

Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-1937 by Sidney Fine

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The University of Michigan Press, 1969

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by Sidney Fine

Ann Arbor The University of Michigan Press

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To Isadore, Rose, and Ruth

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Preface

“Rarely,” Jay Lovestone wrote of the General Motors sit-down strike just after its conclusion, “does a single event of and by itself mean so much.” Historians of the American labor movement probably would be disinclined to challenge this judgment insofar as it applies to the growth of unionism in the automobile and other mass-production industries, and yet the strike has received surprisingly little scholarly attention and has not heretofore been the subject of a single, documented book-length study. Henry Kraus, to be sure, has written a vivid account of the strike in *The Many and the Few: A Chronicle of the Dynamic Auto Workers* (Los Angeles, 1947), but his narrative is undocumented, it does not concern itself in any depth with some of the most important aspects of the strike, and it is lacking in objectivity. The importance of the event, its relationship to subjects that have long been my concern, and the availability of important manuscript collections bearing on nearly all phases of the dispute explain my own interest in the strike and prompted my effort to write an account, based on the sources, of the origins, character, and consequences of this momentous labor conflict.

I first raised some of the questions considered in the book in an article on the strike that appeared in the *American Historical Review* in April, 1965. Since the positions defended by GM and the UAW in the strike reflected the prior experience of both organizations and the nature of the antecedent conflict between them, I have devoted a good deal of attention to the history of both the company and the union and especially to the confrontation between them that began in June, 1933, when Section 7 (a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act altered the rules governing industrial relations in the United States and adumbrated some of the principal issues over which the strike would eventually be fought. The key role of Frank Murphy in the ultimate resolution of the conflict and the central place occupied by Flint in the strike explain the consideration given in the pages that follow to Michigan’s governor and GM’s Michigan stronghold.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge here the assistance that I received in the writing of this book. My research and the publication of the book were facilitated by a Summer Faculty Fellowship and research and publication grants provided by the Horace H. Rackham School

Sit-Down

viii

of Graduate Studies of the University of Michigan. Professor Maurice F. Neufeld of the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations of Cornell University read the entire manuscript and made many suggestions for its improvement. Professor Irving Bernstein of the University of California at Los Angeles kindly permitted me to examine his notes on a file of CIO materials that I was unable to locate. Dr. Philip P. Mason, Dr. Stanley D. Solvick, and Warner W. Pflug of the Labor History Archives of Wayne State University, and Dr. Robert M. Warner, J. Fraser Cocks, Charles Jones, Janice Earle, and Ida C. Brown of the Michigan Historical Collections all provided me with research services that went far beyond the call of duty. My manuscript research was also aided and made more pleasurable by Buford Rowland and Joseph D. Howerton of the National Archives and Records Service, Dr. Elizabeth B. Drewry, Dr. Edgar B. Nixon, and the staff of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, David C. Mearns and the staff of the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress, Josephine L. Harper and Margaret Hafstad of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, James M. Babcock and the staff of the Burton Historical Collection, James J. Moylan of the Catholic University, and Catharine B. Williams of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers.

I am grateful to Winston Wessels for making it possible for me to examine Case File #5977 of the Michigan State Police Records and the Samuel D. Pepper Papers and for his enterprise in securing a microfilm copy of the relevant National Guard files for the Michigan Historical Collections. Dr. David L. Lewis aided me in gaining access to pertinent GM documents and made material in his own files available to me. W. D. Chase of the Flint *Journal* facilitated my use of the *Journal* library; Doris Hedde, Head of the General Reference Department of the Flint Public Library, kindly provided me with copies of sit-down items in the library's collection; Phyliss E. Janes of the General Motors Institute was similarly generous in supplying me with copies of GM executive training programs; and Elfrieda Lang of the Lilly Library made it possible for me to obtain copies of the relevant correspondence in the Powers Hapgood Papers. The persons who graciously permitted me to interview them and who responded to my letters requesting information about the strike are listed in the bibliography. I wish to thank Lee Pressman for permission to examine the transcript of his interview located in the Butler Library of Columbia University, and the late Norman Thomas for permission to use the Norman Thomas Papers. All of the photographs which are reproduced in the text were generously made available to

Preface

ix

me by the Labor History Archives of Wayne State University. My wife, Jean Fine, aided the preparation of this work in so many tangible and intangible ways that the mere expression of my gratitude seems grossly inadequate.

June, 1969

SIDNEY FINE

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Contents

I.	The Battle of the Running Bulls	1
II.	The Corporation	14
III.	The Workers	54
IV.	Company Town	100
V.	The Coming of the Strike	121
VI.	The Sit-Down Community	156
VII.	Strategy and Tactics: General Motors	178
VIII.	Strategy and Tactics: The UAW	199
IX.	Stalemate	231
X.	Negotiated Peace	266
XI.	Aftermath	313
	Notes	343
	Bibliographical Note	417
	Index	427

ABBREVIATIONS

AAWA	Associated Automobile Workers of America
ACLU	American Civil Liberties Union
ACW	Amalgamated Clothing Workers
AFL	American Federation of Labor
AIWA	Automotive Industrial Workers' Association
ALB	Automobile Labor Board
AMA	Automobile Manufacturers Association
AWU	Auto Workers Union
CIO	Committee for Industrial Organization
CS	Conciliation Service
CWAW	Carriage, Wagon and Automobile Workers' International Union
CWW	Carriage and Wagon Workers' International Union
EWRC	Emergency Welfare Relief Commission
GEB	General Executive Board
GM	General Motors Corporation
FTC	Federal Trade Commission
MESA	Mechanics Educational Society of America
NIRA	National Industrial Recovery Act
NLB	National Labor Board
NLRA	National Labor Relations Act
NLRB	National Labor Relations Board
NRA	National Recovery Administration
TUUL	Trade Union Unity League
UAAVW	United Automobile, Aircraft and Vehicle Workers of America
UAW	United Automobile Workers
UMW	United Mine Workers
URW	United Rubber Workers