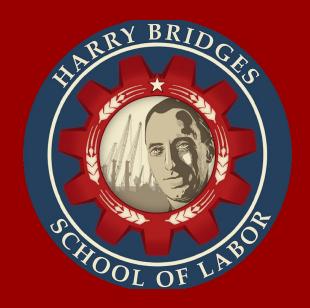






What will we be learning today?

- What is a Sit-Down Strike?/Organizing at General Motors
- Strike Actions Begin
- ☐ Life as a Sit-Downer





SECTION 1: What is a Sit-Down Strike?/ Organizing at General Motors

What is a Sit-Down Strike?

- A sit-down strike is a labor strike in which an organized group of workers, usually employed at factories or other centralized locations, take possession of the workplace by "sitting down" at their stations.
- ➤U.S. workers found the sit-down to have many advantages over the traditional forms of strike. It prevents the use of scabs to operate a factory, since the strikers guard the machines. It is harder for the company to oust men from inside a plant than break through an encircling picket line. Bosses are more reluctant to resort to strikebreaking violence, because it directly endangers millions of dollars of company property, vast assembly lines and unfinished products. The use of machine guns, tear gas and gangsters is much less effective. It is harder to label strikers aggressors while they are inside.

What is a Sit-Down Strike? (cont.)

- In a sit-down the workers' morale is heightened. They are inside and therefore know for certain that scabs are not operating the machines; they are really protecting their jobs and this leads to a higher degree of solidarity and militancy. The men are protected from weather. They are never scattered, but are always on call at a moment's notice in case of trouble. The basic democratic character of the sit-down is guaranteed by the fact that the workers on the line, rather than outside officials, determine its course.
- ➤ Finally, defense against labor spies a constant threat in the Thirties is perfected because a sit-down can be started by one or two rank- and-file leaders over an issue that affects the entire plant. The workers vote by putting down their tools.

The State of GM Workers

- In 1936, General Motors, employed 55 percent of all U.S. auto workers in 69 plants, and was bigger than Ford and Chrysler combined. Three hundred and fifty of its officers and directors were paid ten million dollars in salaries that year. Its two top officers, Alfred Sloan and William Knudson, received \$375,000 each in 1935. Its seventh vice-president, one Charles Wilson, received \$190,000. The giant was controlled by the DuPont interests, which owned about a quarter of the stock.
- The condition of the auto workers was in stark contrast to that of their bosses. In 1935, a year in which the government declared \$1,600 as the minimum income on which a family of four could live decently, the average auto worker took home \$900. Most lived in fearful insecurity. A foreman could fire at will. Layoffs between the old and new model year lasted from three to five months, without unemployment insurance. A compulsory loan system prevailed, under which GM deducted principal plus interest on the worker's return to employment in the fall, cutting wages 10 percent.

The State of GM Workers (cont.)

- As low as the eagles were, it was the speed-up that made life intolerable. One worker's wife described her husband as "coming home so dog tired he couldn't even walk upstairs to bed but crawled on his hands and knees."
- Conditions were described as follows: "The men worked like fiends, their jaws set and eyes on fire. Nothing in the world exists for them except the line chassis bearing down on them relentlessly. They come along on a conveyor, and as each passes, the worker has to finish his particular job before the next one bears down on him. The line moves fast and the chassis are close together. The men move like lightning. Some are underneath on their backs on little carts, propelling themselves by their heels all day long, fixing something underneath the chassis as they move along."

The State of GM Workers (cont.)

- Flint workers were described as having a "peculiar, gray, jaundiced color," like "a city of tuberculars," and in July, 1936, when temperatures soared over 100 degrees, deaths in Michigan's auto plants rose into the hundreds.
- The speed-up was intensified by the ever-present threat of layoffs. "The fear of layoff is always in their minds, even if not definitely brought there by the foremen. The speed-up is thus inherent in the ... lack of steady work and an army of unemployed waiting outside."
- > It was the speed-up that created the conditions that led to the workers organizing.

