

Strategy and Tactics: General Motors

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As the major phase of the sit-down strike began at the end of 1936 GM's Stephen M. DuBrul, then on special assignment to Vice-President Donaldson Brown, reminded the corporation's leadership that Franklin D. Roosevelt, after his sensational victory in November, was likely to be a " 'Popular' leader" who would support any group championing " 'the cause of the workingman.' " Under the circumstances, DuBrul warned, GM was "peculiarly vulnerable" since it was successful, big, and making large profits and since most of its executives had opposed the administration in the election. It would consequently have to be "*so fair in every position*" that it took with regard to the UAW that it placed the union "*on the defensive both with the public and the Administration*" and made Lewis, whom DuBrul characterized as "probably the keenest labor strategist" in the nation, appear to be an "obstructionist."

For the public to accept its position as fair, DuBrul contended, GM would have to engage in collective bargaining with the representatives of its workers on " 'bargainable' " issues. It would have to be "very cautious," however, with regard to matters of principle that might be in dispute. On the crucial question of majority rule, it should make the President's settlement of March, 1934, which endorsed collective-bargaining pluralism, the "keynote" of its position. DuBrul assumed that GM would be unyielding should the union seek an election under the NLRA, which embodied the principle of exclusive representation.

DuBrul thought that GM would expose itself to public and political criticism were it adamantly to refuse to sign an agreement with the UAW. It was his opinion that the corporation should be willing to consider the signing of a contract with a union that was a responsible organization, was not coercing the company's employees, and was able to furnish evidence of its good faith, and if the agreement stipulated that the union could represent only those workers who had designated it as their bargaining agency, recognized the open shop, and did not compromise management prerogatives. "In short," DuBrul concluded, "our position at all times must be that of a reasonable employer who is unfortunately being victimized by irresponsible professional agitators whose demands exceed all reasonable limits. Any other attitude at this time would place our whole case in jeopardy, regardless of the basic merits of our side, and would be

politically about as stupid a blunder as we can commit. We must not forget that there has been an election."¹

Whether the GM leadership studied DuBrul's document, which so astutely appraised the strike issues from the corporation's point of view, is not known, but GM was in the end to follow rather closely the policy guidelines DuBrul had drawn. GM appreciated the fact that the world had changed and that in the year 1937 it was no longer possible, or at least was unwise, for a great corporation to respond to a union challenge by the application of ruthless force; but, although aware that there had been "an election," it was not prepared to surrender meekly the principles of collective bargaining to which it had been committed since 1933.

Responding to the UAW's request of December 24 for a general conference, Knudsen, on the last day of 1936, attacked the sit-down strike as an illegal tactic and defined the collective-bargaining policy that the corporation would observe in the face of the strike. GM, he declared, accepted the principle of collective bargaining and had specified a procedure for implementing this principle in its statement of August 15, 1934. It believed that the proper manner of bargaining was for its employees to take up their grievances with the local plant managers, who were familiar not only with the "basic general policies" of the corporation but with the varying local conditions that the terms of employment must reflect.

The union itself, however, Knudsen contended, had made "real" collective bargaining impossible by shutting down the plants then on strike against the wishes of the great majority of the workers in these plants and without making any prior attempt to bargain with the local managements. The strikers, moreover, were illegally trespassing upon the company's property, and it would not, therefore, bargain with them or their representatives until its plants had been evacuated. "We cannot have bona fide collective bargaining with sit-down strikers in illegal possession of plants." Insofar as the UAW represented the strikers, Knudsen therefore suggested that it order them to vacate the company's premises as a precondition for collective bargaining. He was willing to meet with the union at any time for "general discussion," but the issues raised in its December 24 letter—collective bargaining, seniority, the speed-up, rates and methods of pay, and "other conditions of employment"—would have to be discussed with the local plant managers, who were authorized to bargain with the union for its members.²

Knudsen's December 31 letter, although correct to a degree in its assertion that the sit-down strikes in the GM plants had been initiated by UAW locals before they had exhausted the process of collective

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bargaining, was a confused document. It was not entirely clear from the letter whether GM was opposed to any conversations with the UAW prior to the evacuation of the company's plants or whether the ban on collective bargaining applied only to discussions at the local level where sit-downs had occurred but not to discussions at other plants nor to the undefined "general discussion" with the UAW that Knudsen declared himself willing to undertake. The GM executive vice-president insisted that all the issues about which the UAW wished to talk were local in nature and must therefore be discussed locally; but what the union was most concerned about was the nature of collective bargaining and employee representation in the corporation, and local plant managers certainly had no independent authority to deviate from the national policy of the corporation regarding these matters nor even regarding the standard work week, which was uniform throughout the corporation.

Since operating responsibilities in GM, unlike the formulation of policy, were decentralized, local GM executives theoretically had the power of decision with respect to such matters as the methods of pay and the speed of the line; but the experience of the UAW before the sit-down did not suggest that plant managers could function altogether as independent sovereignties in resolving even these questions without reference to the "basic general policies" of the corporation that they were powerless to alter. In an interview on January 2, however, Knudsen reiterated that it would be "impracticable" for him to try to settle problems arising in the corporation's far-flung plant cities, and he stated flatly that GM would not sign an agreement with the UAW for the corporation as a whole.³

