PART I ~ *Class*

In what historians generally regard as the single most important labor battle in American history—Flint's 1936–37 Great Sit-Down Strike—money was not, as might have been expected, the main issue pitting the nascent United Auto Workers in its struggle against the General Motors Corporation. Rather, it was the speed-up: the ever more exhausting pace of work that made weariness and violent retching a commonplace experience after a stint in the factory. It is no exaggeration to say that this is what industrial work once meant in Flint. As Henry Kraus, a strike leader and, later, an astute analyst of Flint's Great Sit-Down Strike, has suggested: the "oppression of incredible working conditions, the effects of the implacable speedup . . ." and the "deaths in the state's auto centers" were crucial, bodily factors driving rebellion from below.[1]

Hegel might well have felt at home in Depression-era Flint. The bondage that was industrial labor was experienced both as self-destructive and, as it were, motivating: the physical pain of alienated labor served as a necessary precondition for the struggle for recognition that ensued. In December 1936, members of Flint's industrial work force went on strike against General Motors by occupying key Flint factories. They broke their work-induced silence in the face of a sometimes violent reaction by placing themselves before clubs, tear gas, and bullets: the risk of life-and-death struggle was worth it, and class consciousness meant realizing that.

Marx, too, would have been intrigued: the rhetoric of union organizers in 1936 and 1937 owed much to his work. Wyndham Mortimer, then UAW First Vice President and chief union organizer in Flint, stated in one of his open letters to Flint's auto workers: Copyrighted Material

> ALL THE EXPLOITERS OF LABOR HANG TOGETHER. THEY ARE CLASS CONSCIOUS. They are aware of the fact that the interests of their CLASS is (sic) involved, and all this patriotic blah blah is for the consum[p]tion (sic) of fools, and they are hoping we are the fools. We as workers must too become aware of CLASS INTEREST. It is only in this way we may get the true picture and understand all the move being made on our political and economic checker board. Under our present economic system, we as workers can only improve our condition by improving the condition of the entire working class.[2]

The Strike's local meaning was unquestionably articulated within a vision of a larger class struggle. Indeed, when several thousand workers finally came to occupy strategic points of production—that is, when they literally sat down in the "tremendous industrial establishments that mark the points of the compass from the center of the city"[3]—they sought to integrate their workplace lives with their lives *as such*, asserting their status as human beings of intrinsic worth living as members of a community. It is not romanticizing to say that Flint's Great Sit-Down Strike was a struggle precipitated by an alienated *existence*, not simply in Hegel's realm of *Spirit*, but in Marx's more sobering realm of materiality. This, in fact, is how social class was experienced in Flint: it was *lived*.

And though this specific struggle was centered in a handful of apparently ordinary workplaces—within the boundaries of a nondescript, midsize, middle-west industrial city—Flint's GM factories were actually the core capital assets in an expansive, interdependent network of automobile-centered mass production and consumption. The illegal seizure of *this* property could not have cut any faster to the quick of American capitalist society: from Flint to Detroit to Wall Street in a heartbeat. It sliced through the community, and, to a degree, divided the nation, as though questioning the legitimacy of the entire industrial-capitalist system in the midst of America's Great Depression. This strike certainly had enormous repercussions. As Leighton, Meyer, and Pendrell remind us:

> Within a year of the sit-down strike, wages in the auto industry increased by $300 million; the UAW had grown from 30,000 to 500,000 members; and the union had written agreements with 4,000 automobile and auto-parts concerns. Throughout the nation sit-down strikes became the way to organize: teachers, WPA workers, artists, busboys, bellboys, municipal employees, clerks, and stenographers joined with cooks, steel workers, longshoremen, garment workers, fur workers, lumberjacks, and share-croppers in such strikes.
>
> Black workers began to be organized, and working women were admitted into industrial unions other than textile and needle trades,

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> where they were already accepted. Today virtually all labor historians recognize the centrality of the Flint sit-down strike to subsequent labor and corporate developments.[4]

In short, the Flint sit-down strike served as an empowering catalyst, a spark that ignited a firestorm of industrial militancy across the United States.

But, for several notable reasons, the historical significance of this strike is, and has been, easily forgotten. In itself this strike achieved nothing more than the mere "recognition" of the UAW as the sole bargaining agent for the striking workers. For risking everything, the strikers realized in practice only their abstract, legal right to form a union that would represent them in collective bargaining. As one striker explained to his comrades when initially confronted with the official strike settlement:

> What's the use of kidding ourselves? All that piece of paper means is that we got a union. The rest depends on us. For God's sake, let's go back to work and keep up what we started here![5]

Of course, even though this struggle established a powerful industrial union in a previously open shop industry, it did not, however, expand to a more ferocious plane such as could precipitate a social or class revolution to alter the basic property relations of American capitalist society.