GM "Protections" Against Organizing

- ➤ If any worker had "strange ideas" in his head about a union, a vast network of company spies was present to ferret him out immediately. A Senate subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, headed by Robert LaFollette revealed that GM spent \$839,000 in 1934 alone on "detective work," more than half of it paid to the Pinkerton agency. Hundreds of spies worked in the plants, seeking out those who had union "inclinations."
- GM was a member of the National Metal Trades Association, a company group that supplied labor spies to terrorize workers and import scabs and helped set up company unions to break or forestall legitimate unions. The Committee reported that the Justice Department and Army and Navy Intelligence worked with this outfit in union-busting forays.

GM "Protections" Against Organizing (cont.)

- In addition, GM used the forces of the notorious Black Legion, a DuPont-financed terror group that beat, tarred and feathered and murdered active unionists. GM foremen were actually seen donning black robes inside the plant in preparation for a Black Legion raid. Organized force inside the plants had to be defeated to bring the union to auto.
- Attempts had been made to fight the auto moguls early in the depression. In July 1930, a communist-led union struck Fisher Body No. 1 and marched into downtown Flint with banners flying: "In 1776 we fought for Liberty. Today we fight for bread." Prior to this there had been little organizing attempted in the auto industry.

Organizing at GM

- In 1933, LUEL's predecessor organization, the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), created the Auto Workers Union along industrial lines. It conducted strikes which eventually involved tens of thousands and which were met with ferocious brutality, especially at the Briggs Auto Works in Flint. The TUUL-type militancy not only earned the hatred of the corporations but also of the sellout business unionism of the AFL national leadership.
- ➤ The AFL since its birth had opposed the organization of unskilled workers, and especially along industrial lines that is, placing all the different types of workers in one plant into the same union. The AFL had intended all along to keep auto workers divided, both along craft lines and from one plant or company to the next. It organized federal locals for this purpose groups of workers in a particular plant responsible directly to the national Federation and barred from joining together with all other auto workers on an industry-wide basis. These locals were ruled by national officers and an executive board appointed by AFL President William Green.

- When the AFL attempted to step into the auto industry soon after the Briggs strikes, the TUUL locals, in a move for unity, dissolved and joined the AFL federal locals. The entrance of the TUUL left-wing militants into these locals was a first step towards the creation of an industrial union.
- Disregarding the interests of the rank and file while negotiating with the companies, the AFL leadership sacrificed every single demand, including the essential one for union recognition. Thousands of auto workers made huge bonfires of their union cards and quit in disgust. The left-wingers organized the Cleveland Auto Council, which sponsored another national conference at which 37 locals were represented, and again the AFL intervened to try to prevent an industrial union from forming.
- Even a government report warned that because of "insecurity, low annual earnings, inequitable hiring and rehiring methods, espionage, speedup, and displacement of workers at an extremely early age ... Unless something is done soon, they (the workers) intend to take things into their own hands to get results."

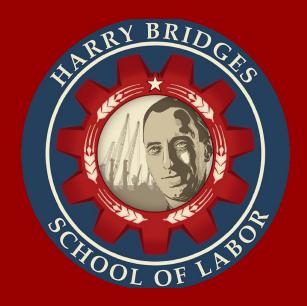
- Finally, with pressure growing for the mass organization of auto workers, agreement was won in May, 1936, to give the auto workers autonomy inside the AFL for what was, in effect, an industrial union. The infant UAW along with the other unions affiliated to the newly-emerging Committee for Industrial Organization were suspended in August by the AFL leadership because of their industrial union concepts.
- Wyndham Mortimer, a militant left-winger who led the local which he helped organize at Cleveland's White Motor Company, UAW's first Vice-President, was put in charge of organizing GM. When Mortimer arrived to begin his work in the summer of 1936, there were barely 100 union members in the city, and the majority of those were company spies. All the others, 20,000 of them, had quit. The sellout policies of the AFL leadership and Roosevelt's intervention had helped the auto companies destroy any union organization, however shaky, that had existed in Flint.