Homer Martin replied to GM for the UAW on January 4, submitting to Sloan and Knudsen the official demands of the union agreed upon at a UAW strategy conference in Flint the preceding day. The UAW president stated that GM's proposal for local bargaining was unacceptable to the union. For one thing, GM, in contravention of the NLRA, appeared to be pursuing a nation-wide policy to forestall the organization of a union among its employees, and there could be no meaningful discussion of grievances with local plant managers until this policy was discontinued. Second, although there were "diverse factors" among the plants of the corporation, there were certain "fundamental issues" that could be determined only by its national officers, and it was to arrive at a national agreement concerning eight such issues that the UAW was seeking a conference: a national collective-bargaining conference; the abolition of all piece-work systems of pay; the thirty-hour week, the six-hour day, and time-and-a-half compensation for overtime; establishment of a mini-

imum rate of pay “commensurate with an American standard of living”; reinstatement of employees who had been “unjustly” dismissed; seniority based upon length of service; recognition of the UAW as the “sole bargaining agency” for GM workers; and the mutual determination by management and union committees of the speed of production in all GM plants.⁴

It is perfectly apparent that the eight issues Martin set forth in his January 4 letter were properly subjects of national discussion, and Martin was on the whole correct in charging that it was “absurd” to contend that basic questions of this sort should or could be determined entirely by local plant managers. The UAW was aware that there were differences from plant to plant regarding such matters as rates and methods of pay, but it believed that these subjects could be more meaningfully discussed at the local level within the context of general guidelines developed at the summit and after a national policy for collective bargaining had been agreed to by company and union. Martin, as a matter of fact, had stated on January 2 that the union was not seeking to define all the terms of employment in a national agreement. “We don’t ask a national agreement binding all the plants [on all working conditions]. What we are asking is a code of rules for collective bargaining. We are willing to bargain with plant managers.”⁵

Among its eight demands the UAW attached the greatest significance to that calling for the recognition of the union as the sole bargaining agency for GM employees. Its “long and sad experience” with membership lists as a basis for representation, the ALB’s scheme of proportional representation, and management efforts to checkmate outside unionism with company unions had convinced the UAW that collective-bargaining pluralism was productive of “confusion, disruption and industrial strife.” “Unified representation,” the UAW was to contend, was the only proper method of collective bargaining, the indispensable prelude to the orderly determination of the conditions of employment by employers and employees, and those who opposed the idea were really opposed to collective bargaining itself.⁶

The proper legal procedure for the UAW to have pursued in seeking to validate its claim to speak for GM workers as a whole was to have requested an NLRB election among the company’s employees to determine whether or not a majority of those voting wished the union to be their representative for collective bargaining. The UAW, however, with good reason considering the size of its membership, doubted that it enjoyed sufficient worker support to win such an election. It was certain, moreover, that GM, which refused to recognize the NLRA as the law of the land, would contest an NLRB

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election order in the courts; and the UAW, like GM and most everyone else, assumed that the law would be declared unconstitutional. The union, therefore, did not hesitate to charge GM with engaging in unfair labor practices in violation of the NLRA, but it did not attempt to put its own claim to speak for the company's workers to the statute's electoral test. Its response at the outset of the strike to questions regarding the size of its membership was that it was sufficient to close GM's plants and that, in a company as hostile to unionism as GM, actual membership, in any event, was not a just criterion of union strength. As its membership grew during the strike, the UAW began to assert its majority status among GM workers, but it offered no proof of this other than its own word.⁷

To the plant workers who supported the UAW, exclusive representation was the means by which the conditions under which they labored could be improved. Of the demands listed by the union in its January 4 letter, the auto workers were most concerned, as has already been indicated, with the speed-up, seniority determined by length of service alone rather than in accordance with the ALB's complicated rules, and, in some plants, with the abolition of incentive methods of pay. It is doubtful, as Hartley Barclay pointed out,⁸ that they really favored the thirty-hour week, and they were, for the most part, less concerned about their hourly rates of pay, which were certainly more than "commensurate with an American standard of living," than about steady employment, regarding which the January 4 letter, surprisingly, had nothing to say.

Sloan, in effect, sought to rebut the union's January 4 communication and to clarify GM's position in the strike in an open letter to the corporation's employees that was published on January 5. Asserting that the UAW was seeking the closed shop and a labor dictatorship, Sloan declared that the "real issue" in the strike was: "Will a labor organization run the plants of General Motors . . . or will the Management continue to do so?" He asserted that the sit-down strikes, "widespread intimidation," and shortages of materials were forcing the corporation's employees from their jobs at a time when the earnings of GM workers were the highest in GM's history and when significant progress had been made in the regularization of their employment.

Despite what the union might say, Sloan asserted, GM employees did not have to join a labor organization to keep their jobs. Work in GM's plants would continue to depend on merit alone, which meant that the corporation's employees did not have "to pay tribute to anyone for the right to work." GM would not accept any union as the sole bargaining agency for its employees, but in accordance with its

statement of August, 1934, the corporation would recognize all representatives of its employees, whether union or nonunion. The corporation would continue to observe the ALB's seniority rules, forty hours would remain its standard work week, and, as always, it would pay "the highest justifiable wages."⁹

Sloan's January 5 letter, an overreaction to the demands of labor that was characteristic of employers in the 1930's, raised questions as to whether the "basic general policies" of GM regarding representation, hours, and so forth were subject to negotiation even at the summit. Replying to the letter, which Frances Perkins criticized as "one of expediency rather than one of philosophy," Martin quite rightly pointed out that the UAW had not requested the closed shop and that it was not labor dictatorship for it to seek to alter working conditions in the automobile industry. The NLRB, in a case involving Delco-Remy, was later to declare that the statement "clearly interfered with and restrained the rights of the employees" guaranteed by the Wagner Act; but, for the moment anyhow, Sloan's letter had the intended effect at least in some quarters: the chairman of the publicity committee of the Cleveland Fisher Body strikers thus reported to the UAW that the letter "created a worse situation as far as public opinion is concerned than we bargained for."¹⁰

The GM and UAW statements of early January sharply defined the differences between the two antagonists regarding the vital issues of collective bargaining and representation. During the ensuing weeks of the strike the corporation and the union continued to trade verbal blows, but they added relatively little to the substance of the debate. The combatants would have to move out from their entrenched positions if a negotiated peace were to be attained.