The second reason the Strike's meaning has been largely forgotten by contemporaries follows from this first reason: the UAW and its kindred industrial unions have themselves developed into great bureaucracies enmeshed in what William Serrin famously describes as "civilized relations" with corporate America.[6] For various reasons (which shall be discussed below), the moment of potential radical struggle was compromised. Today, Flint's Great Sit-Down Strike is part of the union bureaucracy's official origins myth, not a living part of a people's history.

Third, the state's monopoly on the legitimate means of organized violence was not wholly and ruthlessly employed in this struggle to defend the status quo—although, legally, it might well have been. In 1937, New Deal Democratic Governor Frank Murphy placed Michigan National Guard Troops *between* local police and the sit-down strikers. If the Strike did not incite revolution per se, neither did it illicit a violently unforgiving and morally unforgettable repression of dissent. Charles Stewart Mott—an early founder and long-time GM board member, as well as three-time Flint mayor—later complained to Studs Terkel:

> [Frank Murphy] was the Governor during the sit-down strikes, and he didn't do his job. He didn't enforce the law. He kept his hands off.

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> He didn't protect our property. They should have said [to the strikers], "Stop that thing. Move on, or we'll shoot." And if they didn't, they should have been shot.[7]

Some *were* shot, not by National Guardsmen, but by Flint police. Still, unlike the Tiannamen Squares of the world, no one was killed. The repression that Mott desired and expected was circumvented by the politics of the New Deal compromise, including President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's discreet personal interventions.[8] In Flint in 1937 a new, more stable political-economic order, in which the welfare state and industrial unions worked in concert with corporate America, came of age. This apparently was lost on Mr. Mott, who, in his 1970 interview with Terkel, still remembered F.D.R. as "the great destroyer."[9]

Finally, it may be that the larger implications of this specific moment in American history are today mostly forgotten—except as union lore—simply because ordinary people generally do not feel the *need* to remember. Although the United States has experienced many economic downturns since the 1930s, it has since never suffered a comparably widespread, sustained, nor such a socially volatile economic depression as the still aptly named *Great* Depression. Of course, it is also true that there are minority groups, cities, regions, and whole industries and occupational categories that have witnessed Depression-like conditions and decline, even as the nation as a whole has progressed. Deindustrialization has certainly created great depressions in specific localities. Indeed, nowhere has this been more true than in Flint, birthplace of GM and the UAW, and still the location of the single largest concentration of GM employees in the world.

Flint has recently witnessed a new national movement within the UAW developing important local roots. Significantly, *this* organized, self-conscious response to dependent deindustrialization remembers the initial meaning of Flint's Great Sit-Down Strike. Its name is the UAW-New Directions Movement.

NOTES

1. Henry Kraus, *The Many and the Few: A Chronicle of the Dynamic Auto Workers*, 2d ed., with an introduction by Neil O. Leighton, William J. Meyer, and Nan Pendrell (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985 [1947]), p. 23. Also see Sidney Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936–1937* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1969); Victor Reuther, *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976); Frank Marquart, *An Auto Worker's Journal: The UAW from Crusade to One-Party Union* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975); and Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Mass Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

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2. Letter from Wyndham Mortimer, October 6, 1936, in the Henry Kraus Collection, Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.

3. Charles Stewart Mott, introduction in Clarence H. Young and William A. Quinn, *Foundation For Living* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), pp. v–ix, v.

4. Neil O. Leighton, William J. Meyer, and Nan Pendrell, introduction to the 2d ed., Kraus, pp. xiv–xv. Also see "Sit-down an effective tool world over," *The Flint Journal*, 9 February 1992, sec. A, pp. 1, 10.

5. Kraus, p. 287.

6. William Serrin, *The Company and the Union: The "Civilized Relations" of the General Motors Corporation and the United Auto Workers* (New York: Vintage Press, 1974).

7. Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), p. 135.

8. An indication of President Roosevelt's popularity in Flint is given in *The Flint Journal Centennial Picture History of Flint*, edited by Lawrence R. Gustin, 1976, where F.D.R.'s October 15, 1936 visit to Flint is recorded in photographs. According to this source, Roosevelt "was greeted by an estimated 150,000 people—the largest crowd in local history. . . . People were packed 4,500 to a block between Court Street and Atwood Stadium, where 20,000 more were packed in to await FDR's speech." For a scholarly treatment of F.D.R.'s role in the strike, see Fine, p. 233, where Fine notes that F.D.R. "played a larger role behind the scenes than was evident at the time."

9. Terkel, p. 135.

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