- Recognizing the stoolie-ridden, AFL-organized Flint local for what it was, Mortimer set about organizing a completely independent group, visiting workers from door to door, signing them up, and sending the records to UAW national headquarters. This enraged the GM labor spies, but, though tailed and watched at every turn, Mortimer succeeded in keeping membership lists out of their hands. He began publishing a newsletter which went out to 7,000 workers each week. He also organized a secret union group in the Fisher Body No. 1 "body-in-white" department, where the main soldering and welding was done.
- When Homer Martin, the AFL leadership supported UAW President, saw Mortimer succeeding he pressed for his removal. Mortimer succumbed, but managed to arrange for Robert Travis to take his place. In his early thirties, Travis had been successful in leading and organizing Toledo Chevrolet. He shared Mortimer's left-wing views and was regarded as atop-flight organizer despite his youth.

- Slowly but surely the UAW gained strength. The fact that the discredited AFL had suspended the CIO affiliated AFL unions helped draw workers into the new industrial union. Seniority agreements were won at Chrysler Dodge. In Fisher Body union stickers began to appear on auto bodies and carry their message the length of the assembly line. With GM supporting Landon for President but losing as the workers voted for Roosevelt overwhelmingly, the union began to resist the corporation more strongly. Seven stoppages, provoked by speed-up and wage cuts, occurred at Fisher Body No. 1 in the second week of November, 1936.
- On November 9th Travis met with 40 members, key men from each department, to plan how to organize a sit-down should an incident occur. Three days later, on November 12th, it did. A foreman eliminated one man from a three- man unit and ordered the other two to do the work of three. Although the other two were not union members, they stopped working and were fired the next morning.



Discussion





SECTION 2: Strike Actions Begin

- On the incoming night shift, word spread through the 7,000-man plant: "Nobody starts working." The foreman seized the man who had been removed from the group and began to shove him toward the plant superintendent. Simons stepped in and stopped him while the entire assembly line watched. A committee was picked on the spot to meet with the boss as a committee the first time this had ever happened at Fisher Body.
- The super was stunned. He gave in and agreed to rehire the two workers who had been fired, but the men, in spite of an agreement that they would not be docked for time lost in the stoppage, still refused to go back to work. They demanded that the two workers be brought back to the plant. The company was forced to broadcast over local and police radio to find the two men, one of whom was on a date with his girl. No one started working until he had driven her home, changed his clothes and reported for work.

- This story spread through Flint like wildfire. Workers began signing up by the hundreds. GM was forced to bargain with various units on day-to-day grievances. The decision was made by the UAW leadership not to call a national strike until Fisher Body in Flint and Cleveland were ready, which Travis estimated would take another month.
- On December 28th, the first action occurred at Fisher Body in Cleveland where the workers in the quarter panel department yanked the power when the plant manager postponed a bargaining session for a few hours. All other departments followed and by one o'clock in the afternoon the plant was dead. Through the mediation of Mayor Harold Burton, later a Supreme Court justice, GM tried to bargain on a local basis; but the union turned down the ruse. A unanimous vote at a plant mass meeting decided the sit-down would be ended only as a part of a national settlement.

This action had disrupted the timetable of even the UAW leadership, which had planned to begin strike action against GM in Flint. A few weeks later the Cleveland workers had to leave the plant and conduct their strike from the outside because they did not have the strength to maintain the sit-down. It was the Flint workers who had to carry the ball.

The Strike Begins

- The Flint workers got their chance at Fisher Body No. 1 on December 30, only two days after the start of the Cleveland sit-down. When the night shift came on at No. 1 on the 30th, they found that the company had backed up a string of railroad cars and was starting to move dies. This was the GM version of the runaway shop, an open attempt to shift production to a plant where the union was weak and thus destroy Fisher Body No. 1 as a decisive unit. Travis was notified at the union office across the street. He immediately called the workers to a lunch-hour meeting by the prearranged signal of a 200-watt red lamp which the workers could see flickering in the union headquarters. When they had filled the hall, Travis said, "What do we do about the dies?' A worker answered: "Well, them's our jobs. We want them left right here in Flint."
- > Travis reviewed the company moves. He pointed out that the Cleveland workers were out on strike to save their jobs, and again he asked, "What do we do?"
- "Shut her down'. Shut the goddamn plant!" came the cry.

The Strike Begins (cont.)

Henry Kraus, a UAW editor at the meeting, describes the scene: "The men stood still facing the door. It was like trying to chain a natural force. They couldn't hold back and started crowding forward. Then suddenly they broke through the door and made a race for the plant gates, running in every direction towards the quarter-mile-long buildings."

