterpart in the
No. 1 plant. Simons, moreover, was supported by a small group of
left-wingers who worked zealously for the success of the strike. “There
were some in there that were called left-wingers,” strike commit-
teeman Joe Devitt later declared, “but those that were called left-
wingers, I believe, probably played a most active part in the organizing
and conduct of the sit-down strike. They played a major role.\textsuperscript{56} Some of the members of the No. 1 strike community, not necessarily among the radical element however, worked so diligently at their tasks that the strike committee had to order them to rest or to provide relief for them.\textsuperscript{57}

The strikers in No. 1 displayed a fierce independence in their relationship with the UAW leadership on the outside. When Travis asked the strike committee’s permission for one of his men to go through the plant to gather information for the strike bulletins and the press, the committee agreed but assigned one of the sit-downers to the Travis emissary and specified that the notes he took must be approved by the executive board. When newsmen protested the refusal of the No. 1 sit-downers to admit non-American Newspaper Guild reporters to the plant, a member of the executive board replied that the No. 1 strikers made their own decisions and did not necessarily pay heed to Travis’ instructions. A No. 1 sit-downer told a New York Times reporter that his colleagues and he would not evacuate the plant even if Martin or Lewis ordered it “unless we get what we want.”\textsuperscript{58}

The temper of the men, or at least of the leadership, in Fisher Body No. 1 was illustrated a few days after the Battle of the Running Bulls when Captain Lawrence A. Lyon of the state police came into the plant. The discussion between the captain and the strike committee apparently turned to the possible use of the state police to evict the sit-downers, whereupon Lyon was told that if the troopers wanted to repeat the “experience” of Flint’s “yellow bellied coppers” they were welcome to try. Later, Travis and Roy Reuther visited the plant, and Simons invited them “to come and live with us” to avoid arrest for their part in the Fisher No. 2 riot. The offer was declined. Reuther, with the recent battle in mind, told the men that he did not counsel violence but that “every thing hinges on the hinges.”\textsuperscript{59}

All in touch with the situation agreed that morale was at its lowest in Flint among the sit-downers in the Chevrolet No. 4 plant, which the UAW seized on February 1. Since the plant was, from the start, surrounded by the National Guard,\textsuperscript{60} the sit-downers were cut off from the regular visits of family and friends, the plaudits of pickets and sympathizers, and even news of the outside world, and this was part of the problem. The plant itself was also physically the least comfortable of the three occupied in Flint. Known by the workers as “The Hell-Hole,” it was located in a valley bordering on the Flint River. It was damp and poorly ventilated, and its equipment and facilities were obsolete. From the start, moreover, the company, which still held the powerhouse, put pressure on the men
by frequently turning off the heat and lights. Since the sit-downers did not have enough warm clothing to cope with the cold, they had to write to their families to send them the proper garments. After visiting the plant and seeing the plight of the men, Rose Pesotta, acting for the UAW, bought out the stock of winter underwear and pajamas, woolen socks, mufflers, and similar items of one of Flint’s general stores and had the apparel sent into the factory.

The dampness of the plant and the drastic alterations in the in-plant temperature, coupled with the normal hazards of life in a northern climate during the winter, contributed to a certain amount of illness in Chevrolet No. 4; and there were widespread rumors that the men were suffering from amoebic dysentery and intestinal flu. A National Guard source claimed that fifty men had to be evacuated from the plant because of dysentery, but the UAW actually had to remove only twelve of the strikers. Although a pro-UAW doctor who entered the factory on February 7 alleged that he had found no cases of influenza or dysentery, one of the strike officials privately conceded that there had been an “epidemic of intestinal flu” in the plant and that there were some cases of dysentery. The strikers blamed the illness in the plant not only on the company’s manipulation of the heat but also on the water they were drinking, and so they began to drink only water sent into them by the union.

Quite apart from the problems that they faced inside the plant, the men in Chevrolet No. 4 were distressed by letters that they received from their families complaining of sickness and urging the strikers to return to their homes. The UAW charged that company representatives had induced these letters, and the strikers’ “special investigating committee” allegedly ascertained that several of the letters were spurious. Wives also reported that foremen were visiting their homes in an effort to influence them to bring pressure on their husbands to quit the plant. One sit-downer advised his wife that “if anyone goes to the house ask him their name and we will do the rest. If they don’t want to leave shot the bastard.”