In opposing the UAW's demand for recognition as the exclusive bargaining agency for GM workers, the corporation was soon to find an ally in the craft unions of the AFL. The Metal Trades and Building Trades Departments of the Federation and six international unions affiliated with them, led by John P. Frey, the president of the Metal Trades Department and an implacable foe of industrial unionism, wired GM on January 7 and 8 protesting any grant of exclusive bargaining rights to the UAW and requesting the corporation to make no agreement that would give some other organization the authority to represent workers over whom the craft unions claimed jurisdiction. The craft unionists were primarily concerned about the strike in Cleveland, where their membership was apparently greater than in Flint; and here, on January 7, the machinists, electrical workers, plumbers and steamfitters, and bricklayers unions, acting on the advice of Frey and J. W. Williams, the president of the Building

Trades Department, complained to the Fisher Body plant manager that the UAW local, which was not authorized to speak for them, had called the strike without consulting them and without their approval and asked him to reopen the plant so that they could return to work.

Despite this seeming effort to break the strike, Frey, who thought that the "strike movement" was aimed at driving the craft unions in the automobile industry "out of existence," declared that AFL unionists would not work with scabs and did not intend to violate the picket line of the strikers. In an ambiguous joint statement of January 19, the Metal Trades and Building Trades Departments asserted that they would do nothing detrimental to the efforts of the auto workers to secure improved terms of employment but, at the same time, that they would not surrender their rights nor would they remain "inactive" in protecting the welfare of their members.¹¹

Seizing an apparent opportunity to drive a wedge among the company's workers and to deflate the UAW's pretensions to speak for all the corporation's workers, GM made public the telegrams from the AFL craft unions, and Harry Anderson wired Frey on January 9 that he could "rest assured that General Motors has no intention of entering into any agreement with any other organization interfering [*sic*] with [the] legitimate jurisdiction" of unions affiliated with the Metal Trades Department. A few days later Frey, at GM's request, met secretly with Knudsen, Anderson, and GM attorney John T. Smith and was asked what the policy of his department was regarding agreements with corporations. Frey provided the information requested and indicated that the Metal Trades and Building Trades Departments were prepared to confer with GM at any time regarding their affiliated groups.¹²

About February 1 Frey was invited to Detroit for another unpublicized conference with Knudsen and Anderson. Knudsen asked the Metal Trades president what he wished GM to do regarding Cleveland, and Frey replied that the AFL wanted him to meet with union representatives there and to instruct the plant manager to inform the superintendents and foremen that there was to be "a new deal" and that they were not to interfere with the right to organize. Frey had a two-hour conference on February 3 with Lincoln R. Scafe, the Cleveland plant manager, in which the AFL official talked "very plainly" and told Scafe that he would have to meet with a committee representing the metal trades and building trades councils of the city. Scafe agreed to meet this demand and also promised to tell plant supervisory officials that "there is a new deal here in so far as the crafts are concerned." He stated that foremen who did not comply with these instructions would have to obtain jobs elsewhere.¹³

The AFL not only sought to persuade GM to resist the UAW demand for exclusive jurisdiction but also, as we shall see, interceded with President Roosevelt and Governor Murphy to the same end.¹⁴ Not all of the Federation's local organizations, however, subscribed to the hard-line policy of Frey and some of the craft unions. Although the AFL itself did not endorse the strike and, as a matter of fact, was never requested to do so, the local federations in the three cities most directly involved in the strike, Flint, Detroit, and Cleveland, all officially approved the strike; and only the Cleveland Federation, undoubtedly as the result of pressure from the Metal Trades and Building Trades Departments, rescinded its action.

Frey contended that several of the metal trades unions were strongly organized in GM and that some of the craft unions had verbal understandings with the corporation to which it faithfully adhered, but the total craft-union membership in GM plants appears to have been miniscule. The UAW mocked the pretensions of the AFL in the controversy, declaring that the craft locals in the Cleveland Fisher Body plant did not have enough members "to fill a thimble."¹⁵

Frey was to claim a few days after the GM strike ended that the CIO had failed "to drive us out of the industry" because he had secured an agreement with GM that it would not grant the UAW exclusive bargaining rights.¹⁶ Frey, however, magnified his importance in the strike. GM was determined from the start to resist the UAW's representation demand, and it simply used the AFL to buttress a position that it would have maintained with equal determination had the Federation not involved itself in the dispute. GM undoubtedly looked upon the conservative AFL craft unions as a lesser evil than the UAW, and it may be that corporation executives wondered whether events might have taken a different turn had GM at an earlier date welcomed the AFL into its plants, but the corporation was to learn that it was now too late to resist the UAW tide by announcing a new deal "in so far as the crafts are concerned."