The Strike Begins (cont.)

- The workers inside immediately began to secure the plant against any attacker. They moved scores of unfinished Buick bodies in front of all entrances to form a gigantic barricade. With acetylene torches they welded a steel frame around every door. Bullet-proof metal sheets were put in position to cover every window, while holes were carved in them and threaded to allow the nozzles of fire hoses to be screwed into them. Wet clothes were kept in readiness to be placed on the face as protection against tear-gas attacks. Large supplies of metal parts were placed in strategic spots. Paint guns for spraying would-be invaders were located throughout the plant.
- The back-to-work whistle blew, but there was no movement. Suddenly the third-floor windows were flung open to reveal workers waving arms and shouting, "Hooray Bob, she's ours'." The women of the cut-and-sew department were told to report to union headquarters. Nearly all the remaining 3,000 night workers struck.

The Strike Begins (cont.)

- A simultaneous sit-down in the smaller Fisher No. 2 took place, grounding GM body production to a halt. Thousands of stop-orders went out to suppliers and assembly plants all over the country. On January 1 all Chevrolet and Buick assembly plants were closed. By January 7, 100,000 GM workers were idle.
- On January 3 a national union conference of 300 from ten cities met in Flint and formulated demands: union recognition for the UAW, reinstatement of all workers fired because of union membership or activity, seniority to govern all layoffs, new wage minimums, a 30-hour, 5-day week with time and one-half for overtime, abolition of piece work, and a slowing down of the assembly line.



Strike Strategy Begins to Take Shape

- The press attacked the sit-downers, there were constant references to "Lewis' strike" and Lewis "ordering the men in or out" and "Lewis ordering the strike at strategic points," referring to C.I.O. President John Lewis, as if the rank and file had determined nothing.
- The workers in Fisher Body No. 1 paid little heed to the rantings of GM and its press. Once inside they set about organizing one of the most effective strike apparatuses ever seen in the United States. Immediately after securing the plant, they held a mass meeting and elected a committee of stewards and a strike strategy committee of five to govern the strike.



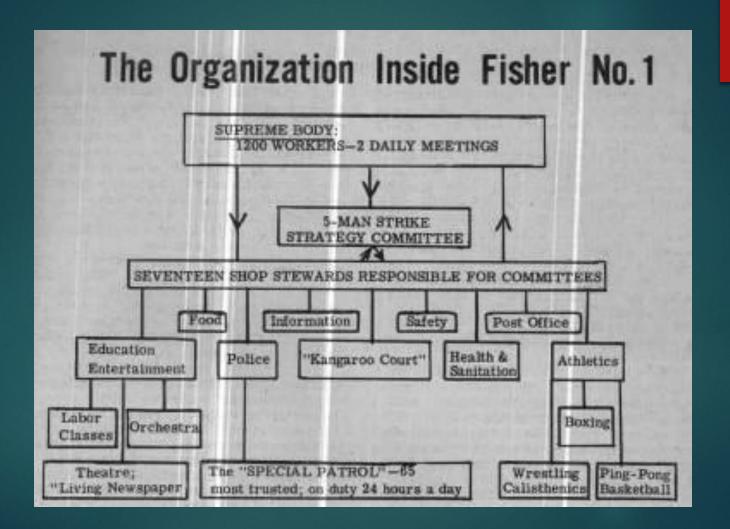
Workers inside Fisher Body 1



Cartoon featured in magazine, New Masses

Strike Strategy Begins to Take Shape (cont.)

- Then committees were organized: food, police, information, sanitation and health, safety, "kangaroo court," entertainment, education and athletics. Since all committees were democratically elected, their authority was unquestioned. The supreme body remained the 1,200 who stayed to hold the plant, the rest being sent outside to perform other tasks. Two meetings of the entire plant were held daily at which any change could be made in the administration.
- The police committee was responsible for guarding every entrance to the plant and posted the names and shifts of every man on the bulletin boards. Within this committee of 65 the most trusted workers constituted the Special Patrol. Their job was to make a complete 35-minute round of the plant every hour, 24 hours a day, throughout the entire strike. They would check out all rumors and report any violations of rules or discipline. Violators were tried by the "court" and initially given minor punishments. After three convictions a striker was sent out.



