

# Flint Sit-Down Strike

December 30, 1936—February 11, 1937



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General Motors employed thousands of people in Michigan in the 1930s. Some autoworkers, including many in Flint, wanted to form a union to negotiate better pay and working conditions. The company refused to recognize the union, the United Auto Workers (U.A.W.).

Workers went on a sit-down strike. Instead of picketing outside, they stayed inside the factory. The sit-down strike was successful because it prevented management from bringing in new workers to break it up.

The strike ended after tense weeks that included court orders and negotiation. General Motors agreed to recognize the U.A.W.

**[ Turn the page to learn more. ]**

## First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or **the right of the people peaceably to assemble**, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The right to gather peacefully to express or defend beliefs.



Flint was a bustling place in the 1930s. Thousands of people moved to the city for jobs during the early 20th century.

Archives of Michigan



How many children  
can you find?

Pedestrian and automobile traffic in downtown Flint, 1934.

Many people came to work in factories, including General Motors automobile plants. The work could be dangerous, but it provided a paycheck at a time when many people were unemployed.



General Motors' Fisher Body factory number one in Flint, circa 1915–1925.

Many autoworkers wanted better conditions and hourly pay. They organized a union to negotiate for them. General Motors leaders did not want workers to join unions.



How many pieces are on the assembly line?

The assembly line could be sped up to produce more pieces even when workers couldn't keep up.

**On December 30, word got out that the company wanted to replace union supporters and send equipment elsewhere. Workers in Flint went on strike. Instead of picketing, they sat down inside to avoid being replaced.**



**Can you find the  
tic tac toe game?**

Strikers sitting and reading instead of putting seats in automobiles.

**General Motors asked the circuit court to order strikers to leave the factories, but the workers stayed anyway. The strike continued.**

Collection of Judge Michael F. Gadola



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Twice the Genesee County Circuit Court issued orders telling strikers to leave the factories because they did not have the right to stay. The first order was questioned since the judge held significant amounts of General Motors stock. The second order by Judge Paul V. Gadola (left) came amidst a clash between strike supporters and the police. Above: Genesee County Courthouse, 2014.

Michigan's Governor Frank Murphy sent National Guard troops to keep the peace. He wanted the strike to end with both sides getting something they wanted.

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How old do you think these troops are?

National Guard with a machine gun overlooking Chevrolet factories numbers nine and four.



**Governor Murphy and federal Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins also met with both sides in Washington, D.C., to help settle the strike.**



### General Motors Executives

Left to right: (seated) Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., President; Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins; Governor Frank Murphy; and William S. Knudsen, Executive Vice President; (standing) John Thomas Smith, Vice President and General Counsel; and Donaldson Brown, Chairman of the Finance Committee.



### Union Leaders

Left to right: Homer L. Martin, head of the United Auto Workers (U.A.W.); Governor Frank Murphy; and John L. Lewis, head of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (C.I.O.).

**Can you find the Governor  
in both photos?**

**Could they come to an agreement? Secretary Perkins told reporters, not yet.**

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**What do you notice about the people in this photo?**

Secretary Perkins was appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as the first woman ever to serve as a cabinet advisor.

**Back in Flint, the strikers remained organized. Everyone was assigned duties. They slept and ate in shifts.**

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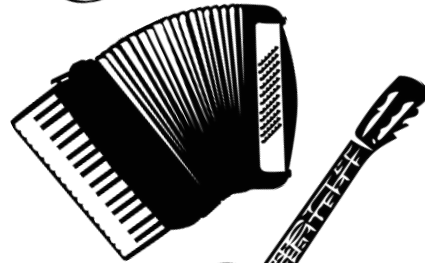


Clockwise from above: Strikers guarding a window entrance, resting in a "quiet zone" on floor mats cut for production, and eating in the cafeteria.

**Can you find signs with rules for strikers to follow?**



Strikers also entertained themselves with music. They sang songs that made fun of company leaders and praised unions.



Collective Bargaining in our shops

*C-I-C-I-O*

And in our shops it makes us strong

*C-I-C-I-O*

CHORUS

With a Union here and a Union there

Here a Union there a Union, everywhere a Union

Collective Bargaining in our shops

*C-I-C-I-O*

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*Sung to the tune of "Old MacDonald Had a Farm"*

From "Songs of the 'Sit-Down' Strike"

"C-I-C-I-O" refers to the C.I.O. (Congress of Industrial Organizations), a group of unions.

Can you figure out how  
to sing this song?

Women and families provided important support, such as meals and first aid. Without them, the strike likely would have failed.

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Clockwise from above: First aid station; women gathered to help “win the fight”; and the head of a kitchen that sent food on trucks to strikers twice a day.

The “Emergency Brigade” wore red berets.  
**How many women are wearing hats?**



The sit-down strike dragged on that winter. As the “strike heard round the world” spread, delays, shortages, and additional strikes caused more than 100,000 workers to be out of work. General Motors lost money.

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What did stores on this street sell?

Downtown Flint during the sit-down strike.

Finally, on February 11 Governor Murphy announced the strike was settled. General Motors recognized the union, and strikers agreed to return to work.