In challenging the UAW's demand for exclusive bargaining rights, GM could point not only to the statements of AFL leaders that the UAW did not speak for the craft unionists in the corporation's plants but, more important, to the apparent protestations of an overwhelming majority of GM workers that they were satisfied with existing conditions of labor and wished to return to or remain at work. Beginning about January 5 GM employees were given the opportunity by a variety of means to express their loyalty to the company, their satisfaction with working conditions, their opposition to the strike and to having the UAW pretend to speak for them, and

their desire to go back to work or, if still working, to remain at their jobs. GM declared at the end of the month that 83 percent (123,724) of the 149,249 workers affected by the strike had by way of petitions, mass meetings, ballots, and other means protested the strike and that this total included 82 percent of the company's Flint workers, 69 percent of its Cleveland workers, and 90 percent of its Anderson workers.¹⁷

In addition to the loyalty pledges signed by GM workers, thousands of the company's employees sent wires, letters, and petitions to President Roosevelt and Governor Murphy complaining about the strike and about being "forced to submit to labor dictators of a minority group" and affirming their desire to return to or remain at work. "Please end Chevrolet strike. I want to work," one GM employee wired Roosevelt. "Why should we, the ready to work for our money citizens of Flint, Michigan," one woman asked Murphy after the Battle of the Running Bulls, "have to sit idle in our homes while the few union men of this city and the other men who have come from other cities to keep us from working and earning an honest living go their merry way—breaking all laws and making [a] laughing stock of all our police officers?" Messages of a similar sort were also sent to John L. Lewis. "We the employees [of] Chevrolet Gear and Axle," one such communication declared, "defy you and your malicious un-American tactics. As law abiding citizens we will fight shoulder to shoulder with General Motors until your defeat is definitely determined."¹⁸

The UAW protested at the time and before the La Follette Committee later that GM had gathered its loyalty pledges through a process of "coercion, intimidation, and the threat of loss of jobs" for non-signers. It claimed that the company had financed the employee committees that had gathered the signatures and had provided them with the addresses of its workers, that foremen had in some cases distributed the petitions, that employees were threatened with the loss of their jobs and company benefits and even with violence if they did not sign, and that the union itself in some plants had found it necessary to advise the workers to sign petitions and postcards to protect their jobs.

Although one could have anticipated this sort of union reaction to GM's claims of employee antagonism to the strike, the UAW charges were by no means without some substance. Scafe admitted that GM had helped to finance the employee committee gathering signatures in Cleveland, and he conceded that "a small portion" of the Cleveland Fisher Body workers who asserted their loyalty did so at the "solicitation" of foremen. Insofar as employee committees sought

signatures by mail, one can be certain that the mailing addresses of employees were provided by the company, and, of course, loyalty petitions could have been circulated within the plants only by permission of the management.¹⁹ James Myers, the Industrial Secretary of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ, after talking to a large number of strikers and non-strikers in Flint, concluded that the loyalty pledges in that city had not been given voluntarily. "We all felt we had better sign," he quoted one Flint resident as saying, "since we thought it was a method to spot union sympathizers." Another Flint signer wrote the President that GM was "all powerful" in the city and "Most of us would sign anything to keep our jobs."²⁰

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that employee support for GM and opposition to the strike were entirely synthetic. There was, as Representative Fred L. Crawford of Michigan informed the President, a "third side" of the strike, employees ready and willing to work but unable to do so. GM over the years had succeeded in convincing many of its employees that it was a good employer, that their jobs and well-being depended on the open shop and the absence of labor trouble in the corporation's plants, and that what was good for GM was good for them. A clinical psychologist who practiced in Detroit during the sit-down reveals that he often heard even unemployed GM workers remark, "Why can't the union let General Motors alone? If they make trouble, there won't be jobs for any of us." Robert and Helen Lynd have written that the mood of GM's Muncie workers in 1937 was reportedly, "'Why pick on General Motors, which treats its men better than any other outfit in town.'" A Buick worker similarly wrote Governor Murphy during the strike that "General Motors should not have to join a union. It is their Company and they are O.K. as is." Russell B. Porter, who covered the strike for the *New York Times*, concluded on the basis of his observations that the "overwhelming majority" of GM workers in Flint, Pontiac, Detroit, and Lansing were opposed to the strike and wanted to return to work and that only "a small minority" were strikers. Although certainly correct about the limited number of actual strikers, Porter probably exaggerated the extent of opposition to the strike and overlooked a large middle group of workers who, although preferring work to idleness, were uncommitted to either side in the dispute and were awaiting its outcome to determine where their best interests lay.²¹

The loyalty, back-to-work movement in Flint was given organizational status with the appearance on January 7 of "The Flint Alliance for the Security of Our Jobs, Our Homes, and Our Community." The Alliance was headed by George E. Boysen, a forty-seven year old vice-president of the C V S Manufacturing Company who had been

a Buick paymaster from 1917 to 1932 and had later served as a city commissioner and as Flint's mayor for one term. Boysen, who talked too much and came to be regarded by reporters as "something of a crackpot," was a poor choice for the assignment, but, as Roy Reuther later remarked, "it wasn't a particularly good assignment."²²

The official Flint *Journal*-GM view of the origins of the Flint Alliance was that workers who were anxious to bring the strike to an end had "induced" Boysen to head the organization because of "his well-known interest in the men in the shops." The Alliance, Boysen asserted, was not directed against anyone but was intended as a "rallying point" for those who desired to work and wanted "industrial peace" in Flint. In addition to showing where the overwhelming majority of the good people of Flint stood with regard to the strike and giving them "'an outlet for their vent,'" to use Boysen's phrasing, the Alliance was allegedly designed to prevent the claimed popular resentment in Flint against the strike leaders and outside "agitators" from erupting into violence. Although the movement to establish the Alliance, according to the official version, had originated among factory men, membership was open to all citizens, and a large enrollment was desired, Boysen said, for "its moral effect toward smothering the strike movement."²³

While Alliance membership cards were circulating among GM workers in Flint, the organization began to take on the character of a "citizens' alliance." On the morning of January 11, some hours before the Battle of the Running Bulls, two hundred of the city's business and professional men met in a downtown hotel, endorsed Alliance objectives, and established a "cooperating committee" to assist in its activities. Boysen, at first, had indicated that he was financing the organization himself, but he was soon declaring that the downtown business and professional leaders had made substantial contributions to the Alliance. It was presumably with funds so obtained that the organization was able to hire Floyd Williamson of the Lawrence Witt agency of New York to handle its publicity.²⁴