Strike Strategy Begins to Take Shape (cont.)

- No one could enter or leave the plant unless checked out by the reception committee.
- A "reception committee of five searched my party and car for weapons outside the plant." Then "we walked up to the plant itself. All doors were shut and barricaded. I climbed onto a pile of packing bags and swung over a heavy horizontally-hinged steel door into the plant. On a platform inside there was another reception committee which checked credentials again."
- > Such care was necessary since the company was always attempting to spread rumors of scandals inside. They even smuggled a prostitute in another guise into the plant but she was discovered and sent packing.

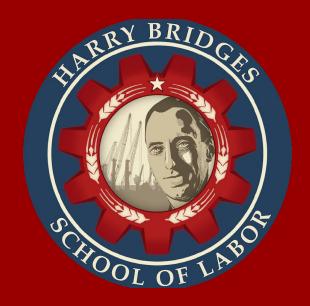


Discussion and New Members Introductions



New Member Introductions

- What is your name, pronouns and state (or country/territory)?
- Where do you work? Is it unionized?
- How did you find out about the People's School?
- What do you think about tonight's class?





SECTION 3: Life as a Sit-Downer

Life as a Sit-Downer

- Inside, every worker had a specific duty for six hours a day. They were on duty for three hours, off for nine, on three and off nine, in each 24-hour period. Every day at 3 P.M. there was a general cleanup. No matter how cold the weather, all windows were opened wide and teams of workers moved in waves on, and in between, the assembly lines for the entire length of the plant, leaving it spick-and-span. Personal cleanliness also took high priority, every worker taking a "shower a day."
- The strikers divided themselves into social groups of 15, setting up "house" in some cozy corner and living family-style for the "duration." They made mattresses of car cushions, took out the seats and made beds of the car floors. Every visitor was impressed with the extreme neatness and the care taken with all plant property.

Life as a Sit-Downer (cont.)

- A plant post office was established to handle all mail, which included censoring every letter. Daily visits were arranged whereby workers' children could be handed through a window while workers talked to their wives as they stood outside. At one point the organization was so confident of its fortress that workers who lived nearby were allowed the liberty of going home for a day at a time.
- The monotony and boredom, away from the family, was probably the most difficult problem to overcome. Calisthenics were organized daily. The entire plant was wired with a loudspeaker system. A 12-piece orchestra was organized from among the strikers and concerts were broadcast every evening. Each "social group" had either a radio or phonograph. Ping pong, checkers, chess, cards (using washers as "money") were provided. The bottoms were knocked out of two wastebaskets and a basketball court set up. Boxing and wrestling teams were organized. The strikers took to writing poems and songs, the best of which were published in the union paper. They put on skits lampooning the foremen, GM and its bosses.

Life as a Sit-Downer (cont.)

- Labor classes were held daily in the history of the labor movement and instructions given in parliamentary procedure, "how to run a union meeting" and in the union constitution. A "living newspaper" was presented to allow the workers to act out the specific events of the strike as it went along.
- Dramatic groups were invited and Detroit's Contemporary Theatre put on plays. One local movie owner sent entertainers and another who refused to help out was boycotted after the strike. Charlie Chaplin donated his current movie, Modern Times, and film showings were held. A writing class was led by a graduate student from the University of Michigan and workers took to writing plays.
- The Women's Auxiliary which was to play a key role in the strike organized dancing, representing all national groups, in front of the plant. They formed "living formations" or mass charades to describe phrases like "Solidarity Forever" or "Sole Collective Bargaining Agent."

Life as a Sit-Downer (cont.)

- The organization outside the plant was no less efficient and vital to the existence of the workers inside. Union headquarters at Pen-gelly Hall was the hub. Committees were established for food preparation, publicity, welfare and relief, pickets and defense and union growth. The responsibility of feeding several thousand workers both inside and outside the plants was enormous. The union kitchen was headed by Dorothy Kraus, wife of the union editor, and a union chef from a large Detroit hotel.
- Food transportation was handled by the city's bus drivers who remembered the solidarity of the auto workers in the bus strike. Two hundred people, mostly women, prepared this food. Some crates of fruit were kept inside for snacks and carefully guarded against poisoning. As it later turned out, a Pinkerton agent was on the inside food committee.