It is hardly surprising in view of the pressures to which they were subjected that many of the men in Chevrolet No. 4 did not appear as “cheerful” to visitors as the sit-downers in No. 1 did. At one point, Kermit Johnson, the youthful strike leader in the plant, wrote Travis that he had not slept for more than three hours a night since the strike began because of “the growing dissention [sic] among the boys in here. These boys don’t need democracy they need a king,” Johnson observed. Despite the reports of low morale and dissension, however, many of the strikers appeared to be enjoying life in Chevrolet No. 4 or, at least, so they advised their families. “We are one
happy family now," one of them wrote. "We all feel fine and have plenty to eat. We have several good banjo players and singers. We sing and cheer the Fisher [sic] boys & they return it. . . . Do not worry at all for we are peaceful Chevrolet workers and are bound to win."  

It was possible, of course, to see the sit-down strikes as a revolutionary challenge to the rights of private property in the United States, and a few radicals inside and outside the plants undoubtedly did so; but the mass of the sit-down strikers were utterly without revolutionary intent, and, unlike the Italian automobile workers who occupied the great Fiat plant in Turin in September, 1920, they evinced no desire to operate the factories that they were temporarily occupying or to achieve labor control of industry. They were sitting in to secure meaningful collective bargaining with their employer and better working conditions, not to transform property relationships.  

The sit-downers did not see themselves as law breakers, nor did they, indeed, give much thought to the legal implications of their action. "All that’s up to the union and the lawyers," a spokesman for the Fisher No. 2 strikers told a reporter. "We’re not up on those things. We’re just here protecting our jobs. We don’t aim to keep the plants or try to run them, but we want to see that nobody takes our jobs. . . . We don’t think we’re breaking the law, or at least we don’t think we’re doing anything really bad, any more than people who violated the prohibition laws a few years ago."  

It may be, as Seymour Martin Lipset has suggested, that in a society in which so much stress is placed on success, workers are persuaded to believe that "the most important thing is to win the game, regardless of the methods employed in doing so." Those who believe themselves "handicapped" in our society may feel constrained "to ‘innovate,’ that is, to use whatever means they can find to gain recognition."  

In the automobile industry in 1936 and 1937 the sit-down tactic became the "means" to achieve the desired end of recognition.

The UAW adopted the sit-down tactic against GM rather than resorting to the conventional strike not for ideological reasons but because the technique had proved itself effective. It was, of course, aware that the automotive sit-downs in the preceding weeks had gone unchallenged in the courts and that, with the exception of the Gordon Baking Company sit-in, public authorities in Michigan had made no effort to evict sit-down strikers; but, aside from this, it is doubtful that the UAW leadership or organizers had given much thought to the question of the legality of the device. Once the strike was under-
way, however, and its legality came under attack, the UAW felt it necessary to adopt some rationale for its behavior.

In defending the sit-down, the UAW took the position that the new strike tactic was just another means by which workers protected their jobs against strikebreakers and was not essentially different from the conventional picket line, which also entrenched upon the employer's property rights. The union, as a matter of fact, contended that it would have struck in the conventional manner had it had any confidence that GM would not attempt to break the strike by introducing scabs into the struck plants, removing equipment from plants on strike to strike-free plants, and seeking by itself or through public authorities that it controlled to smash the UAW picket lines, secure injunctions against the strikers, and do whatever else was necessary to break the strike. A strike on the inside, according to the UAW, neutralized the "arsenal of weapons" available to GM and gave the union a chance to win.70

On a loftier ideological plane, the UAW contended that the strike was legal since the worker enjoyed a property right in his job and, in striking, was therefore "protecting his private property—his right to a job." The property right of the worker in his job, it was alleged, was superior to the right of the company to use its property as it saw fit since the workers had invested their lives in the plant whereas the stockholders of the company had invested only their dollars. As one Fisher Body sit-downer graphically phrased it, "Our hides are wrapped around those machines." The property, the Flint Auto Worker declared, belonged to GM, but "there is something else inside these plants that the workers have earned by years of sweat and toil—and that is THEIR JOBS!"71