Although a Michigan State Police investigator who made frequent visits to the Alliance office reported that the organization appeared "to be doing little business," Boysen advised Governor Murphy on January 14 that 25,887 persons in Flint had joined the Alliance or signed loyalty pledges. Boysen contrasted this massive display of anti-strike sentiment with an alleged UAW membership in the city of only two thousand.²⁵

The UAW viewed the Flint Alliance as a serious threat to its strike ambitions, as the spearhead for the possible use of violence

against the strikers or even, despite the fact that its membership was not limited to auto workers, as the nucleus for a rival organization. The union ridiculed the notion that the Alliance had been "inspired" by GM workers to articulate their opposition to the strike and contended that it was, on the contrary, a "Strike-Breaking Agency," "an illegitimate organization . . . financed, controlled and dominated" by GM. Its membership cards, the UAW said, had been distributed by foremen, supervisors, and company-union representatives, and the signatures on these cards had been obtained by coercion and intimidation. Two of the Alliance press agents, the UAW charged, worked for the Arthur Cudner firm, which handled Buick's public relations, and GM public-relations men were Boysen's constant companions. The UAW scored a minor victory when it forced the withdrawal of the treasurer of the Alliance by revealing that he had been convicted of embezzlement when he had previously served as the treasurer of the city of Flint.²⁶

According to Bob Travis, one of the UAW's undercover men in the Alliance discovered that Harlow Curtice, then president of the Buick Division, was GM's "man" behind the Alliance,²⁷ but the UAW was unable to offer convincing proof of a GM link to the organization. A state police investigator did, however, report two days after the Alliance was launched that it was "a product of General Motors brains,"²⁸ and the organization was such an obvious concomitant of GM's loyalty campaign and was such a convenient anti-strike weapon that it does not strain one's credulity to believe that there may have been some connection between the Alliance and the company. The year after the strike, it is probably relevant to note, Boysen once again became a GM executive, and he worked for the company until his retirement in 1953.²⁹

On the other hand, given the nature of the Flint community and its close ties with GM, the corporation could confidently have expected its friends to launch an organization like the Alliance without itself taking the initiative.³⁰ It may be that Michael Gorman, the editor of the pro-GM Flint *Journal*, was involved in the birth of the Alliance. Cyril Player, who was a Flint *Journal* reporter at the time of the strike, recalled the next year that he had asked Gorman, probably on January 5, why, if the vast majority of Flint GM workers opposed the strike, as Gorman alleged, they were not "'vocal'" about their discontent and had no spokesman. Gorman told him the next day with regard to this conversation, "I think something is going to be done. I may have news for you tonight." The following day the *Journal* announced the formation of the Alliance in an extra edition

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under the headline, "Flint Workers Start Revolt against Strike." Two weeks later a state police agent investigating the Alliance reported that Gorman was "connected" with the organization.³¹

The UAW's charges of coercion in the enrollment of Alliance members, like its allegations concerning the gathering of loyalty pledges, were not without basis in fact. A state police investigator reported that union men were obliged to sign membership cards under the eyes of foremen and that when the employees were paid at Buick on January 8 they first received Alliance cards to sign. Myers found that membership cards had been distributed by company employees on company property during working hours and that the distributors had been compensated for the time involved. "Spontaneous sentiment solicited under the eyes of the boss," one worker wrote the President, "is quite obviously a synthetic brand of spontaneity." Another worker complained to Senator La Follette that the names of non-signers were sent to Sloan as a prelude to their dismissal, and so one had to sign "or Else." "I think this is legalized Blackmail," he wrote, and "it is time that High Jacking of Personal libertys [*sic*] be stopped."³²

Despite union charges of coercion, the widely publicized allegations that large numbers of GM workers had signed loyalty pledges or Flint Alliance membership cards constituted, at the very least, "a huge paper success" for GM, as Kraus has observed,³³ and helped to strengthen the impression that the company wished to convey, namely, that an overwhelming majority of contented GM workers were being kept from their jobs by a small band of strikers. The minority character of the strike was the principal theme stressed by GM in its effort to win public opinion to its side, a matter of no small concern to a company that sold its product directly to the consumer. In Flint, the *I.M.A. News*, which became a GM mouthpiece during the strike, thus charged repeatedly that 5 percent of the city's GM workers were forcibly keeping the remaining 95 percent from their jobs. GM also insisted that it was "outside agitators" who dominated and exploited even this "small handful of workers," who alone stood to benefit from Flint's suffering, and who sought to array class against class in a thoroughly un-American fashion. The *I.M.A. News* asserted that a still more sinister force was manipulating the strikers: Russian Communism. The seizure and occupation of private property, it pointed out, was, after all, the same Communist tactic as had been employed in Italy and Russia. Lewis and Martin were dupes of the Communists and were being used by them to spread Communist influence in the United States. "The strikers think that they are acting for their own

best interests; in reality they are acting for the best interests of a vast conspiracy to destroy all for which life is worth living."³⁴

To demonstrate that the issue in the strike was union power rather than working conditions, GM stressed the high hourly and annual wages that it paid its workers as compared to workers in other industries and pictured its employees as members of "One Happy Family."³⁵ As further evidence of its solicitude for its workers and as a reminder of the benefits associated with GM employment, the corporation announced on January 26 that since so many of its employees were then without work through no fault of their own, it would distribute one month in advance the proceeds under its Employees Savings and Investment Plan for the class of 1931. Of the \$10.7 million to be disbursed to 12,229 employees, 4250 of them in Flint, GM declared that it had contributed \$6.5 million. The next day the corporation announced that it would pay the necessary monthly charges to maintain group-insurance coverage for all of its idled employees and that they could reimburse the company when they returned to work.³⁶