Life as a Sit-Downer (cont.)

- Several hundred workers gave their cars for use by the union. Sound equipment, guarded day and night, was used to talk to the sit-downers from outside the plant. The Flint Auto Worker was distributed by the tens of thousands. A "chiseling" committee was set up to collect food and supplies. Two-thirds of what was needed was obtained in this fashion, the committee going from house to house and to small shopkeepers.
- The union headquarters became the center of life for thousands of workers who streamed in and out, bringing their families along. A nursery was set up to take care of the children while their mothers were working for the strike.



Strikers' wives prepare hot meals

Life as a Sit-Downer (cont.)

- There was constant communication between the outside strike leaders and the strike committee inside. Picketing took place around the clock in front of the plant.
- The fantastic spirit and organization of the workers spread across the nation. Sit-downs became a national phenomenon. Workers the country over grabbed newspapers each day to see "if the boys in Flint were still holding out."
- Companion strikes sparked new methods of organization. Only one reason could drag one sit-downer at the Philadelphia Exide Battery Co. outside – he was married at the plant gates. The entire country was union-conscious.



Solidarity with the Strikers

- Support poured in from all over the country. Despite the attempt of the national AFL to sabotage the strike, its city central bodies in Flint, Detroit, Cleveland and Minneapolis backed the sit-downers with all sorts of aid.
- The United Rubber Workers' Goodyear local sent \$3,000. Six thousand, came from UAW at Studebaker. Trucks of food arrived from Akron. The Hudson and Chrysler workers began a "one- hour-a-day club": one hour's wages each day donated to the strike fund. Veterans formed a Union Labor Post No. 1 to counteract the "patriotic scabbing" organized by flag-wavers.
- > Even small businessmen joined the ranks, one drugstore owner telling a reporter:
 - "This whole block of store is solid for the union. Hell, I never got anything out of GM dividends; a union victory is better for my business."

GM's Counter-attack

- As production decreased daily, GM turned to their courts for an injunction with which to oust the strikers. It was a ticklish legal situation, since the workers were in no way harming the machinery, and, in fact, kept the plants in better shape than the company had. The tactic was "so new," said one observer, "that no existing law has any relevance in regard to it." But that, of course, wouldn't stop GM.
- It got an injunction from Genesee County Judge Edward D. Black. County Sheriff Tom Wolcott went to the plants to read it to the workers, ordering them out in 24 hours. As the nervous sheriff stood on a table in the Fisher No. 1 cafeteria reading the writ, workers laughed at him and broke out into "Solidarity Forever" when he had finished. Needless to say, the workers refused to budge.

GM's Counter-attack

- With GM set to request an order for removal, one of the union attorneys dug up information which proved to be a bombshell: Judge Black owned 3,665 shares of GM stock, worth \$219,000.38 Michigan law stated that "No judge of any court shall sit as such in any case or proceeding in which he is a party or in which he is interested..."
- > While the judge denied that his stock ownership would influence his decision, this was too blatant even for GM. Shamefaced, it forgot the Black injunction and allowed legal matters to cool a while before seeking another one.
- This exposure proved a boon to the workers' cause as it hit the front pages of every paper in the country and exposed GM's complete control of the political machinery of Flint. But the company had just started.

GM Brings in it's Goons

- All of a sudden there appeared on the scene an organization called the Flint Alliance. It claimed to be composed of "loyal" GM workers who were laid off in other plants because of the Fisher Body strike and who were demanding an end to "minority rule." The president of this group turned out to be one George Boyson, a former Buick paymaster and then owner of a company manufacturing sparkplugs obviously loyal to GM. The treasurer was revealed as a former Flint city official who had been convicted of embezzling city funds.
- So "widespread" was the "anger" among the "loyal workers" that these two were picked as the main officers of the Flint Alliance. In reality, the Alliance was set up both as a strikebreaking group and to mobilize vigilante action against the sit-downers.

GM Brings in it's Goons (cont.)