The concept of the worker's right to his job was without basis in law, and no court accepted the doctrine, but the idea did have a few adherents outside the UAW ranks, including, most notably, the dean of the Northwestern School of Law, Leon Green.72 Other union sympathizers, aware that the concept lacked a legal basis, argued for the recognition of the idea as a moral right or took the position that the sit-down would eventually receive legal recognition just as other union tactics once considered illegal, like the strike itself, had gained the sanction of law.73 The weakness of the right-to-a-job thesis, however it was expressed, was that it ignored the numerous workers who wished to continue working but were denied their right to a job by the sit-downers, and it could not logically be applied to sit-downers who were not employees of the plants in which they were sitting and were thus clearly trespassers.
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If the sit-down tactic were indeed illegal, resort to it was nevertheless justified, the UAW claimed, because GM was itself violating the law of the land, the NLRA, by refusing to engage in meaningful collective bargaining and by employing a variety of unfair labor practices designed to thwart organization.\textsuperscript{74} This argument, even though its essence was that two wrongs make a right, did help to weaken the force of GM's attack on the illegality of the sit-down for at least some of those concerned about the strike. The columnist Dorothy Thompson thus wrote during the strike that she was unable to work up very much "moral indignation" regarding the illegality of the sit-down since the strikers were fighting for a status recognized by law but being sabotaged by employers who had "the bigger guns and the stronger strategical positions." The Department of Research and Education of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ pointed out that the GM sit-down was opposed to all the Council's "accepted principles of law and equity" but that workers could be expected to adopt "extreme measures" when the owners denied them their legal right to organize and to engage in collective bargaining.\textsuperscript{75}

Sympathizers with the UAW cause differed as to whether the sit-down was legally to be construed as a trespass in Michigan and elsewhere; not until 1939, when the United States Supreme Court declared a sit-down in the Fansteel Metallurgical Corporation to be "a high-handed proceeding without shadow of legal right,"\textsuperscript{76} was this question definitively resolved. The New Republic contended that trespass statutes were not relevant since they were designed to apply to persons who forcibly entered upon the property of another and caused damage to it whereas the sit-downers had entered the plant where he was sitting with the consent of the owner and had not damaged the property. The leadership of the American Civil Liberties Union, on the other hand, concluded that the sit-down was obviously a trespass and was "clearly illegal."\textsuperscript{77}

Actually, the legal status of the sit-down in Michigan was somewhat clouded, at least insofar as the criminal law was concerned. Forcible entry and detainer was not a statutory offense for which a penalty had been expressly provided, but it was to be argued later that since it was an indictable offense under the common law, sit-downers were guilty of a felony according to the terms of a Michigan statute that made it felonious to commit an offense indictable under the common law for which no statute had specified a punishment. An assistant to Wayne County Prosecutor Duncan McRea contended, however, that employees who "passively" participated in a sit-down strike were not committing a criminal act but were subject to eviction by civil action through the institution of summary proceedings before
a Circuit Court commissioner. According to the assistant prosecutor, these proceedings, provided for in a statute of 1915, superseded the applicable common law. Law enforcement officers, he pointed out, could institute criminal proceedings only if the strikers disturbed the peace, were guilty of kidnapping, or maliciously destroyed the employer's property.78

McRea, it will be recalled, had stated in December, 1936, that sit-downers were not trespassing since they had entered the plants in which they worked at the invitation of their employers, but this view was later challenged by a writer in the Michigan Law Review, who, assuming that the sit-downers were no longer employees, a questionable conclusion at best, contended that, on the basis of Michigan cases, the sit-down was a trespass and the civil liability of the strikers was clear. The sit-down, he thought, might also be regarded as a tort of civil conspiracy against non-strikers and the employer since the strikers were denying them their right to work. The writer was less certain about the applicability of the criminal law to the sit-down.79

Quite apart from the legality of the sit-down strike in Michigan, there was a real question as to whether even peaceful picketing was legal in the state. The Supreme Court of Michigan had last pronounced on the question in 1922 and, following a long line of precedents, had ruled against picketing in any form. It could be argued, however, that the Dunckel-Baldwin Act of 1935 assumed peaceful picketing to be legal in the state, but this was far from certain. Given the doubts about the legality of both the sit-down and peaceful picketing, the UAW can hardly be blamed for pragmatically adopting what appeared to be the more effective strike technique. “You have fought a great fight,” Martin told the Flint Fisher Body workers at the conclusion of the strike, “and the ends justified the means.”80

As GM and other employers saw it, there was no question about the illegality of the sit-down. “Sit-downs are strikes. Such strikers are clearly trespassers and violators of the law of the land,” Knudsen declared on the last day of 1936.81 Regarding the strike as clearly illegal, GM had to decide which of several legal remedies it would be most appropriate and expedient for it to employ in an effort to regain control over its property. The company made its decision early in the new year, but, as it turned out, it was unable to secure the evacuation of its plants until it had agreed to terms that brought the strike to an end.