GM also sought to show its concern for its employees by announcing on January 23 that it would provide at least a day or two of work per week for as many as possible of its workers who up to that time had been idled by shortages caused by the strike but who were not themselves on strike. The primary purpose of this act, GM insisted, was the well-being of its workers since there was no immediate need for the parts that they would produce. GM reinforced its re-employment drive with a nation-wide broadcast in which it was argued that the right to work had from the beginning of the nation's history been "the acknowledged right of each one of us to decide for himself, with no man's interference." Homer Martin bitterly complained that GM had first closed many of its factories prematurely in order to turn public opinion against the UAW and that it was now reopening them as "a further development of that scheme of exploitation."³⁷

In resisting the sit-down strike, GM saw itself as fighting for interests beyond its own. If it surrendered on the issue of the occupation of its plants, the company alleged, it would set a precedent dangerous to the security of every automobile manufacturer, every businessman, and even every homeowner since the CIO was "striking at the very heart of the right of the possession of private property." If GM, however, thought that the automobile industry as a whole would support its defense of property rights by a common shutdown, it was disappointed in its expectations. Walter Chrysler was "in close consul-

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tation with General Motors people" throughout the strike, but there is no evidence that this influenced Chrysler Corporation policy in any way. *Steel* reported that a plan for an industry-wide shutdown beginning on January 15 had been presented at a "secret meeting" of automobile manufacturers in Detroit but had been rejected because Ford contended that it would put the industry "in a bad light" and might even induce a panic.³⁸ It was unnecessary for Ford to point out, assuming the accuracy of the *Steel* report, that what was good for GM in this instance was not, at least in the short run, necessarily good for its competitors, which were now presented with the opportunity to fill automobile orders that would otherwise have been filled by the industry's leading producer.

GM, on the whole, did not handle its public relations with the finesse and skill that one might have expected of the nation's largest manufacturing corporation. Its public-relations department was relatively small and inexperienced; it did not keep its press representatives sufficiently well informed of strike developments; it was slow in getting strike news cleared and made available to the public; it was not prepared "statistically and factually" to combat union arguments; and it was less skillful than the union in cultivating the hordes of newsmen who flocked to Flint to report on one of the great dramatic events of the era. The fledgling UAW, capitalizing on a fleeting moment in American history when a large segment of the American public sympathized with the workingman's efforts to attain recognition and a higher status, bested GM in capturing the headlines and getting its message across. "The union," one source declared, "made news happen and was articulate, whereas the Corporation was suspicious, slow and inarticulate."³⁹

GM's most vital immediate concern upon the outbreak of the strike was less to influence public opinion in its favor, important as that objective was, than to secure the evacuation of its property. There were several conceivable methods that the corporation might have employed to attain that objective. It might have resorted to "self-help," that is the use of "reasonable force" (tear gas, shutting off utility service) to dislodge the strikers, since a property owner could employ such force as was necessary short of inflicting "'death or serious bodily harm'" to expel a trespasser; but it could not be sure that this method would achieve its objective nor that violence could be avoided that would be damaging to the corporation's image. It might also have called on the Flint police for assistance, but, as already noted, there was some uncertainty as to whether trespass was a criminal offense in Michigan and, consequently, whether sit-down strikers were subject to eviction by other than civil process. GM might

also have resorted to civil suits against the union to recover the monetary damage caused by the trespass, but this tactic did not promise an early evacuation of the company's property, nor did the size of the UAW treasury indicate that such a procedure would be particularly effective in the long run.⁴⁰

Rejecting alternative approaches to the subject, GM decided that the mandatory injunction was the remedy most suitable for the sit-down offense. On January 2 the company petitioned the Genesee County Circuit Court for a "temporary restraining injunction" to prevent the union defendants from interfering with entry into or exit from the two Flint Fisher Body plants, interfering with the delivery of merchandise to and from the plants, picketing the factories or loitering near their approaches, "continuing to remain in said plants in idleness in a so-called 'sit-down' strike and . . . remaining in said plants at any time outside of their regular specified working hours," damaging or trespassing upon the plaintiff's property, intimidating employees who wished to work, using physical force upon them, or addressing "insulting or abusive language" to them, protecting or aiding anyone in committing the specified acts, and unlawfully conspiring or combining with anyone for these purposes. GM stated in its petition for the injunction that the defendants were damaging its property, that unsanitary conditions in the plant were likely to endanger the public health, and that the plaintiff was suffering "irreparable injury and loss" for which it had no adequate remedy at law.⁴¹

The injunction was promptly granted on January 2 by the eighty-three year old Judge Edward D. Black, a life-long Flint resident who had served on the bench for twenty years. Evan J. Parker stated that the company was seeking the injunction solely to recover its property and that its action was not to be construed as an attempt to resume operations, but had the full terms of the injunction been enforced—"The only thing" the writ permitted the union to do, Travis said, "was to take a deep breath"—the UAW would have found it difficult to continue the strike.⁴² GM was undoubtedly on sound legal ground in seeking an injunction to undo what it regarded as a trespass upon its property, a fact which such friends of organized labor as the American Civil Liberties Union recognized,⁴³ but, in asking the court to restrain all picketing and to limit other striker activities, the corporation unwisely raised a civil-liberties question when it was unnecessary for its purposes to do so.