- It was composed principally of GM supervisors, of which there were hundreds, and businessmen. Foremen descended on non-struck plants with membership cards, attempting to intimidate workers into signing. Several received a "going over" when they refused to join. More than half the cards were filled out with "names" such as "John Fink" and "James Stool-Pigeon" or "Strikebreaker" and "Mr. Sloan" with the comment added, "I own General Motors and its employees."GM took pictures of "crowds" of workers supposedly demonstrating to go back to work. The "demonstrators" later turned out to be men waiting for their paychecks.
- The company was pushing its back-to-work movement through the Flint Alliance, claiming that a minority of strikers were "dictating" to a majority of non-strikers.

GM Brings in it's Goons (cont.)

- Actually the union was signing up thousands of men and women into the UAW every day. Even those workers who were not on strike and not in the union let it be known, by their presence at demonstrations and picket lines—their sympathies were with the sit-downers.
- M continued its refusal even to meet with the union unless the strikers vacated the plants. And, of course, the union said they would not do so unless guaranteed that the company would not fill them with scabs, a pledge which GM would never agree to. The tension mounted. Cries were heard in Congress for outlawing sit-down strikes. A Detroit clergyman saw "Soviet planning" behind the strike. The AFL leadership urged the workers to go back to work. But the workers, marvelously organized and in high spirits, sat tight. So GM finally turned to violence.



Discussion & Wrap Up



Volunteers Needed!

We are in need of volunteers for the staff of the People's School! Here's a few roles we need filled:

- People to help manage posting on our social media and podcast platforms
- Video Editors, Audio Editors, Graphic Designers, Artists, Narrators
- Facilitators, Web Controls, Moderators

Email <u>info@peoplesschool.us</u> if you're interested and try to attend our next staff meeting if possible.



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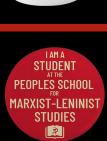














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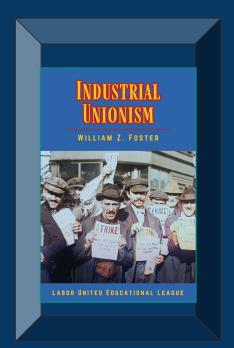


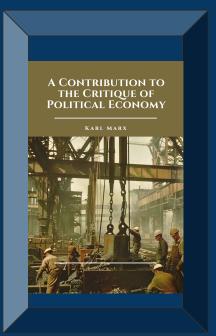
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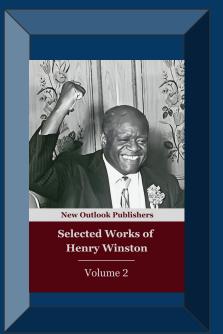
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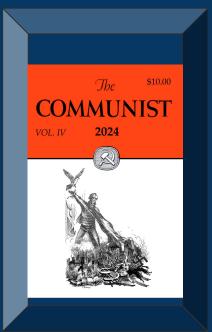


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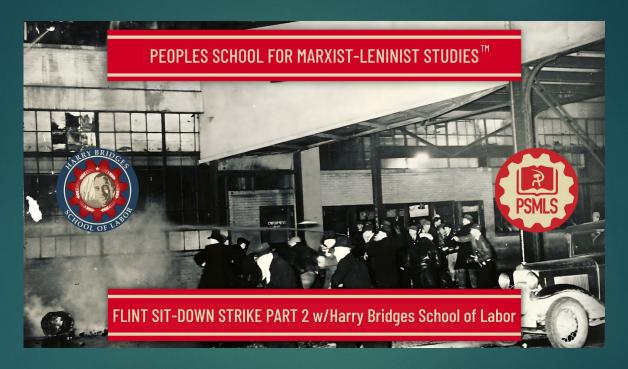
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https://luel.us/laborschool/

Launched in Spring 2023, the Harry Bridges School of Labor is a monthly class held 2x per month. Classes will cover a variety of topics aimed at building class conscious among union members.



February's class is on "Black-Led Rank-and-File Movements". Class will be February 5, 2024 at 9pm EST/6pm PST and Saturday February 8, 2024 at 7pm EST/4pm PST.



Join us next week as we continue our presentation on the Flint Sit-Down Strike.

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