Sheriff Thomas Wolcott read the injunction at the No. 1 and No. 2 plants on the evening of January 2, giving the sit-downers thirty minutes to leave the two factories; and in the next few days he served the injunction on the national and local officers of the UAW to

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whom it also applied. The sheriff deputized one hundred city policemen and sixty company guards to aid him in enforcing the writ; but since no writ of attachment had been issued requiring the apprehension of the offenders, Wolcott, who later claimed that he had been under some pressure to enforce the injunction, presumably from persons in high places, made no move against the sit-downers.⁴⁴

Homer Martin criticized the injunction as "part of the general procedure of corporations which don't want to bargain collectively." He stated, however, that the UAW would not "fight the law," although he reserved a final decision on the matter until he could consult with union counsel. On the evening of January 3 John Brophy, Adolph Germer, Martin, Ed Hall, George Addes, Larry Davidow, the UAW's chief lawyer, and Lee Pressman, the chief counsel for the CIO, gathered in Davidow's Detroit home to discuss the Black injunction. Germer suggested that Black might be the owner of GM stock, and so Pressman called his law partner in New York to ask him to check out the matter.⁴⁵

On January 5 the UAW called a press conference and "exploded" the news that Black held 3665 shares of GM stock worth \$219,900 at the market price. Black, Martin charged, had been guilty of "unethical conduct" and had dealt a "cruel blow" to the integrity of the judicial system. Since Michigan law, moreover, forbade a judge to "sit as such in any cause or proceeding in which he is a party, or in which he is interested," the UAW contended that Black had violated his oath of office and the law and demanded both his impeachment and his disbarment.⁴⁶

"It sounds like Communist talk to me," Judge Black remonstrated, and the Genesee County Bar Association rushed to the venerable judge's defense. The president of the association declared that Black was "one of the ablest jurists" in Michigan and that Flint's lawyers resented the attack upon him by the UAW president, who was not even a resident of the state. When the Committee on Professional Ethics and Grievances of the House of Delegates of the American Bar Association quietly undertook a probe of the affair, Black informed the secretary of the committee that he had held GM stock for twenty-five years but that he also held stock in two Flint banks and paid taxes in Flint and no one had questioned the propriety of his sitting in cases involving the banks or the city. One of the GM attorneys who had prepared the company's injunction petition insisted that the statute cited by the UAW applied only when judges presided over trials and not when they issued preliminary orders, as in the instant case. For the American Bar Association to conduct a hearing because of such charges, he wrote, would be "to directly lend aid and encour-

agement to a group of men who are avowed communists and enemies of the American form of government."⁴⁷

GM, it is clear, had been unaware of Black's large stock-holdings in the company. Its attorneys, as a matter of fact, had sought the injunction in Black's court only because the presiding judge of the Circuit Court could not be found at the time the application for the writ was made. Understandably embarrassed by the whole affair, GM quickly had further proceedings in the case transferred to the court of Judge Paul V. Gadola; but, for the time being, it made no effort to press for action. There is no gainsaying Kraus's conclusion that the UAW had scored a "brilliant victory." The revelations concerning Black, as Lee Pressman later remarked, "lent color to the accusation that General Motors controlled the community, that people [in Flint] were peons and slaves of General Motors."⁴⁸

In addition to seeking an injunction to secure the evacuation of its Flint plants, GM took measures to strengthen its offensive power and to keep itself informed on the plans of its union opponent. The corporation augmented its force of plant police in Flint and elsewhere and laid in a supply of tear and sickening gas. GM, until the end of January, also continued to avail itself of the labor espionage services provided by such detective agencies as Pinkerton. Although the testimony of Pinkerton officials on the point was utterly confusing, it appears that there were at least two Pinkerton agents among the sit-downers in the Fisher Body No. 1 and No. 2 plants. Travis and Simons charged that espionage agents inside the plants supplied anti-union reporters with information that reflected adversely on the sit-downers and that they also were a source of rumors inside the plant that were damaging to morale, but there is little hard evidence concerning the disruptive role of labor spies inside the plants during the sit-down.⁴⁹

In addition to the Pinkerton operatives inside the plants, the detective agency continued to employ labor spies on the outside in Flint and other towns. Dubuc remained on the company's payroll until the end of January, receiving his last payment from Pinkerton just after February 1. The night that the sit-down began in Flint two Pinkerton officials took Dubuc to Fenton, a small town near Flint, and sought to ascertain the UAW's intentions regarding Chevrolet and particularly the key Chevrolet No. 4 plant. Pinkerton similarly sought to learn from one of its Lansing agents who was serving as a vice-president of the Lansing Fisher Body local and who, like Dubuc, was also cooperating with the UAW whether the union intended to strike the Fisher Body plant in that city.⁵⁰

A La Follette Committee investigator reported from Flint at the

end of January that he had learned that a Flint police lieutenant had placed spies among the sit-downers and that he might be giving fuller reports to GM than to Chief Wills. The same investigator also wrote the committee's secretary that he was becoming "firmer" in the opinion that there was "a definite company espionage system" in the city and that GM was planning to replace detective-agency spies with its "own set-up," a development that was later confirmed in a general way by Harry W. Anderson.⁵¹ Whether served by Pinkerton or its own agents, however, GM seems to have learned relatively little of union strategy as devised by the strike organization in Flint; and, in the end, the strike leaders in the city took advantage of the probable presence of labor spies in their midst to help mask the most daring union maneuver in the entire strike.⁵²

Following the Battle of the Running Bulls, Knudsen, describing himself as "a peaceful party," stated for GM, "We are not going to encourage violence because we do not believe that labor disputes can be helped by violence."⁵³ Whatever its role may have been in the Fisher No. 2 riot of January 11, GM did not attempt to use its own guards to eject the strikers occupying its plants, nor does it appear to have requested state or local authorities, at least after the Battle of the Running Bulls, to employ such forces as were available to them to secure this objective. GM supervisory personnel, however, on a few occasions both before and after January 11, were involved in acts of violence against strikers, although they presumably acted on their own initiative rather than on instructions from the corporation. They may have been seeking by a show of force to forestall the spread of the strike to their own plants or, if their plants were already on strike, were perhaps giving vent to their frustration at having failed in their assigned role as intermediaries between the company and the men to maintain harmonious employer-employee relations. The most conspicuous involvement of GM supervisory personnel in acts of violence against UAW unionists occurred in Anderson, Indiana, as will be described later,⁵⁴ but in Michigan also, in Flint on January 7 and in the Saginaw area three weeks later, GM foremen were implicated in the use of force against UAW members.

The first "open hostilities" in the Flint strike occurred on January 7. The UAW had set up a loudspeaker system across the street from the Chevrolet No. 9 plant on the outside of a tavern that it was using as a branch office, and as a shift of workers emerged from the plant in the afternoon Roy Reuther spoke to them over the loudspeaker. A group from Chevrolet that included foremen and supervisors thereupon rushed the crowd being addressed by Reuther, smashed the sound equipment, and engaged in fisticuffs with some of

the listeners. One unionist who worked in Chevrolet No. 9, Ted LaDuke, received a one and one-half inch gash on his scalp. A state police trooper reporting on the violence declared that he had reliable information from neutral sources that what had occurred was premeditated," and he stated that foremen and straw bosses at all the plants still working were prepared to "deal with" union assemblages outside their factories in the belief that their jobs depended on halting the spread of the strike.⁵⁵

In Saginaw, Michigan, the home of several GM plants, intense hostility had developed by the second week of the strike against the "outside" organizers who were seeking to enroll workers in the area in the UAW. At a public meeting on January 13 of a newly organized Loyalty Committee, the chairman announced, "These organizers will find that Saginaw is a hot town; in fact, we will make it so hot they won't be able to stay. . . . We might send them home in a pine box with a bunch of Saginaw Forget-me-nots on top.'" In the days that followed UAW organizers and workers learned that Saginaw was indeed "a hot town" for them, and this persuaded the strike leaders to call on the assistance of the United Mine Workers (UMW), which was well-established in the city. The local UMW agreed to sponsor a meeting for the auto workers, to be held on January 31, and it was able to arrange for the use of the municipal auditorium for this purpose, something that the UAW could not have done on its own.⁵⁶

On January 27 Joseph B. Ditzel, the secretary of the Toledo Chevrolet local, and three United Mine Workers organizers, Anthony Federoff, John Mayo, and William J. Hynes, arrived in Saginaw to mobilize support for the January 31 meeting. The four men contacted Francis O'Rourke, a UAW organizer in the city, and the group then went to nearby Bay City to purchase radio time for spot announcements of the meeting. They conferred in the lobby of the Hotel Wenonah with John Mundy, a UMW board member and a long-time Bay City resident, and then Ditzel, Hynes, and O'Rourke left to put an ad in the local paper. After their departure a "gang" of about twenty men whom the three unionists had noticed as they left the hotel went into the lobby, instructed Mundy to leave, and then drove Federoff and Mayo to the Saginaw police station and advised them to leave town.

When Hynes, Ditzel, and O'Rourke returned to the hotel, they were set upon by the vigilantes, who were armed with blackjacks, and were chased around the lobby. Ditzel recognized a former Toledo Chevrolet foreman among the group, one of several Toledo foremen who had been transferred to Saginaw when part of the machinery for making transmission gears had been moved to that city following the

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Toledo Chevrolet strike of 1935. The police arrived after about thirty minutes and escorted the three organizers to the Saginaw police station.

When Powers Hapgood, in Flint, heard about the events in Bay City and Saginaw, he called the Saginaw police station and advised the unionists to remain there until he could arrive with a posse of rescuers. The organizers, however, decided not to follow this counsel when the police promised them a safe escort to the Genesee County line, where they would be met by state police troopers. The men were first taken to the Hotel Bancroft, where the out-of-towners were registered, but they were attacked in the lobby by a "big gang" (the estimates of the number involved range from thirty-five to three hundred!) that included at least six former Toledo foremen, and O'Rourke was "beaten severely." Mayo was knocked through an open doorway that led into a drugstore and was able to escape. The other four were put in a cab and were driven toward Flint over icy roads at a speed of sixty-five to seventy miles per hour, with one police car ahead of the cab and one behind it and perhaps thirty-five to forty cars filled with vigilantes trailing the procession.

When the motorcade reached the county line, there was no sign of the troopers who were supposed to have been there to escort the cab to Flint; but as the cab and its police escort proceeded into Genesee County they encountered a large grey sedan, parked alongside the road. The sedan sideswiped the cab and caused it to skid off the road into a telephone pole. Federoff had "most of his scalp taken off," O'Rourke sustained a broken hip and a piece of bone penetrated his bladder, and Hynes was badly cut. The cab, La Follette Committee investigator H. D. Cullen wired the committee's secretary from Flint, had been "crashed ... deliberately according to police records," a judgment agreed in by the cab driver and the organizers.⁵⁷

In describing the events of January 27, the Flint *Auto Worker* charged that GM was now "unleashing a wave of terrorism" against the UAW.⁵⁸ The occupants of the grey sedan were never identified, but GM foremen were involved in the antecedent vigilantism in Bay City and Saginaw. The UAW surely magnified GM's role in such violence as occurred in the strike, but some GM subordinates, on occasion at least, did appear anxious to settle the dispute by force rather than by negotiation. Their behavior not only embittered GM-UAW relations but, coupled with the embarrassing Black affair, revelations of espionage, and allegations of coercion that GM could not completely refute, handicapped the corporation in presenting its case to the public. GM, *Fortune* later observed, "was in no spiritual shape to fight an honest holy war."⁵⁹